

Aquí Hay Una Mezcla:
Dominican Women's Transnational Identities in Santo Domingo

by
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Dedication

To two amazing women of wholly different worlds and different generations.

Although neither lived to see me arrive at this moment,
their lives forever inspire my will to struggle forward:

My grandmother Lillian “Billie” Barsky
and my oldest sister Bernice Kafui Glover.

I am so glad you had the chance to meet.

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Preface: Ay/I/Eye

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized.
—Audre Lorde

Our Mixed Race Bodies Ourselves

The Dominican Republic (DR) is the only place I have ever lived in which I can visually blend in as part of the majority—in the US, I am considered “black”(like my father), while in West Africa I am “white” (like my mother). I resemble the people around me in the DR because the majority of the population is racially mixed of African and European descent.¹ My brown skin, light brown eyes and curly hair seem to place me there. With this study, I inserted myself into unique and diverse contexts in the DR in hopes of gaining greater understanding of contemporary constructions of race and gender in Santo Domingo in the 21st century. Not surprisingly, I have studied Dominican women’s identities through the lens of my own personal experiences with race and gender. As a woman of Ghanaian and Eastern European Jewish descent, a unique perspective on race and racial ambiguity informs my work. Being racially mixed of African descent has informed my experience in each location in the DR that I have placed myself.²

My mixed race body—far more common in the US today than just 20 years ago—has sparked numerous questions and moments of curiosity for people living in predominantly monoracial US communities. Whereas in the past the “one drop rule” in the US enforced boundaries of whiteness and blackness, the category “mixed race” has

¹ Just as I use the ubiquitous term “US,” in reference to the United States, I use the term “DR” to refer to the Dominican Republic, where Dominicans frequently refer to the country as “*rd*” for *Republica Dominicana*, pronouncing it—and sometimes writing it—as “*rrrrre-de*,” for emphasis. In contrast, North Americans who vacation in the DR or are familiar with vacation materials, typically refer to the country as “The Dominican.”

² Although I have one white parent and one black parent, I rarely use the term “biracial” to define myself. This difference is likely generational and I came of age with a generation that coined and used the term “mixed.”

recently emerged out of a white middle class that has demanded recognition for their children of color and an acknowledgement of the existence of their multiracial families. This organized movement was focused in particular around the lead up to the 2000 census in determining how these families would identify themselves and thus become a visible minority.³

“Mixed race” as a social construction relies on an investment in the existence of racial categories; for this reason scholars of race frequently object to its existence. The concept inadvertently reinscribes racial hierarchies while the celebration of “mixed race” contributes to a hierarchy of color—one that is widely understood by people of color in the US and capitalized on by mainstream media. In the DR, a comparable color hierarchy in which lightness is preferred, and mixedness is fetishized, is overtly engaged. Current discourse on race the US and in the DR is not taking place within a vacuum but emerges from a globally-produced and globally-consumed media and popular culture that is thick with racial signifiers and racial mixture. Mixed race bodies have come to represent a palatable exotic within a white-dominant mainstream popular culture in which there are social benefits to identifying one’s self as mixed and being identified as such.⁴ Mixed race identity reflects a particular experience of race and racial formation within monoracial communities in which the individual is viewed as different. The identity typically captures an experience of not being easily identifiable in racial terms or identifying with more than one racial group.⁵

The term “mixed race” or the comparable language of “*mestizaje*” or “*mulataje*” did not emerge with great frequency in my interviews of women in Santo Domingo, perhaps because racially mixed bodies signify Dominicanness and are the norm rather the exception. What emerged consistently within these conversations were experiences of race and racial ambiguity that happened to be familiar to me because of my own racial

³ Kimberly DaCosta, *Making Multiracials: State, Family, and Market in the Redrawing of the Color Line* (Stanford University Press, 2007); Kim M. Williams, *Mark One Or More: Civil Rights in Multiracial America* (University of Michigan Press, 2008). Although the federal government did not embrace a sole multiracial category for all mixed race people in the US on the 2000 Census, it did allow for participants to check one or more races to reflect their racial identities.

⁴ DaCosta; Beyonce’s recent advertising in which she identifies her racial background reflects this.

⁵ Danzy Senna, *Caucasia: A Novel*. (New York: Riverhead, 1999); Naomi Zack, ed. *American Mixed Race: The Culture of Microdiversity* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers), 1995; Jill Olumide, *Raiding the Gene Pool: The Social Construction of Mixed Race* (London & Sterling, PA: Pluto Press, 2002).

identity. Therefore, in my approach to ethnographic research in the DR, I explore a position of both Insider and Outsider as I navigate constantly shifting signifiers. I draw on my personal understanding of what it means to be able to “shape shift” across permeable boundaries of race and culture. I understand my own subjectivity as providing insight into Dominican women’s transnational experiences and identities. Undoubtedly, this subjectivity informs my perceptions of the women with whom I have spoken.

Filmmaker and scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha aptly captures this tension between identification and difference for the feminist researcher in her essay “Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference.”⁶ She writes, “The moment the insider steps out from the inside she's no longer a mere insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out.” This state of being inside and outside at once, though Trinh does not make this connection, is also common to the “mixed race condition.”⁷ This “not quite the same, not quite the other” space of being is one that racially-mixed people repeatedly narrate.

With this ethnographic research, I have taken on the role of the “insider” to which Trinh refers, working my way into the lives and communities of the women I aimed to write about, in order to understand more about their transnational worlds and to convey something about their experiences of race, gender and globalization. The wisdom they share shapes my study and has shaped me. According to Trinh, the precarious position in which I have placed myself through doing this type of research, getting so close and being seen as familiar and recognizable in the context of Otherness, actively disrupts a binary of insider/outsider. Trinh points to this necessary awareness of one’s subjectivity from which one does the work of understanding the world outside. I call on these insights with this study. My own engagement with the subject at hand is inevitably transformative for, as Trinh writes,

⁶ Trinh Min-ha, *Inscriptions: Feminism and the Critique of Colonial Discourse* Volume 3-4 (Center for Cultural Studies, UC Santa Cruz, 1988). http://culturalstudies.ucsc.edu/PUBS/Inscriptions/vol_3-4/v3-4top.html (December 4, 2011).

⁷ Jill Olumide, *Raiding the Gene Pool: The Social Construction of Mixed Race* (London & Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2002).

Differences do not only exist between outsider and insider—two entities. They are also at work within the outsider herself or the insider, herself—a single entity. She who knows she cannot speak of them without speaking of herself, of history without involving her story, also knows that she cannot make a gesture without activating the to and fro movement of life.⁸

The communities I have chosen to write about are ones in which I have felt seen and known, where my presence has been welcomed: black, feminist, progressive, queer, artist, student, leftist, and activist communities. For the most part, the women I have interviewed see themselves as alternative to mainstream Dominican culture. Our conversations allowed them the opportunity to name and articulate their own difference. In making contact, I learned how issues of identity and self-making are equally important to each of them as the topic is to me, both personally and intellectually.

Like the women in Santo Domingo to whom I dedicate this work, I too understand myself to be a woman of African descent caught in a transnational flow of bodies and ideological frameworks driven by neoliberal capital. Inevitably, I ask, as Trinh does, “[W]here should the dividing line between outsider and insider stop? How should it be defined? By skin color, by language, by geography, by nation, or by political affinity? What about those, for example, with hyphenated identities and hybrid realities?” Although I am not Dominican, and I am not Latina, many times I have had acquaintances in the DR encourage me to “pass” as one of their own. As so many assure me, “*Ya estas bien aplatana’o* [you are now very dominicanized],” I wonder just how simple it is to adopt the cultural identity of another.

⁸ Trinh.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the current influence of neoliberalism—as an ideological formation of globalized capitalism—on young Dominican women living in the capital city of the Dominican Republic. Existing stereotypes about Dominican women inform how they see themselves and how they are perceived globally; these dominant social ideologies have tangible impacts on their lives. Through this transnational feminist study, I consider how Dominican society is culturally and economically invested in particular representations of “the Dominican woman.” I consider how new media technology, such as the internet, influence the lives of these young women and how US popular culture permeates their identities. I scrutinize how skin color and hair type as racial signifiers matter to the Dominican women about whom I write. I argue that their racially mixed and racially ambiguous bodies cast them as shape-shifters within a global capitalist culture in which the capacity to transform what one represents in terms of race and class is rewarded.

La Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo (La UASD), the public university in Santo Domingo, is a site of activism that provides a window into the contemporary context of many progressive Dominican youth. Murals on the campus of *La UASD* give a glimpse into Dominican history of the last few decades and reflect a Dominican culture of the visual that is primed for new media discourse. Thirty interviews with Dominican women (from 2010 to 2011) illustrate their diverse experiences of gender as tied to racial ambiguity. Hollywood actress Zoe Saldaña serves as an example of the ways Dominican women’s racially ambiguous bodies are highly fetishized transnationally today. Saldaña’s value, I argue, lies not only in her gender performance but in her racial ambiguity and the possibility of her serving as whatever viewers project onto her. Additionally, I examine the impact of US black feminist writings on black lesbian Dominican activists on the island and consider how these theories of identity—now accessible via the internet—inform Dominican women’s identity-based activism. Embracing intersectionality, they have begun naming themselves as “Afro-Latinas” in a society that has historically refuted its African roots.

Introduction

Muñeca sin Rostro: Transnational Feminist Cultural Studies and the Unfolding Archive

Much postmodern engagement with culture emerges from the yearning to do intellectual work that connects with habits of being, forms of artistic expression and aesthetics that inform the daily life of a mass population as well as writers and scholars.

–bell hooks, “Postmodern Blackness”

Muñeca sin Rostro⁹

Tens of thousands of handcrafted ceramic dolls in varying shapes and sizes sit on shelves in gift shops throughout Santo Domingo. Specific styles of dolls that reflect both regional and market preferences are produced with the clay from different parts of the country and sent to the capital for sale.¹⁰ They will become Mother’s Day gifts, or tokens of appreciation, presents carried off into the Dominican diaspora by soon-to-be houseguests or relatives making holiday visits. They become souvenirs of tourists’ visits to the Dominican Republic, its beaches and historic plazas. Those dolls that survive their travels intact will be set on mantles, on coffee tables and in china cabinets. Often the mass production of these dolls is executed crudely, with little attention to detail. Close inspection reveals that each is thus unique in its form and paint. To purchase one is to choose between hundreds of the same sitting on a shelf in the Supermarket *La Serena*, in tourist boutiques along the walking mall *El Conde*, or even in the city’s *Barrio Chino* [Chinatown]. Typically, the *muñecas sin rostros* have long bell-shaped dresses fashioned out of clay with high, painted collars reminiscent of a bygone colonial era. A version of the doll was also produced for international markets by the company Gifina, fashioned

⁹ I use a peppering of Spanish words that I do not always immediately translate. In part, this is because the meanings of the terms become evident through the story I tell. My use of Spanish in this way is also a remark on how meanings of language cannot always be readily translated (as Dominican author Junot Díaz captures in his writing, for example) because the two languages combine into one. Dominicans on the island consistently combine English and Spanish to fully express themselves—I do the same here.

¹⁰ This popular doll was originally produced beginning in the 1980s in the artisan community of Higuerito, in the town of Moca, located in the region Espaillat.

from brightly-colored modeling clay.¹¹ They are often romantically clasping a bouquet of flowers at their waist. Yet beneath the wide-brimmed hats and floral embellishments, all of the dolls' faces are left blank.

Ask any Dominican why this figure, called a *muñeca sin rostro* [doll without a face], has been created as such, and they will tell you it is because: “we are a mix of everything, we are Spanish, we are indigenous, we have African roots. Our features cannot be represented in any one form.” In a society in which the vast majority of its members are racially mixed, the explanation given refers to the Latin America ideology of *mestizaje* in which racial mixture between Europeans and indigenous peoples is celebrated.¹² The story of the doll also suggests that Dominican women have no one single identity and because they are racially mixed, they can represent any and all of their racial and ethnic inheritances. Thus, the *muñeca sin rostro* offers a provocative metaphor with which to consider who and what Dominican women represent within the transnational culture of Santo Domingo of today, beneath the weight of neoliberal policy and global development across the Americas. Without a face, without a singular identity, the *muñeca sin rostro* constructs Dominican women as anonymous pawns in a larger economy. Each doll represents a highly feminized yet racially ambiguous object that has been produced for an open market. The identical style of manufacture suggests they are interchangeable and easily reproduced—as Caribbean vacation souvenirs.

The *muñeca sin rostro* is just one of the many narrow representations of Dominican women that this project confronts. Along with this iconic souvenir, numerous other representations of Dominican women circulate across the globe; digital images travel via the internet in real time. Instantaneously, depictions of Dominican women are delivered to global audiences via movie trailers, beauty pageant headshots, vacation destination webpages and dating websites. Photographs of Dominican women are captured on cell phone cameras in the hands of so many Dominicans or visitors to the island. These photographs frequently portray Dominican women's bodies as objects for

¹¹ The modeling clay is called *porcelanicon* in Spanish, known as a type of “cold porcelain” that does not need to be baked. This famous factory is now closed but the dolls circulate as collectables.

¹² What became social policy in Mexico. See Suzanne Bost, *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities in the Americas, 1850-2000* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005); José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race/La Raza Cosmica* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1997); Licia Fiol-Matta, *Queer Mother For The Nation: The State And Gabriela Mistral* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

consumption, as the women become just another part of the “much-consumed Caribbean landscape.”¹³

In the dissertation that follows, I examine the impact of neoliberalism, as an ideological formation and a cultural phenomenon, on the Dominican Republic today. The neoliberalization of the DR, which includes the increased privatization of daily life, a greater investment in tourism than in education, and the broad influence of US popular culture, informs the lives of young Dominican women living in Santo Domingo and consequently their identities. Like the “transnational Latina/o diasporic community” that Angharad N. Valdivia describes, Dominican women in Santo Domingo, too, are very often “made visible in the global context through particular articulations of gender and sexuality that are deployed by consumer culture and transported by mediated images.”¹⁴ Existing stereotypes about Dominican women inform how the women see themselves and invariably shape the courses of their lives as they are constantly rejecting or embracing these social constructions. With this study, I consider the ways in which Dominican society is culturally—and economically—invested in particular stereotypes of the Dominican woman and scrutinize how color and racial difference matter to the women about whom I write. I argue that Dominican women’s racially mixed and racially ambiguous bodies cast them as shape shifters within a global capitalist culture in which their capacity to transform is rewarded.¹⁵

Racial ambiguity is a critical aspect of daily life in the transnational Caribbean culture of Santo Domingo. The possibility of changing one’s racial identity through symbols of race and class—altering physical attributes and embracing particular aspects of blackness deemed desirable—is crucial to many women’s lives. Sometimes it is the key their survival. However, the fetishization of mixed race and racially ambiguous bodies as a symptom of 21st century neoliberalism in Latin America and the Caribbean

¹³ Mimi Scheller, “Virtual Islands: Mobilities, Connectivity, and the new Caribbean Specialities,” in *Small Axe*. October 2007, p.16-33 (22).

¹⁴ Angharad N. Valdivia, “The Gendered Face of Latinidad: Global Circulation of Hybridity,” Ch. 3 in *Circuits of Visibility: Gender and Transnational Media Cultures*, ed. Radha Sarma Hegde (New York and London: NYU Press), 53.

¹⁵ Beyoncé continues to be an excellent example of the marketability of the shape-shifter (though she has generally not been identified as “mixed race,” as Mariah Carey who came before her). See *Colorlines*’ recent article online: “Beyoncé is the Whitest She’s Ever Been in New Album Promo,” accessed January 19th, 2012.

has been overlooked in the existing scholarship. Dominican women's self-perceptions are informed by these distinctive experiences of race, and by a racial hierarchy in which mixed race bodies are valued over monoracial white or black bodies. Who they are, how they identify themselves, and what opportunities are available to them are formed by and within a global color hierarchy that they navigate differently depending on their color and the malleability of their racial identity. Asks Diana Taylor, rhetorically, "Why this insistence on the body? Because it is impossible to think about cultural memory and identity as disembodied. The bodies participating in the transmission of knowledge and memory are themselves a product of certain taxonomic, disciplinary mnemonic systems. Gender impacts how these bodies participate as does ethnicity." To tell a story of Dominican women, I must tell it with and through ongoing negotiations of the body. The "mixed race" and racially ambiguous bodies effectively serve a neoliberal global agenda in which diversity and multiculturalism are prized, yet society remains striated by class and by color.

For this study, I chose to interview *dominicanas* of working class and aspiring middle class backgrounds, who are studying (or have studied at) universities in Santo Domingo and who have much to say about their own experiences of race, gender and globalization. All of them have regular access to the internet and generally spend time online daily; they also watch television programming, videos and films produced in the US or from around the globe. Our mutual understandings of the impact of globalization, include access to media and popular culture from all over the world and exploitative job options from abroad as well as an endless desire on the part of Dominican to have the things that their family off of the island enjoy.

Although Dominican experiences in the US are increasingly well-documented—particularly around processes of racial enculturation and social mobility—little is published about the lives of Dominicans on the island today, let alone that of young Dominican women in the capital city.¹⁶ Academic discourse that shapes scholarly perceptions regularly omits the dynamic realities of contemporary life and gendered

¹⁶ Ginetta E. B. Candelario, *Black Behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York After 1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Mary C. Waters, *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

experience in the DR.¹⁷ The transnational popular culture with which Dominican youth and particularly Dominican women engage, and that which they produce, is not recognized as worthy of study, subordinated in part because of existing hierarchies of gender, race, and class. While projects of “high culture” are frequently supported by the state, popular culture embraced by young people is often passed over. Nevertheless, as Stuart Hall writes,

The role of the ‘popular’ in popular culture is to fix the authenticity of popular forms, rooting them in the experiences of popular communities from which they draw their strength, allowing us to see them as expressive of a particular subordinate social life that resists its being constantly made over as low and outside.¹⁸

Through the ‘popular’ that Hall defines, I have been able to understand some of the layers of Dominican identity that matter to Dominican women. The popular culture that they themselves consume reveals some of the key values that shape their identities. By “consume” I refer to the intake—both intentionally and unintentionally—of ideologies and representations about race, gender, sexuality, *dominicanidad* and much more.¹⁹

Essentialized constructions of Dominican womanhood perpetually overshadow complex contemporary identities.²⁰ Only through offering a diversity of young Dominican women’s voices am I able to challenge the essentializing and provide a glimpse into the nuances and variations on this social identity. From Marxist students fighting for environmentalism, education and gay rights within the country, to Metalheads, to Hari Krishnas, to slam poets, to black lesbian feminists pushing back against a conservative culture, this dissertation documents a few of the many “faces” of

¹⁷ Ginetta E. B. Candelario, compiladora. *Miradas Descendentes: Los Estudios de Genero en la Republica Dominicana al inicio del Tercer Milenio*, (Santo Domingo: Centro de Estudios de Genero, INTEC, 2005); Silvio Torres-Saillant, Ramona Hernández and Blas R. Jiménez, eds. *Desde la Orilla: Hacia una Nacionalidad sin Desalijos* (Santo Domingo: Editoria Manatí, 2004), 369-382; Kimberly Eison Simmons, *Reconstructing Racial Identity and the African Past in the Dominican Republic* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009).

¹⁸ Stuart Hall, “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” in *Black Popular Culture*, eds. Michele Wallace and Gina Dent (New York: The New Press, 1998), 26.

¹⁹ Initially, I asked young women about what they were watching, listening to and influenced by. I self-consciously excluded *telenovelas* from my study of Dominican women, recognizing they do have a broad social influence because of their prevalence in Dominican households each and every weeknight. However, the majority of the young women I interviewed expressed to me that they were watching movies and American television shows online rather than viewing local programming.

²⁰ The figures that I discuss throughout this dissertation include the Mother, who sacrifices everything, the Mega Diva, the Virgin and the Whore.

women in Santo Domingo, as we head into the second decade of the 21st century. Throughout the introduction that follows, the scholarship I traverse produces a framework within which to understand the ways Dominican women's transnational identities intersect at routine junctures, even as they remain in constant motion.

What's Mixed Race Got to Do With It?

Although Dominican racial identity cannot be mapped directly onto the neoliberal discourses of multiculturalism and notions of mixed race or multiraciality that have emerged from US racial discourse in the last few decades, beliefs about racial ambiguity and "mixed race" do appear to have clear parallels within the DR today. These similarities are worth exploring. The concept of "racial ambiguity" that I interrogate here requires an understanding of race as a social construct, which then allows for the fluidity of racial identity.

Racial ambiguity, or the possibility of being read in terms of race differently depending on the context one is in, relies on the use of symbols that have cultural relevance in the context in which they are being read.

As illustrated by my reading of Dominican Hollywood actress Zoe Saldaña in Chapter 3, and as I show more generally throughout, today an acceptable "brownness" takes the place of blackness in producing a female ethnic Other that is primed for transnational popular consumption. The popularity of mixed race bodies makes the DR an excellent site to consider the significance of racial ambiguity and the impact and value of mixed race bodies. More specifically, by examining how Dominican women are characterized in advertising, student murals, political billboards and Dominican and US films screened in Santo Domingo, I confront enduring (mixed) race and gender stereotypes that take on new iterations in the present.

What and how Dominican women's racially mixed bodies signify in the Americas today emerges out of a Latin American ideological framework of generations past and a global framework of the present. Suzanne Bost identifies this interrelationship between ideological frameworks of the past and present in her interrogation of racial mixing in popular literature of the Americas from the mid-19th to the end of the 20th century.

Marking the importance of reading *for* mixed race in literature and popular culture, Bost writes,

Feminist novelists and critics have been at the forefront of the effort to rewrite narratives of racial mixture because sex and race oppression intersect in the history of interracial mixing. *Mulattas* and *mestizas*—in the feminine—have been targeted as the source, the cost, and the evidence of mixture, and they serve a significant symbolic function in writings that discuss the implications of mixture in the America.²¹

Looking closely at narratives of mixed race identity in film and literature of the present unequivocally supports Bost's argument that there is a "unique relationship between women and racial mixture."²² This dissertation keys into that same analytic of the intersections of mixed race and gender identity in order to illuminate critical aspects of Dominican women's contemporary experiences and constructions of identity in the neoliberal context.

Beliefs about race and racial mixing in the US and the DR, like the histories that created them, are divergent yet in contact at critical moments. A long history of miscegenation on the island of Hispaniola, which the DR shares with Haiti, is reflected in the diverse physical features of the Dominican population. Bodies identified as a mix between two races have at the very least existed since the Spanish arrived on the island, their first landing in the new world, at the end of the 15th century. The Spanish and French who colonized the island of Hispaniola beginning in the late 1500s brought with them African slaves as human chattel. Instituting practices of rape and bondage, however, the colonizers rapidly killed off the majority of the indigenous people inhabiting the island, the Taíno.

Just like the Latin American concept of *mestizaje* (a term for those of mixed indigenous heritage), "mixed race" in the US emerged as an identity of value at particular social moments. In the US, segregation laws and anti-miscegenation laws made interracial mixing punishable by the state into the middle of the 20th century. Yet in Latin America there is no history of a "one drop rule"; whiteness functions as a racial (and

²¹ Suzanne Bost, *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities in the Americas, 1850-2000* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 14.

²² *Ibid.*; See also, Pedro Alonso O'Crouley, *A Description of the Kingdom of New Spain* (Warwick, RI: J. Howell, 1972).

social) category that has been accessible to Dominicans with light enough skin. In fact, the Dominican government has historically invested in the racial mixing of the people in order to whiten the local population. Contemporary mixed race identity in the US is not outside of a history of racial discourse and has been criticized for effectively obscuring larger structures of racism against monoracial groups. Representations of mixed race in the US today still seem to function in relationship to the stereotype of the “tragic mulatto,” which, like notions of blackness, is embedded in a hegemonic popular culture.

Dominicans in the DR are often referred by themselves and others as “mulattoes” (a derogatory term in the US) in reference to their racial mixture and African roots.²³ Roughly 80% of the Dominican population is “*mulata/o*,” and color and physical features within families and communities are typically wide-ranging. As Dominican geographer Marco Morales pointed out to me, you only have to look back a couple of generations in the DR to see married couples of different racial backgrounds in most every family. A couple of generations ago “miscegenation” was encouraged (when then does choosing a lighter partner come in).

Historically, being racially mixed has been a superior position in the racial hierarchy of the island of Hispaniola, as black identity and Dominican identity have been constructed as mutually exclusive categories throughout Dominican history. Being Dominican is understood to mean being *not* black and therefore *not* Haitian. First and foremost, it has meant being Latina/o in language and culture. Nevertheless, a whole host of racial and ethnic groups have immigrated to the DR and mixed with the population, including Eastern European Jews, Japanese and Lebanese, for example, who continue to immigrate to the country today. Yet for reasons I explore in the chapters that follow, the preoccupation with race and identity comes back to tensions around black and white.

Being racially mixed shapes Dominican identity throughout the 20th century and into the present.²⁴ As Kimberly Simmons articulates in her 2010 book *Reconstructing*

²³ A newly defined system of identification in the country, promoted by the Organization of American Studies, legally categorizes Dominicans in only three ways, “black,” “mulatto” or “white.” <http://www.listindiario.com.do/la-republica/2011/11/11/210557/RD-sera-de-negros-blancos-y-mulatos-en-nueva-Ley-Electoral> (November 11, 2011)

²⁴ In the US, racially diverse families like those common in the DR seem such a new phenomenon that the New York Time thought it worth creating a diagram for audiences to visualize the possibilities. Accessed online April 24, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/10/09/us/mixed-races-in-one-family.html>

Racial identity and the African Past in the Dominican Republic, “mixture is a distinguishing feature that links a sense of shared history and pastness, Dominican ancestry, with a sense of *being* and *feeling* Dominican (author’s own emphasis).”²⁵ Such is true for Dominicans both on the island and across the Dominican diaspora. The language of being “black behind the ears,” refers to how the visual trace of blackness on even the lightest Dominican bodies has been historically looked for at the crease behind the ear.²⁶ This phrase continues to have social significance today, so much so that it continues to emerge in day to day conversation. Obviously, no one set of physical features captures what Dominicans look like. A great many Dominicans are as dark in color as the majority of Haitians tend to be, and a great many Dominicans are born of Haitian parents. Because of this, various other socially constructed and socially understood identifiers take the place of racial indicators to make meaning around race and blackness in the DR.²⁷

It is appropriate then, that I come to this interdisciplinary study on Dominican women’s identities with a background in African American studies, cultural anthropology, cultural studies, critical mixed race studies and American studies. I draw on this wide range of disciplines to formulate questions about a black diaspora and Afro-Latinidad in the context of the DR; thus my project places Dominican studies within conversations in each of these fields. The interdisciplinarity of this research reveals the ways that it is necessary to put black cultural studies and mixed race studies in conversation with Latin American studies.²⁸ I draw on the scholarship of black and Latina women in my readings of the racialized and sexualized experiences of Dominican women because this scholarship speaks to the experiences that my interviewees define. I recognize the epistemic knowledge available within such scholarship and witness

²⁵ Simmons, 119.

²⁶ See not only Candelario’s work, but also Edwidge Danticat’s *Farming of the Bones* for examples of the use of this term.

²⁷ The imbedded stereotype of women from the US as being blonde with blue eyes is one that travels around the globe just like Barbie dolls sold en mass to reproduce that ideology—however, Barbies now come in a diversity of colors and ethnic identities.

²⁸ Conversations about blackness have been taking place for some time within Caribbean studies, however, less has been written about contemporary black identities in the Spanish speaking Caribbean. See Aisha Khan, “What is a Spanish?: Ambiguity and ‘Mixed’ Ethnicity in Trinidad,” Ch. 4 in *Perspectives on the Caribbean: A Reader in Culture, History, and Representation*, ed. Philip W. Scher (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2010).

Dominican women today turning to these same scholars for understanding and inspiration.²⁹

Cultural studies lends itself to multivalent readings of identities produced within transnational cultures of the Americas, where the smallest popular culture iterations can respond to and resist real social oppressions. From cell phone videos and snapshots to music videos shared online, worldwide young people are communicating through digitized visual discourses about race and gender at every moment of every day.³⁰

However, Hall reminds us,

As popular culture has historically become the dominant form of global culture, it is at the same time the scene par excellence of commodification, of the industries where culture enters directly into the circuits of a dominant technology—the circuits of power and capital. It is the space of homogenization where stereotyping and the formulaic mercilessly process the material and experiences it draws into its web, where control over narratives and representations passes into the hands of the established cultural bureaucracies, sometimes without a murmur.³¹

If nothing else, this study represents that “murmur.” It is a push back against the commodification and essentialization of Dominican women’s identities that appears as a symptom of the neoliberalization of the DR. Like Hall, who embraces the contradictions of a construction of “black popular culture,” I acknowledge the contradictions within Dominican identity, and Dominican women’s transnational identities as necessarily selectively defined due to the limitations of my research as well as the narrow boundaries of the term. Nonetheless, by working within this construct I have been able critique the ways that it so often simultaneously commodifies and silences. In the next section, I consider the ways in which Dominican women’s lives in Santo Domingo today are inherently transnational.

²⁹ *But Some Of Us Are Brave: All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: Black Women’s Studies*, eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1993), 164. Barbara Smith calls for Black women in reading black women’s literature to “look first for precedents and insights in interpretation within the works of other Black women.” This is equally important in readings of Dominican culture.

³⁰ Accordingly, I expect that this contemporary cultural studies text to be read beside a computer, smart phone, Ipad or such, with Google Search and YouTube open and ready.

³¹ Hall, “What is this Black in Black Popular Culture?”, 26.

Transnational Identities: Goods for Sale?

Up until quite recently, most North Americans who did not follow baseball or live in New York City have given little thought to what it means to be Dominican. Yet for people living in the Dominican Republic, the US shapes each and every day. Even though the relationship between the US and the DR has a long and complicated history, popular media and social policy have only recently begun to recognize the presence of Dominicans in the US. In fact, as historian Frank Moya Pons explains, “Many US politicians as well as past Dominican President Joaquin Balaguer have understood the DR as a satellite of the US in the Caribbean Region. It has for decades remained under US supervision, in a way, through US economic reliance and thus US control, for the sheer fear of having “another Cuba in the Caribbean.”³² Amalia Cabezas, in her introduction to *Economies of Desire: Sex and Tourism in Cuba and the Dominican Republic*, describes the DR as having “long been a quasi-colony of the United States,” and leading up to the 1990s, “emblematic of the problems that could beset Cuba, troubles such as child prostitution, gambling, casinos, widespread social inequities, and the pervasive lack of a social safety net for its citizens.”³³ In fact, the US has occupied the DR through military intervention on two different occasions, from 1916 to 24 and from 1961-1966, with the aim of influencing political outcomes and “making the world safe for capitalism” in the lead up to and during the Cold War.³⁴ Today, what one can plainly see is a US *cultural* occupation of the DR.

When, in 1996, President Leonel Fernandez vowed that he would make Santo Domingo, into a “little New York”—the place of his childhood—he was hinting at the major construction projects to come.³⁵ Over the years, he has funded the construction of

³² Frank Moya Pons, *The Dominican Republic: A National History* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2010), 402.

³³ Amalia Cabezas, *Economies of Desire: Sex and Tourism in Cuba and the Dominican Republic*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 3.

³⁴ After the violent “*Guerra de Abril*,” of 1965, US forces finally left the country but thereafter financed many of the projects advanced by Joaquin Balaguer, the president they had selected over the democratically elected Juan Bosch.

³⁵ The capital city was a construction project of dictator Trujillo that would prove his power and influence. Fernandez’s commitment to realizing construction projects that reshape the landscape and convey a more modern city harkens back to this earlier period.

bridges, parks and tunnels throughout the capital. He has even funded a shiny new Metro system that travels above and below ground, providing the city's residents with a mode of transportation more commonly found in a US city than on an island in the Caribbean.³⁶ In just the last few years, life on the island has changed significantly in that Dominicans now have greater access to goods that the developed world has the opportunity to enjoy: laptops, smart phones, European-design home decor, Columbia sportswear, even Cartier watches. Being Dominican in Santo Domingo today means watching North American TV shows as much Latin American *telenovelas* (evening "soap operas" from Mexico, Brazil and elsewhere), and taking up new styles, foods, values and language. Yet these things take on new life on the island. Michael Jackson's 1992 song "Remember the Time", for example, takes on new meaning when it is remixed and transformed into Merengue dance music by Dominican artist Omega. It was an ideal choice for remixing since Dominicans in the DR and in diaspora share in common a nostalgia for music by the "King of Pop" that has long crossed national borders. In 1954, being Dominican meant listening to Nat King Cole, sing "*Quizas, Quizas, Quizas*" in his thick North American accent still mocked today.

"Neoliberalism" has been precisely defined by Elizabeth Martinez and Arnoldo García as having five key elements: the rule of the market; the reduction or elimination of public funding for social services; the deregulation of corporations with profit the ultimate goal; the privatization of all state owned enterprises; and individual responsibility taking precedent over the public good or collective community needs.³⁷ However, beyond economic policy, neoliberalism is also a network of social formations and cultural practices that result from advanced capitalism.³⁸ As Lisa Duggan declares in the *Twilight of Equality*, "Neoliberal politics must be *understood in relation to* coexisting, conflicting, shifting relations of power along multiple lenses of difference and hierarchy."³⁹ Therefore, it is essential to consider a broad framework of neoliberal influences to understand the social formations and the rapid changes occurring in the DR

³⁶ The construction required the relocation of tenants in areas often classified as slums.

³⁷ Based off of Elizabeth "Betita" Martinez and Arnoldo Garcia's "What is Neoliberalism?: A Brief Definition for Activists" Online at CorpWatch, <http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=376> (December 5, 2010).

³⁸ Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston, Ma.: Beacon Press, 2004); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³⁹ Duggan, 70; emphasis in the original.

today. For instance, the tenets of neoliberal economic policy foster a disregard for human life within the DR: workers are treated as expendable and social safety nets for the most disenfranchised are left up to the goodwill of private employers.⁴⁰ This same system benefits from stereotypes of the Dominican woman as either a tireless laborer in the home, who sacrifice everything for her family; or the sexy accessory to a wealthy men, who have no value without male recognition (the “controlling images” I address in Chapter 3).⁴¹ In this way, neoliberalism impacts the politics of identity that are central to the organization of human life, influencing how people are able to live their lives, how they are seen by others, and how they see themselves.

Additionally, within this framework of neoliberalism I include—as Cathy Cohen does—the powerfully deceptive ideologies of multiculturalism and colorblindness.⁴² Multiculturalism, as the romantic celebration of difference that then turns up in the marketing of products, does little to end racism, though in the context of the DR it may instill pride in individuals of color. As Gordon and Newfield articulate, “the culturalism of multiculturalism threatens to shift attention from racialization to culture and in so doing to treat racialized groups as one of many diverse and interesting cultures.”⁴³ This is to say that the danger of multiculturalism is this denial of structural and institutional influences. The classic example they provide, is the idea of “a culture of poverty” that blames poor people for the situation they are in instead of looking at larger structures that keep the poor disempowered and without social access.⁴⁴ Multiculturalism thus serves neoliberalism well in by placing the focus on individual capacity for success rather than on systems that disadvantage whole groups of people marked by race, gender, sexuality, age group, etc. The unwillingness and subsequent inability to discuss racial difference, referred to as “colorblindness,” is widespread in the US.⁴⁵ This type of racial elision, in which race matters yet it is rarely talked about, is not unlike to what sociologist Eduardo

⁴⁰ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics” *Public Culture* 15(1) (2003): 11–40.

⁴¹ Patricia Hill Collins, “Black Woman as Worker.” Chap. 3 in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁴² Cathy Cohen, Keynote. Colloquium for African American Research 2011 conference. Paris.

⁴³ Christopher Newfield and Avery F. Gordon, “Multiculturalism’s Unfinished Business.” Chap. 6 in *Mapping Multiculturalism*, eds. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 78-9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁵ See the work on privilege by white anti-racist activist Tim Wise.

Bonilla-Silva argues is a Latin American racial ideology.⁴⁶ However, in the Dominican Republic, remarking upon racial difference is commonplace, not silenced.

The 2004 Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) opened up Dominican borders to US industry in the name of development. But neoliberal policies have the country developing in a fashion in which it lurches forward, unevenly, leaving many of its citizens far behind. By uneven development, I mean an investment in large construction projects in cities yet an ongoing lack of adequate roads. Investors are encouraged to build impressive luxury malls, yet the city's residents continue to go without running water or electricity. Computer literacy programs are set up throughout the country but access to the facilities are limited. Moreover, while access to foreign goods have increased, incomes have stayed the same. Most families continue to sustain themselves with the staple foods such as plantains, processed meats, white bread, rice, beans and eggs, produced locally. They are greatly impacted as the prices of these goods (and the gas with which to cook them) go up. The majority of Dominicans are relegated to the same level of poverty as those in countries once labeled "third world," for the simple fact of "structural disadvantages shaped by the colonial process and by the uneven division of international labor."⁴⁷ The educated, leftist Dominican youth with whom I did much of my research, are highly critical of the cultural values and products that the US increasingly exports to them. What is for sale in the DR are often items no longer wanted in the US. T-shirts that failed quality control, expired beauty products, and foods that did not sell well to their original market find a new life in the DR.

Like so many countries in Latin American, the DR relies somewhat on remittances. By utilizing a range of new technologies, Dominicans on the island maintain constant contact with family and friends in diaspora, sharing goods, news and culture across national borders.⁴⁸ The *Asociación Dominicana de Empresas Remesadoras de*

⁴⁶ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

⁴⁷ Shohat, Ella and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 25.

⁴⁸ Fifty-eight of the 70 Dominican women I surveyed said they were in contact with Dominicans in the US. They also mentioned a range of other locations where they had family or friends and thus influences: Spain came in second, then Puerto Rico, then Italy, other parts of Latin America, Europe, and Japan and Korea.

Divisas (Aderedi) reported billions of dollars flowing from the US into the DR annually, a situation that has shifted with the US economic downturn; now parents who are able have begun sending money to their children living outside the country.⁴⁹ Simultaneously, the “first world” has infiltrated Dominican society culturally and ideologically. New goods, styles and fads arrive as “cultural remissions,” rapidly crossing borders and shaping Dominican culture over the decades since Dominican immigration to the US. The numbers of Dominicans immigrating has steadily increased, from the 1960s through the 1980s.⁵⁰ Clothing styles come from abroad, as do new foods: Chimichurri’s (inspired by US fast food hamburgers) and extra-long hotdogs (topped with sautéed cabbage and Dominicanized with crushed potato chips) have become a part of Dominican cuisine of today.

I use the term “transnational” in this dissertation, to refer to people and cultures formed across national boundaries and amidst streams of culture flowing from all different directions. Spaces such as the Dominican Republic have since their formation as nation-states always existed as transnational and transcultural. Whereas in the past, it was the sailing ship, and later the airplane that connected people across geopolitical divides, today new digital technologies mobilize people, goods, ideas, capital and culture in and out of the DR. Just as the term “globalization,” served scholars of Latin America in the 1990s, “transnational” is today a term of analysis that helps us to see what Inderpal Grewal refers to as cultural “connectivities,” the diverse linkages across nations that produce that which is global, and remind us that the societies in which imperialist nations such as the US have economic investments do not exist in a vacuum.⁵¹ As Nestor García Canclini addresses in *Notes on Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, “Globalizing processes accentuate modern cross-cultural contact by creating

⁴⁹ Lenora Suki, “Financial Institutions and the Remittances Market in the Dominican Republic” Center on Globalization and Sustainable Development (New York: The Earth Institute at Columbia University, 2004). Accessed online at <http://idbdocs.iadb.org/wsdocs/getdocument.aspx?docnum=547045>

⁵⁰ Peggy Levitt writes about the “cultural remissions” in *The Transnational Villagers* (University of California Press, 2001). See also, Hoffnung-Garskof, 77; Immigration numbers dramatically increased in the early 1960, reaching more than 10,000 Dominican immigrants to the US per year into the 1970s.

⁵¹ Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); “Connectivities” is Grewal’s concept.

world markets for money and material goods, messages and migrants.”⁵² National borders remain porous on many levels, as nations struggle to define and determine the boundaries of their territories and as the people within those borders seek to determine with whom and what they identify.⁵³ Too, the Dominican Republic is experiencing a “globalization from below,” in which the people organize in response to neoliberal developments that do not have their best interests in mind.⁵⁴

As US-based Latina scholar Diana Taylor writes, “The Americas, I have been taught to believe, are one—and I still believe it. Produced and organized through mutually constitutive scenarios, acts, transactions, migrations, and social systems, our hemisphere proves a contested and entangled space.”⁵⁵ Through a “hemispheric analysis” that illuminates the many connections across the region, I aim to make obvious for scholars in North America that which is a given for women in Santo Domingo. Within the complex category of “the Americas,” the Dominican Republic’s distanced intimacy with the US stands out to me, and the impact of neoliberalism on Dominican society has captured my attention for the purpose of analysis.

Taylor and many transnational feminist scholars remind us that “the First world is in the Third World just as the Third World lives in the First.”⁵⁶ The Dominican neighborhood of Washington Heights exists as an “ethnic enclave” tucked into New York City’s upper Manhattan, and you can live out your days there speaking only Dominican Spanish while eating *asopao* and *tostones con salami*. Yet a corresponding reality holds true for the closed world of North American expats that make English-speaking upper class lives for themselves in Santo Domingo. A trip to an upscale supermarket reveals specialty foods brought in for foreign palates. The first world has infiltrated the third world quite broadly, and goods and cultural values from the former permeate the latter. As Dominican families squeeze into tiny cinderblock apartments without consistently

⁵² Néstor García Canclini. *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. Trans. by Christopher I. Chiappari and Silvia L. López. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 10.

⁵³ Ongoing ties to multiple homelands are reinforced when xenophobic host countries make it difficult for people of color in diaspora to integrate or assimilate.

⁵⁴ Arjun Appadurai, “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination,” in *Globalization*, Arjun Appadurai, ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 1-20.

⁵⁵ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press), 271.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

running water or electricity, US cable television with subtitles translates MTV reality shows and the Atlanta local news that flows into their homes. High-end malls and US fast food chains respond to and cultivate a desire on the part of Dominicans in the capital city to live like those outside the country. “*Ya somos americanizados* [We are already Americanized],” argues a friend (via Facebook chat) who has grown up there. Countless new condo towers, a massive Ikea and a rapidly expanding metro system reflect in the city’s landscape how Dominicans understand themselves as transnational subjects.⁵⁷ This next generation of Dominicans is making significant assimilations to US culture without ever leaving the island, forming their identities within a nation that has changed dramatically under neoliberal development.⁵⁸

Along with changes in identity formation, Dominican women’s cultural significance has shifted dramatically under neoliberalism. The most culturally familiar example of a respectable working class Dominican woman is characterized in the Julia Alvarez novel, *In The Time of the Butterflies* (1994). The popular narrative tells the globally recognized story of the murder of the three Mirabal sisters. Alvarez, who is based in the US, may be the most transnationally celebrated female Dominican author to date and was mentioned by several of the women I interviewed as an author whose work has been important to their understanding of the *herstory* Dominican women share. Few could name any other female Dominican authors, however. The story of the Mirabal sisters is one that continues to be retold on film with details of their struggle for justice under Trujillo, punctuated by their brutal murder. Wide audiences embrace the memory of these young, educated sister activists whose lives were cut short at the hands of Trujillo’s henchmen during the last months of his rule.⁵⁹ Both Dominican and Hollywood films have portrayed the story of the three sisters in fictional narratives revised for dramatic effect.⁶⁰ No fewer than three feature films have been produced about these

⁵⁷ Ella Shohat. *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*. (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2001); Hoffnung-Garskof.

⁵⁸ Canclini. *Hybrid Cultures*.

⁵⁹ Like Anne Frank, some of the tragedy seems to lie in the fact that they nearly survived until the end of fascist rule.

⁶⁰ In 2010, new women filmmakers were still producing short films on this topic for the *Mujeres en Cortos*, a now annual film festival that takes place at the Cinemateca in Santo Domingo.

women, who are seen as martyrs for the nation.⁶¹ According to the United Nations, the Mirabal sisters have become symbolic of both popular resistance and feminism. Their story and images are a reminder to work against violence against women. Since 1999, November 25th each year, is recognized as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, marking the day on which they were killed in 1960.

From Minerva Mirabal to Sex Tourism

Participation in a global market entails producing something to be consumed by others. Historically, on the island of Hispaniola this has meant sugar—and with that, a dependence on African slave labor. The extraction of goods and labor from the DR for the benefit of more developed nations continues today. In fact, new trade policies and government negotiations appear to encourage outmigration from the DR when most jobs within the country do not pay well enough to live with dignity, let alone in comfort or affording luxury items.⁶² Although economic policy under neoliberalism relies on excessive consumerism and encourages a type of individualism on which this consumerism is reliant, the majority of Dominicans are merely struggling to earn enough to get. As in the US, many Dominicans try to emulate the wealthy for status recognition, whether or not they actually have disposable income. Many of the women I interviewed, well aware of the poverty the country faces, commented on the obscenity of this.

Factory jobs for some Dominicans mean producing name-brand clothing, medical devices, tobacco products and other goods in the *zona franca* of the capital, where nearly 40% of the factories are US-owned.⁶³ In other instances, new policies have encouraged the development of factories in border regions of the country, where rural Dominicans are without jobs. These job opportunities come with health risks and often without

⁶¹ *Trópico de Sangre* (2010), *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1995), *Del Fondo de la Noche* (2009) and *Nombre Secreto: Mariposas* (2009).

⁶² These and other terms used to talk about poverty, class and wealth, remain subjective. Adults in their 20s and 30s who work full time are often unable to afford to move out of their parents' homes and often experience a lack of dignity, as do parents who cannot afford to clothe and feed on a fulltime salary.

⁶³ *Informe Estadístico Sector Zona Franca* 2010.

<http://www.cnzfe.gov.do/documentos/informesestadisticos/InfEst2010Esp.pdf> (March , 2012)

protections or government oversight to prevent on-the-job injury.⁶⁴ Because policies of trade and government negotiations shape worker conditions, Dominicans are motivated to migrate in order to survive, to acquire an education, and to be able to afford goods from abroad. For nearby Puerto Rico, and for Europe, the DR has meant an endless stream of domestic laborers, who migrate and in order to provide remittances to family back home.

Meanwhile, Dominican bodies back on the island, are of value as global commodities in several other ways. Boys and young men are essentially “farmed” throughout the country with hopes of become players for North American baseball leagues. One Dominican recruiter for the leagues enthusiastically likened the famous pelotero [baseball player]-producing town of San Pedro de Macoris to a mine where he knew he would surely hit gold. In a pivotal scene in the 2008 film *Sugar*, the title character is standing with a fellow baseball player in a clothing store in the US when he recognizes that he himself is an exported good. Having made the leap from a small town in the DR toward his transnational aspirations as a US major league baseball player, he glances at the tag of a shirt for sale and gives pause: it too was “Made in the Dominican Republic.”

Meanwhile, sex tourism economy in the DR is strong.⁶⁵ Tourists from the US, Europe and elsewhere travel to the DR to find men and women, boys and girls, who will fulfill their sexual desires.⁶⁶ That vast informal economy influences how outsiders view Dominican bodies.⁶⁷ Sex tourism is so prevalent within Dominican culture that low-brow films such as the 2007 comedy *Sanky Panky* and its sequel emerged satirizing the sexual economy that tourism creates—in this case for men. Hence, the reality of sex tourism is well-integrated into popular consciousness. The Dominican term “*sanky panky*” refers to

⁶⁴ Outside monitors such as the globally recognized Workers Rights Organization come in and advocate for the rights of Dominican workers on the ground and help them to organize their own campaigns to improve the quality of workers lives.

⁶⁵ So strong that the US-based Center for Disease Control invest a great deal of money in studying sexual behavior in the DR because it is a hot spot for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases that travel to the US. Mark Padilla. *Caribbean Pleasure Industry: Tourism, Sexuality, and AIDS in the Dominican Republic*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), xiii.

⁶⁶ Here I use a turn of phrase that inadvertently excludes transsexual sex workers, who are another influential piece of this same economy of desire.

⁶⁷ Denise Brennan, *What's Love Got To Do With It? : Transnational Desires and Sex Tourism in the Dominican Republic*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Gregory, 139; Padilla, xiii.

men who seek sexual relationships with tourists in order to gain economic benefits.⁶⁸ For Dominican women this exchange looks different because of numerous factors surrounding gender, race, and economics and the fact that Dominican women's racialized bodies signify differently in the context of the Caribbean. Apparently, the prostitution of women is seen as a less humorous premise for a Dominican comedy.

In her book, *What's Love Got to Do With It?* (2004) Denise Brennan writes about Dominican women in the town of Sosúa on the northern coast of the DR who work in the context of a sexual economy that effectively renders their identities and livelihoods in terms of transnational opportunities that are tied to sex tourism. What Brennan documents in the north of the island can be found in the capital city as well and likewise shapes the identities of *capitaleñas* who exist within what she refers to as a "transnational social field."⁶⁹ This "sexscape," as she calls it, pervades the DR, in part, as I will next discuss, because of the ways that Dominican bodies are racially fetishized.

Brown-skinned Dominican bodies are hypersexualized in popular media, and thus marked as consumable goods on multiple levels under a neoliberal development plan that encourages tourism for economic growth.⁷⁰ As Dominican activist Sergia Galván has written, the myths and prejudices perpetuated about black women sustain the trafficking of dark-skinned Dominican women into sex work and benefit male European tourists.⁷¹ In addition, foreigners' treatment of Dominican women as sex objects, as a potential romantic partner or simply as purchasable goods, is not entirely separate from Dominican men's relationships with and treatment of Dominican women. It is so commonly understood that Dominican men will marry, start a family and have a girlfriend on the side, often repeatedly moving on to other younger women, that it has become an accepted stereotype. While their bodies are fetishized in youth, Dominican women's bodies are also deemed disposable: unmarried, middle-aged women in the DR are "disposed of" because they are viewed as having lost their sex appeal. Thus, in writing about Dominican women, it is important to understand the different ways that Dominican

⁶⁸ Padilla, ix.

⁶⁹ It is not necessary to actually leave the country to live in the space transnationally. Brennan, 42.

⁷⁰ Stephen Gregory. *The Devil Behind the Mirror: Globalization and Politics in the Dominican Republic* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007), 139; Brennan.

⁷¹ Sergia Galvan, In "Power, Racism, and Identity" in *Connecting Across Cultures and Continents: Black Women Speak Out on Identity, Race, and Development*, ed Achola O Pala. 1995. NY UNIFEM

women are valued and devalued within Dominican society today. Just as laborers are seen as expendable, with never-ending sources of cheap labor available on the island, poor Dominican women are in the precarious position of being highly devalued under patriarchy and easily replaced. This social positioning has grave consequences that include extremely high rates of femicide, the murder of women by their male partners. Limited cultural outrage reflects the ways that cultural values reinforce a type of male privilege that positions women as the property of men.⁷² Violence is used to subdue and reassert ownership over one's property.

Women have been traditionally written out of histories of activism and resistance in the DR, with only a few exceptions.⁷³ Moreover, cultural histories of contemporary life in Santo Domingo are few and far between.⁷⁴ The privilege of writing Dominican history has been relegated to a small number of scholars, who often find themselves writing for each other. Meanwhile, another set of Dominican historians reside outside of the country. Past presidents Rafael Trujillo, Joaquin Balaguer and Juan Bosch were all prolific writers and publishers of the history of the nation that they led; they were also notorious for scripting the story of events in ways that benefited them, portraying Dominican history as they wanted their actions remembered. Although the public university is flooded with research projects, theses and monographs, produced by its many capable female students, these writings submitted for degree will never see publication. New works by and about Dominican women are being produced for US academic audiences. Sociologist Ginetta Candelario and historian April Mayes, for example are currently at work on a history of Dominican feminism that documents this story up to the mid-1900s. Works like this may get little attention from historians within the DR, who are reading monographs in English

⁷² Mariana Ramírez Mac-Lean, "Como si importara." In *Diario Libre*, March 21, 2012. Retrieved online, 3/22/2012. http://www.diariolibre.com/destacada/2012/03/21/i328561_femicidios-machismo-violencia-de-genero.html

⁷³ Besides the Mirabal sisters, often recognized is activist Mamá Tingó (Florinda Soriano Muñoz), an Afro-Dominican activist who fought for rights of the working poor. Like the Mirabals, she is also a martyr, and was killed under Balaguer. She is recognized in Dominican history and now has a metro stop named after her.

⁷⁴ Carlos Andújar Persinal writes on Dominican popular culture and its significance. His essays have been compiled in "una perspectiva de la identidad cultural dominicana" in *Meditaciones de cultura: laberintos de la dominicanidad* (Santo Domingo: Archivo General de la Nación, Volumen CLII, 2012), 27.

as regularly as their US counterparts are reading their work in Spanish.⁷⁵ Contemporary scholars like myself locate ourselves geographically within and outside of the DR as we research and construct narratives of Dominican identity for transnational academic audiences; crossing barriers of language, culture and access we offer our take on Dominican life from new angles. That which I have been able to *see* from my unique vantage points (both within and without) has been essential to my understanding of gendered racialized meaning in Dominican society and, as I discuss in the next section, such details of the visual have a tremendous impact on the lives of Dominican women.

Picture This! Race and Ambiguity

Photographs of two teenage girls hang on the wall above the dining table of their family's Santo Domingo apartment. In these pictures, their hair blows in the artificially-produced breeze of a portrait studio. As with most Dominican women, being of African heritage as well as European descent means that their hair only falls down past their shoulders or flutters in the wind if has been chemically-straightened and then pressed weekly. Through these images, one can read a layered and complex Dominican cultural value system regarding color, class and Dominican identity. The studio photographs actively confirm the racial statuses of these two young women by demonstrating that they have “*pelo liso*” or “good hair.”⁷⁶ As Ginetta Candelario writes regarding Dominican women's transformation of hair, “the ability to invest in self-care and self-beautification is an expression of a sense of entitlement to economic, emotional, and social well-being and an effort at its attainment.”⁷⁷ The enactment of class status through the transformation of self by way of hair, makeup and apparel in the DR also demonstrates the significance of racial ambiguity for Dominican bodies. Their racially mixed bodies are able to transform their meaning through sociocultural signifiers For Dominican bodies of mixed racial heritage, within a Dominican racial schema, there exists the possibility of signifying racially in

⁷⁵ Ginetta Candelario is writing a history of early feminist activism, from 1880-1960; Erika Martinez has compiled an anthology of Dominican women's writings that is near publication, the first of its kind.

⁷⁶ EFE Newswire, “*Documental revela obsesión de dominicanas por pelo liso*” *HOY* 15 de Mayo, 2008: 1D

⁷⁷ Ginetta E. B. Candelario, *Black Behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops* (Durham: Duke UP, 2007), 254.

multiple ways. Color may signify one thing about race while hair and dress as a symbol of class might signify differently.

Standards of beauty, femininity and sexuality as conveyed in these portraits exemplify individual and familial aspirations. Additionally, the pictures position the young women within the Dominican racial category “*morena*” (meaning “brown,” gendered with the feminine ending) or even “*morenita*” (meaning “a little brown”), and distance them from a blackness that connotes Haitianness and in the DR. The term “*morena/o*” is employed by Dominicans to refer to someone who is dark, but in a more socially acceptable way, avoiding use of the term “*negro*” or black.⁷⁸ Many different color types and hair types are included in this category based on individual judgment. Where and how these portraits are placed in the household—centrally, often with light-skinned family members made prominent and darker-skinned relatives omitted—signifies as well by not only reinforcing the ideals of a heteronormative family structure but by depicting particular values around color that are also embedded in the construction of the acceptable family. Today, family photos are uploaded as digital snapshots to a Facebook virtual wall or timeline, where users can actively construct their identity portraying color, class, femininity, sexuality and standards of beauty. They reach certain audiences (locally and globally) through this personalized visual narratives online.

“Race,” as a social construction that human beings typically delineate based on visual markers of difference on the body, categorizes individuals into groups with others who share in common physical attributes, or have descended from those who do. In the US, “race” refers to the meanings attributed to skin color first and foremost, although a person’s is commonly referred to in terms that do not particularly reflect the reality of their skin color (e.g. “black” and “white” but also “red” and “yellow”). Any ancestry that is not white makes a person not white according to US racial logic. Throughout the Americas, however, other defining features work in combination with skin color to construct one’s racial classification. Quite frequently, these include hair color and texture, nose shape and eye shape and the shape of particular body parts—black people’s sexual

⁷⁸ “Indio” served as an intermediary category between black and white. Candelario 18; 199. In the essay, “*Raza y Lenguaje en el Cibao*,” Daisy Josefina Guzmán compiles an extensive list of racial descriptors that Dominicans use, but for the most part these signify a hierarchy of color. Candelario calls on this study as evidence however, it was research done nearly 40 years ago. I believe that racial categories, like language and culture in the DR, are shifting far more rapidly than Candelario’s work suggests. Candelario 18; 199.

organs, for example, are often deemed of inhuman proportions as compared to whites, in order to justify beliefs about the sexual prowess of people of African descent and/or their inhumanity.⁷⁹ Human beings draw on and reinforce *ideas* about the difference between human bodies and attach these to stereotypes about culture and behavior in order to construct beliefs about racial groups. Language constructs the meaning as much as actual physical difference does. And the distortion and repeated presentation of visual images construct racial meaning as well.

Race relies on what scholar Christina Sharpe has referred to as the “narrative eye and the visual eye,” in order to make sense of and construct difference along particular lines. The “narrative eye” or what we already *believe* about race informs what we *see* in others and how we identify them. This concept is crucial to understanding race in the Dominican Republic where bodies are racially mixed and often racially ambiguous and in such a way that the subtleties of phenotype are perceived differently depending on surrounding information. Although a popular saying is “seeing is believing,” the visual eye is no more without sociocultural bias than the narrative eye.

Though seemingly fixed because of its visibility (and active documentation of difference through the cataloging of images of individuals), race is in fact a highly dynamic construct. As Omi and Winant put it, “The effort must be made to understand race as *an unstable and “decentered” complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle*” (italics authors’ own).⁸⁰ In this age of technology, race is additionally unstable in that it can be produced and constructed *by* media, transformed for the purposes of capitalism—through music and the emotion it evokes, viral videos produced by individuals, images, and films that are easily circulated via the internet. Lisa Nakamura demonstrates in *Digitizing Race* that “Internet is a privileged and extremely rich site for the creation and distribution of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic visual images of racialized bodies.”⁸¹ This, she notes, is increasingly influenced by the use of the internet by people who might otherwise have little influence on their society at large.

⁷⁹ Aisha S. Durham and Jillian M. Baéz, “A Tail of Two Women: Exploring the Contours of Difference in Popular Culture.” In *Curriculum and the Cultural Body*, Stephanie Spriggay and Debra Freidman, eds. (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

⁸⁰ Omi and Winant, 69.

⁸¹ Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2008).

It is also historically quite subjective. Different bodies are racialized uniquely depending on the histories of the particular region of the world in which they are located and whether or not there was a social movement around black consciousness.⁸² When the internet creates windows into a range of worlds, it simultaneously offers us a range of social meanings.

In the DR, there is no history of a mainstream identity-based movement around blackness (as occurred in the US in the 1960s) that would lead Dominicans to claim blackness as a political identity. While it is likely that Dominicans heard James Brown's 1968 hit "Say it Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud" on the radio in DR and in the US when it came out, they would not likely have identified themselves as "black" at that time—and most do not today. This particular history of racial enculturation specific to Dominicans is frequently dismissed by scholars of the African Diaspora as a denial of blackness.⁸³ It is in fact more complicated than that. A comparison of US and Dominican racial ideologies reveals an ongoing cognitive dissonance between the two nations. Individuals experience their own racial identities in relationship to the external world, this project shows. And for most Dominicans on the island, their racial identity is confirmed by those around them as *Latina/o*.

In line with the dynamism of race as a construct that I have already noted, having a different racial formation and different historiography of racial ideology than the US does not mean that the Dominican racial identity is frozen in time. Rather, as the women I speak with demonstrate, racial meaning and the cultural expectations put upon them regarding how their Dominican identities signify racially is changing quickly, both inside and across national borders. For example, the term *indio* ["indian" or "indigenous"] is a color term that worked to imagine less blackness in the population under Trujillo. Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof writes explicitly about the term *indio*'s significance in the Trujillo era: "On national identity cards, officials...applied the intermediate category *indio* to most of the population. In its literal meaning, the use of *indio* instead of *black* or *mulatto*

⁸² Michelle M. Wright. *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁸³ Henry Louis Gates, "Black in Latin America: The Other African Americans" online at <http://www.theroot.com/views/black-latin-america-other-african-americans-0?page=0,0> (June 2012); Silvio Torres-Saillant, 1998.

conformed to a broad Caribbean tradition of celebrating indigenous cultural and racial traits at the expense of African ones. In practice though, *indio*...was a color term.”⁸⁴ The term has remained on national identity cards since the 1960s as an ideological construction.⁸⁵

Although it is still used, *indio* has far less significance for young Dominicans today. One 25-year-old I spoke with did not even realize the letter “I,” for “Indio,” was on her *cedula* [ID card]; “It’s a number ‘1’,” she informed me. The term remains controversially understood by US-based scholars as representing a Dominican romanticization of indigeneity and a rejection of blackness.⁸⁶ However, as Simmons specifies,

While it may seem that Dominicans assert black denial...blackness was actually denied Dominican people for much of the twentieth century by the state in effort to whiten the population as witnessed by immigration policies, national racial and color categories and other socialization practices where mixture was promoted over blackness.⁸⁷

Another friend, who is dark in color and identifies as black (since blackness has shaped her experience as a Dominican) was assigned an ‘I’ on her *cedula* as well. She is angered by this false representation and has said she wants to make a legal complaint to the state. Likewise, multiple acquaintances have shown me how their *cedulas* categorizes them as white even though they are well aware that they are of mixed racial heritage and only “*blanca* [white]” in Dominican terms; outside of the country they are not. Clearly, not all Dominicans are invested in denying their blackness, though they bear the weight of this history and face ongoing criticism for a presumed “denial of blackness.”⁸⁸ The racial project of the state emerges at different moments and at different levels of society.

As the climate around race shifts in the DR, notes Simmons, Dominicans’ racial identities change and race is “being reconfigured due to the interaction between external and internal forces as evidenced by changing racial and color categories and the

⁸⁴ Hoffnung-Garskof, 27.

⁸⁵ Simmons, 71.

⁸⁶ A commonly cited study that perpetuates this notion is Ninna Nyberg Sorensen’s essay, “There are No Indians in the Dominican Republic: The Cultural Construction of Dominican Identities,” in *Siting Culture: The Shifting Anthropological Object*, eds. Karen Fog Olwig and Kirsten Hastrup (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁸⁷ Simmons, 5.

⁸⁸ Hoffnung-Garskof; Candelario; Simmons; See also Torres-Saillant.

articulation of ‘new’ identities throughout the African diaspora.”⁸⁹ Dominicans increasingly assert their blackness and African heritage. Furthermore, what signifies blackness today, after an era of profound commercial success of hip hop music gone global, is very different from what blackness has meant to Dominicans in the past. What blackness means to those who have lived in New York city is very different from what those who have only seen it on TV believe. Nevertheless, in 2012 one can easily find an essay about *Día de la Raza*—still recognized as Columbus Day in the US—that blatantly omits Africans in its discussion of the peoples of Hispaniola that the Spanish “discovered” and then mixed with.⁹⁰

A history of colonialism and slavery has embedded myths about color and sexuality throughout the Americas. In the context of the Dominican Republic, light-skinned women with so-called European features and “*pelo liso* [straight hair]” are identified time and again as pretty, respectable and appropriate for office jobs. Dark-skinned women in contrast are perceived as hypersexual, better dancers, and sexually available to all men, so they are aggressively pursued on the street and in the work place as sexual objects. This structure in which brown skin is hypersexualized, with darker skinned women being viewed as more sexually available, and lighter skinned women as more “civilized” is of course not unique to the DR but has its own history in the slavery of the Americas and plays out in different ways across the African Diaspora.⁹¹ This history informs a system in which, on a spectrum from dark to light, lighter-skinned people are given preferential treatment and social benefits, a prejudice known as “colorism.” As Margaret Hunter articulates in *Race, Gender and the Politics of Skin Tone*, “It is difficult to distinguish between our own innocent preferences for skin tones and the socially constructed hierarchy of skin tones informed by racism. Many have internalized this racism so deeply that they can no longer recognize colorism and racism for what they are, and instead see them simply as individual tastes.”⁹²

⁸⁹ Simmons, 71.

⁹⁰ Ironically the post also includes information about an event in celebration of the day that is about anti-discrimination organized by Mujeres Dominico-Haitianas (MUDHA), Minority Rights Group International (MRC) y the European Union, in hopes of working towards “greater social cohesion”.
<http://www.elcaribe.com.do/site/estilo/educacion/290776-ihoy-vive-la-raza.html>

⁹¹ Margaret L. Hunter, *Race, Gender and the Politics of Skin Tone* (Routledge: New York, 2005), 120.

⁹² Ibid., 89.

Hair texture is key to defining the significance of color.⁹³ Candelario's research on Dominican women in New York City addresses this significance of hair type directly when interviewing women in a salon. She showed her interviewees headshots of women and men pulled from hairstyling magazines in order to elicit their responses about the meanings attributed to different hair types and associated skin color. What she concludes from her research is that it is not whiteness that is the ultimate goal, but a mixture of fine features that are preferred by the Dominicans in diaspora with whom she spoke. "If class mediates race for Dominicans, as has often been argued, then by implication hair that makes blackness excessively visible does not jibe with privileged social and economic status," writes Candelario. "The goal is not Nordic or Aryan whiteness but mixedness that is more an approximation of Hispanic looks as those are popularly understood: straight haired, tan skinned, aquiline featured."⁹⁴ As her research demonstrates, glaringly white skin is not desired. Rather, there is a Dominican preference to be "[o]f color, but not black..."⁹⁵

There are instructive differences and continuities in the experiences of those who experience racially ambiguity, and those who identify as both racially and culturally mixed. Gilroy prioritizes the visual image with his work and its interrogations of blackness through which to understand the meaning and import of the racial identity. This prioritization of mixed race as theory is likewise essential to reading of representations of Dominican identities whose identities are shaped by their experiences as racially mixed bodies of African descent in the Americas.

What is this "Mixed Race" in Black Popular Culture?

If a disciplinary approach is also a politics of analysis, as many of us who embrace the tools of cultural studies believe, "Critical Mixed Race Studies" is a valuable tool despite its weaknesses. While "Black" has the history of large and political and cultural movement behind it, "mixed race" does not. "Mixedness," like notions of blackness in the US, is embedded in a white supremacist patriarchal society, and has been

⁹³ Simmons; In his 1982 book *Slavery and Social Death* Patterson argues that hair texture as a greater "badge of status" than skin color even though it can be disguised; cited in Collins, 61.

⁹⁴ Candelario, 239.

⁹⁵ Candelario, 240. "Dominican" as a category becomes a bit monolithic here.

historically perceived as a negative social status, a tainting of the blood, a poisoning of that which is otherwise good. In the US, the not-quite-white identity of the mulatta/a or the *mestiza/o* has been portrayed as tragic, inhabiting a border space, mongrelized—in relation to the primitivism of blackness—and psychologically damaged.⁹⁶ These ideologies reflect significant anxieties about white racial purity. Contemporary mixed race identities have attempted to work in opposition to these longstanding racial narratives and the social stigma associated with people who are multiracial. Yet new US multiracial identities frequently emerge from a place of privilege. What is at stake for mixed race people in the US in terms of how they are racially perceived by others is very different from what is at stake for Dominicans on the island or in diaspora. More often than not US mixed race youth struggle with finding racially-defined social in-groups and must to respond to questions “What are you?,” –real concerns cited as damaging to a child’s self-esteem. Yet Dominican women are calculating their social opportunities based on their physical presentation and how they position themselves or are viewed by others in terms of race, color and class.

An increasing number of scholars have been since the 1990s researching the ways that US mixed race identities have been newly constructed. Kim M. Williams and Kimberly DaCosta each traced the mixed movement from its origins, investigating why families and individuals were rallying around the mixed race category option in the 2000 census.⁹⁷ Many were striving for the removal of racial categories on school forms that forced children to choose a race, arguing this diminished their sense self.⁹⁸ DaCosta attributes the cultural formations around mixed race as emerging out of a post-civil rights era in which identification is valued. A common theme she identifies in interviewing “multiracial entrepreneurs,” as DaCosta calls them, is that they are typically middle class

⁹⁶ In the popular US 20th century novel, *Imitation of Life* (1933) by Fanny Hurst, the “all-but-white” daughter of the protagonist’s black maid disappears dramatically in the conclusion. She vanishes from US society, running away to Latin America with a nice white man, and electing sterilization. Latin America is the place that Hurst identifies for this outcast figure to racially pass as white and keep her secret until death.

⁹⁷ Williams sat in on meetings with white parents and multiracial adults who make up a network of multiracial organizations trying to get a multiracial category on the census.

⁹⁸ Williams.

with above average educational levels. She also questions as many other do, what might actually make mixed race people a cohesive group.⁹⁹

Meanwhile, anthologies since the early 1990s that collect the voices of mixed race individuals have laid the foundation for critical “Mixed Race Studies” scholarship today. They have invested in coalescing a collective voice for racially mixed people in North America.¹⁰⁰ Such anthologies often include a glossary of terms to educate readers about mixed race identity and equip them with the language to discuss this “new” racial category and understand issues of identity faced by this minority group.¹⁰¹ Roots’ two edited volumes testify to individual experiences of context-specific racial identity and racial ambiguity as part of a mixed race experience. Root also expresses a desire to move beyond race and embrace the multiracial moment. Yet, even though these projects aim to resist the biological notions of race, they necessarily engage with social beliefs about race as something real and social science as well as psychology is employed to make arguments about mixed race, reinforcing what it had hoped to dismantle.

In my mind, a “postmodern” approach to blackness, one in which we can embrace black identity in its multitude of forms, is a much more fruitful approach to new racial formations than a sectioning off of “special interest groups,” something the mixed race movement in the US seemed to advocate. Ultimately, mixed race identity formation in the US seem to emerge out of a neoliberal cultural ideology of the 1990s, a moment in which being racially unique has a great deal of cultural currency. Being different enough to stand out but not so different that you challenge the dominant power structure has its benefits—for the individual. The reality is that a mixed race aesthetic has only become increasingly fetishized under neoliberalism today, to the extent that mixed race people now hold some degree of cultural currency not afforded monoracials.

⁹⁹ While I understand the opposition to the historic erasure of a particular experience of difference, I do believe that mixed race as a social construction weakens social movements on the part of groups of color. For this reason, the mixed race movement has been quite easily co-opted by right wing conservatives such as Ward Connerly who are interested in doing away with racial categorization for different reasons but gladly hid behind this movement.

¹⁰⁰ Root; Zack; Lise Fundeburg, *Black, White, Other: Biracial Americans Talk About Race and Identity*. 1st ed. (New York: W. Morrow and Co., 1994).

¹⁰¹ Maria P. P. Root, ed., *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996). In the latter, Root opens with “A Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People” that later becomes foundational for the movement; it includes a list of affirmative statements such as “I have the right not to keep the races separate within me.”

Black is...Black ain't

I see, as my interviewees so frequently do, value in understanding Dominican identity in relationship to blackness and the African diaspora. Writes Gilroy, “The concept of diaspora has become a useful one because it allows us to look simultaneously at the differences and the continuities in black experience.” Like concepts of blackness and mixed race, the African diaspora is a politically, ideologically and culturally constructed theoretical framework. Using it to understand Dominican identity is unique only in that Dominicans do not typically and have not historically viewed themselves through this lens and to do so illuminates many aspects of the politics of identity with which Dominicans are engaged. However, the African diaspora is essential to understanding the Caribbean region, past, present and future. Historical ties to Africa, transatlantic orientations to the continent, diasporic longings and African diaspora aesthetics have long informed Caribbean identities and do so to this day. Work on the DR is always already in conversation with a concept of diaspora, but generally that of Dominican migrants who have made lives beyond the island. An African diaspora framing pulls us back to what is culturally and physically on the island. We are forced to acknowledge a history of the forced migration of Africans to the Americas, as well as present social, cultural, structural ramifications imbricated in contemporary and globalized representations of blackness. If the notion of “diaspora” is not complex enough, “Africa” and how it is thought of generally, by those outside of the continent and those who call Africa home, tends to obscure the profound heterogeneity among its people. “Africa” in what might be only a geographic reference has come to represent a multitude of histories and cultural representations. Yet from the West, it is attached firmly to blackness. In studying blackness in the Caribbean, beyond offering a transnational history that places the US at its center, the African diaspora as a construct is a tool useful for remembering politically what is at stake in attachments to blackness and to Africa and in rejecting it, as in the case of many Dominicans.

The cultural significance of Africa has of course shifted over time. It is as Stuart Hall describes it, transformed, not, as the West would have us imagine it: a “*Présence Africaine*” that is frozen in the (primitive) past. Thus, the African diaspora as a construct

that serves to unify people of African descent across a range of differences, such as languages, locations, and histories that vary tremendously, down to the systems of colonial rule and the religious practices of one's ancestors in the new world let alone on the continent—however, it does so with the premise that all of these people are black. The African diaspora is an analytic strategy for scholars across disciplines to better deconstruct the nuances of particular black identities. Historian Sidney Mintz, who recognized at the moment of his writing in the early 1970s, the political nature of broadening the categories of blackness by using the term Afro-American. question of “What is African food?” is a tool of analysis in that it forces us to look more closely at themes, connections and syncretisms that occur across Caribbean cultures. We see in the study of the Caribbean people of African descent who are white, which from a “rule of hypodescent” perspective is surprising to us in ways that imagining people of European descent who are black is not.

Traces of history that are tied to African cultural practices emerge in popular culture to recover what Hall refers to as a “narrative displacement.” In fact, it is a political act to connect blackness to African histories and cultures for it flies in the face of a dominant West in which African slaves were denied their histories, identities and culture. To be a slave in the Americas was supposedly to have no past. Haiti had been written about by historians of the DR and others in the region in this way as having no history and no hope for being able to coalesce as a nation, and has no “culture”. As frequently done with Haiti to this day, there is the risk of tying blackness to an essentialized Africanness and primitivizing blackness; discourses of the primitive become a constantly threat to black humanity (with real life or death consequences) that is always already under siege. As Kobena Mercer writes “Because white supremacy posited that Africans were entirely stripped of an original culture by the Middle Passage, African Americans were obliged to refute such racist assumptions. As James Baldwin reminds us in “Strangers in the Village,” however, looking backwards and attaching contemporary blackness to Africanness by those in the West is another manner of asserting past dominant narratives. It reinforces ideas common in the DR about high culture as effective in civilizing of African diasporic subjects.

Another way in which to think about the African diaspora and its construction is in terms of the visual. Black visual artists and their white collectors have worked to place black art into an African diaspora as well, changing the meaning and value of the work and its style. African diaspora art work, argues Kobena Mercer, is about representing the race, and working against a narrative of absence for black people. Mercer points us to the repetition of the image of the African mask, for example, as tying works of what he calls the “Afro-diaspora modernism” together in their repeated calling to Africanness. Ultimately, each of these questions about race and who gets included in what categories of identity are tied to the visual and enforced at the boundaries of what a person looks like and how they perform their racial identity. Black bodies in film and on film are tied to an African origin because of how we think about and how we recognize blackness. Black bodies on film repeatedly stand in stark contrast to whiteness. One example of how this plays out for Dominican bodies is the documentary film *Sugar* in which we see the young Dominican baseball player Azucar get recruited to a US minor league baseball team in the Midwest. Decontextualized in the rural US, he is a black man and on the screen he is viewed as such. Placed in a homestay on a family farm, he is thrown into stark contrast with their whiteness. So much so that when the adolescent granddaughter in the film becomes a potential love interest, we as viewers are terrified for our protagonist because of what he does not yet know about US race politics. Seeing the young white girl together with Azucar, a dark-skinned Afro-Latino youth evokes other images of black bodies of the African diaspora and their narratives. Thus, the tension in several of the scenes in the film is informed by a sense that a young black man interested in a white woman in small town US can get himself killed.

The African diaspora is invested with enough cultural meaning that it can do social work—and vice versa. It gives a minority group influence by increasing its numbers while obscuring differences for the sake of the collective. It connects those who left Africa hundreds of years ago and those leaving Africa today if they are black. It served a purpose during the US black power movement and the civil rights movement and the South African anti-apartheid movement and the Brazilian *movimento negro* through expanding notions of brotherhood and sisterhood among black people across

nations. It can make racial oppressions across cultures and nations look simplistically parallel. And it can be strategically employed and commodified.

Not least of all, African diaspora as an analytic in the study of the Caribbean should point us right to Haiti as its own ideological construction central to Western imperialism in the Americas. Haiti, viewed as the “Africa of the Americas” to this day must work against a construct of the African diaspora that is stigmatizing. It is too African. And being viewed as such makes possible ongoing US intervention on multiple levels. Production of images of Haiti as “Africa’s eldest daughter” demonstrates the way that as a nation it has been shaped to fit whatever the needs of appropriation were at the time. Black Americans would travel to Haiti in the 20th century in order to capture a “cultural primitivism” that was prized by the establishment and lacking in their own work. After the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), Haiti was no longer the “Pearl of the Caribbean,” representing an excess of wealth in its peak production of sugar. The Spanish feared Haiti would be an example to Cubans who fought ten years in the war of independence. Dominicans later feared the Haitian occupation (which had occurred from 1822-1844) of their side of the island. Haiti to this day remains an outlier that historically caused fear in the hearts of colonial governments in the Caribbean and beyond. Dominican Dictator Raphael Trujillo feared Haitian Otherness (interpreted as blackness). But reading Haiti in the context of the African diaspora leads us to understand the nation’s history of revolt as part of something far greater.

Now You See it, Now you Don’t: Methods in Action

With this interdisciplinary project, I point to and analyze cultural texts that though they appear to be located outside of the mainstream, in fact, address core aspects of Dominican women’s experiences. Specifically, I examine visual representations of Dominican culture and identity: YouTube videos, student murals, event posters, and images with text that are widely circulated online and that document Dominican life and values in the 21st century. Additionally, I have gathered ethnographic notes that reflect my own observations and personal experiences regarding life in Santo Domingo. These observations are informed by what I hear, and what people tell me about their lives, but they are significantly informed by what I *see* around me. I lived in Santo Domingo, from

February 2010 to March 2011 and returned again at the end of November 2011 for five additional months during which time I was transcribing interviews and writing chapters. I spent time building relationships within the community of students I would later interview, finding it far easier to settle into conversation with people that I knew in some way. I in no way claim to have produced a complete picture of what it means to be a Dominican woman, this was never my goal. Rather, I sought a diversity of opinions within a segment of the population who are embracing a transnational identity while living their lives in Santo Domingo. The socio-economic background of the women with whom I spoke appears to have made them better prepared to critique their own subject positions because of opportunities for international travel, regular internet access, higher education and ongoing relationships with family and friends living abroad. These experiences feed a greater self-awareness. I have interviewed young Dominican woman across a network of students and activists. Capturing their attention with business cards size flyers that carried the Facebook logo, I drew volunteers from several university campuses to participate in my online survey. On Facebook, I set up a page called “*Un Proyecto Sobre La Mujer Dominicana* [A Project About The Dominican Woman]” with which I could locate women interested in being interviewed on this topic. Those who participated also referred their friends. In total, I have spoken with 30 women, ages 18 to 38, with most of them in their early and mid-twenties.¹⁰²

In the first months of getting to know my research site, I discovered that Zoe Saldaña, Rita Indiana, Marta Heredia and Michelle Rodriguez were especially popular in the DR.¹⁰³ Their images were also circulating transnationally and well-recognized. For this reason, I designed interview questions and an online survey around digital photographs of these women. In 2010, images of Zoe Saldaña around Santo Domingo regularly circulated in the press. Similarly, Rita Indiana’s music was everywhere and people were excited about her.¹⁰⁴ I was not at all familiar Rita Indiana before my arrival, but I had been told to keep an eye out for her locally. I also knew nothing of Marta

¹⁰² I also spoke with Dominican men about the cultural history of the country, but only one in formal interview, as reflected in Chapter 1’s section about student activism at *La UASD*.

¹⁰³ Indiana may have been at the height of her popularity during the time I was there while Heredia was on the decline.

¹⁰⁴ This is not exactly the case in 2012.

Heredia, who had won the Latin American Idol the year before thanks to Dominicans worldwide texting in their support. Actress Michelle Rodriguez I added last, at the urging of my host sister, and was to find that at the end of 2010 a Dominican film was released with her in the starring role. In each interview, I presented headshots of the four women, which I had printed out on a sheet of paper. In this way, I was able to draw out more pointedly issues of color, hair texture, shape of facial features, stature and the media portrayal of these celebrities. Nearly all of my interviewees were able to recognize the women, though a few did not know Saldaña's name right away or did not recognize Rodriguez at all.

Writing transnational cultural studies at this moment in time, when transmission of information via the internet is nearly instantaneous, is as terrifying as it is exhilarating and amplified in its exponential multiplication. My research responds to a key question Jasbir Puar poses for today's cultural studies: "What does it mean to be examining, absorbing, feeling, reflecting on, and writing about the archive as it is being produced, rushing at us—literally, to entertain an unfolding archive?"¹⁰⁵ This cultural material expands my world of understanding as I am connected to more and more Dominican friends via Facebook. By posting and reposting event flyers, visual images and commentary, popular culture flows down the screen and fills my inbox when I log in to the social networking site. Conversations take place both about images posted and people respond to images with other images. Quickly and easily, images cross linguistic divides signifying on universal meanings as communities are more readily marketed to transnationally. Viewers develop a common language that can lead agreed upon hierarchies. One can simply click "Like" along with thousands of others to show your support of a website's publication anti-racist article, you can click on a link to sign a petition against environmental degradation, or easily "share" a newly digitized black and white image of your favorite writing, otherwise long lost in an archive somewhere. As others observe what you share, what you click on, and what groups you are a part of, you form an online identity and are associated with the type of information you post to your page.

¹⁰⁵ Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), xix.

Visual culture is also malleable and can respond to other visual culture. A keen example of this is the billboard of the President of the Dominican Republic that quietly went up throughout the capital in the fall of 2010. It is a profile shot of President Fernandez in front of a bright pink and orange sunset. He is located at the left-hand corner of the scene, beside a Dominican flag. His right hand rests authoritatively with two fingers along his cheek as he gazes into the sunset; “*El Destino* [Destiny]” is written along the bottom right-hand corner of the image. I noticed the repetition of this image across the visual landscape of the city. Many Dominicans perceived the billboard as an eerie and ominous warning that Fernandez would not step down willingly for the 2012 election. Online, Dominicans responded to this image with graphic design, reposting it after stealthily changing the words that run along the bottom to read “*el cretino*” [the cretin]. This effort was then applauded within the virtual community, whose members comment on and shared the revised image.

Alongside visual culture analysis, I employ ethnography as a tool to better understand the social significance of this same popular culture and the impact of neoliberalism on the lives and identities of young women in Santo Domingo. I draw on the traditions of anthropology, and embrace a different type of accountability than a cultural historian might. I refer to the women I interviewed for this project as “interviewees” for lack of a better term. However, the interviews were deliberately conversational in style. Early on during my time in the Dominican Republic, each interviewee acted a “cultural informant,” educating me about the details of Dominican culture that I did not understand. As a testament to their knowledge and generosity, I have been well-schooled in aspects of what it means to be Dominican in Santo Domingo as we head into the second decade of the 21st century. I am familiar with the social divisions, cultural expectations, racial meaning and by all means, the public transportation system. Over time, several of the people I interviewed became good friends. Eventually, we shared social networks in common. While transnational feminism asks that I be conscientious about the inherent global inequalities that meet each time women of color sit together (even metaphorically) at the same table, it also reminds me of the urgency of the work to be done.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Talpade Mohanty.

“It’s so difficult to actually listen to all the voices and then pick the ones that build a solid concept about or opinion about the subject,” observed one of my interviewees, after reading a chapter of my dissertation that I had composed about her peers.¹⁰⁷

“Yes.” I agreed, “It will end up being a snapshot of what’s going on, you know, in 2010, and what’s happening and what people were saying.” As Jasbir Puar defines it, a type of “alternative historical record, archive and documentation of our contemporary moments,” this dissertation can only be a “snapshot” of a moment in time.¹⁰⁸

“I like that concept, a snapshot....” She says. This metaphor for the consolidation of all things taking place in one location at one particular moment resonates with her. Still, she questions me, “Transnational? Why transnational?” and I am reminded of the ways that term, which has been so important to the framing of my project in American Studies today, has little resonance to her.

“Because it really interests me how you can live in the DR and speak English and identify with US culture,” I explain. Her reaction reminds me of the ways that the “transnational” in Dominican culture is so inherently a part of life for young people in Santo Domingo that it seems to hardly require remark, let alone its own term. The young women I interview do not remember life in the DR being any other way.¹⁰⁹

Women of Color Feminism at the Center: Transnational Feminist Methodologies

Women of color feminism as a theoretical approach is consistently at the center of my work because it brings personal narrative to the fore and values women’s experience as knowledge. Women of color have demanded of feminism of the 1970s and 80s a level of self-reflexivity on the part of white women, so that they might recognize their privilege and their own complicity with a hegemonic structure that benefits not only white men but also white women. In her contribution to the landmark publication *This Bridge Called My Back*, Audre Lorde injects theories of difference into a historically

¹⁰⁷ Since she has joined the activist group of which they are all apart, I wanted to know her perception of my project as well.

¹⁰⁸ Puar, xv.

¹⁰⁹ Rita Indiana Hernandez captures this quality in her novel *Papi* (2004) that reflects life in Santo Domingo in the 1980s, inundated with US popular culture.

white feminist movement in order to push past claims that all women face a common oppression under patriarchy. Lorde asserts a women of color feminism that stretches beyond the knowledge of a white patriarchal culture. She fearlessly speaks truth to power with an understanding that, as a black lesbian writer and warrior, she can be no further marginalized in US society than she is already: “When I speak of knowledge, as you know, I am speaking of that dark and true depth which understanding serves, waits upon, and makes accessible through language to ourselves and others. It is this depth within each of us that nurtures vision.”¹¹⁰ That depth, that “deep down place,” is important to women of color scholarship and very often overlooked by the mainstream dominant culture.¹¹¹

“We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity,” write the women of the Combahee River Collective in their 1977 statement. Followed by Michele Wallace, Kimberley Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins and others, these women articulate the ways in which black women’s intersectional identities lead them to be multiply oppressed. They urge not only theory but practice based on these intersecting identities and reclaim them as the source of their power: “We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.”¹¹² These same knowledges, bell hooks later notes, are turned against women and devalued. She writes, in *Remembered Rapture*, “Patriarchal mass media’s appropriation and popularization of [women’s experiences of child abuse, domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment...] helped create a cultural context where the confessional narrative has been trivialized, made to appear solely a gesture that is self-serving and exhibitionist.”¹¹³ hooks’ prolific writings are foundational to women of color feminism and are recognized

¹¹⁰ Audre Lorde, “An Open Letter to Mary Daly” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. 2nd Edition (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1984), 95.

¹¹¹ Except when the black woman is seen as mystic, which is common in popular film. See Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance* (Temple University Press).

¹¹² Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. *But Some Of Us Are Brave: All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: Black Women’s Studies*. (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1993), 13.

¹¹³ bell hooks. *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work*. p. 61.

within this project, both in my analysis of what women have to say about their lives, and by the Dominican women that I interview who use her theory in their activism (as I discuss in Chapter 4). hooks consistently speaks up, out and against hegemonic white feminism and women's studies projects that perpetually exclude women of color, often by saying "well, we invited them, but they didn't show up."¹¹⁴ She habitually stands alone in her protest, whether among siblings in the patriarchal household of her Southern childhood, or by locating herself outside of the academy in order to teach others transgress. She does not aim to patiently integrate herself into white feminism but condemns it for its inability to represent a diversity of women's experiences.¹¹⁵

Coming from a community in which black women were laborers for white families for generations, hooks recognizes the ways in which their labor allowed black women to observe the inner workings of power. Likewise, as Hill Collins writes, partly in reference to academia, "As outsiders within, Black women have a distinct view of the contradictions between the dominant groups' actions and ideologies."¹¹⁶ Women of color feminism as a praxis challenges accepted norms and cultural constructions such as heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy, as well as the national discourse itself as a shifting and rather flawed ideology.¹¹⁷ Women of color have a distinct view within the workings of neoliberalism and its contradictions, which this study reflects.

Women of color feminism emerges from and is engaged in an ethnic studies tradition that interrogates earlier formations of feminism and women's studies. Transnational feminism emerging from women's studies and postcolonial theory, then, is intertwined with the women of color feminist movement. Scholars such as Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Cheryl Clarke, Ida B. Wells and many others make clear that black feminist theory significantly informs

¹¹⁴ It is worth noting that the works of women of color are available to us through independent presses that print their work. This *Bridge* in its second edition came forth from Kitchen Table Press which no longer exists, while South End Press has published the works of bell hooks for decades and has makes the multivocal collaborative work of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence available as well. In the knowledge/power dichotomy, the politics of publication matter tremendously.

¹¹⁵ bell hooks. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1984), 25.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, 117.

women of color feminism more broadly, which in turn feeds into the transnational feminism of our day.

With this study, I heed Barbara Smith's call to do the necessary work of black feminist criticism, as I remain "constantly aware of the political implications of [my] work."¹¹⁸ My research on Dominican women's identity, as this dissertation attests, is tied to the "political situation of all black women." I recognize the importance, as Hill Collins does, of documenting and explaining black women's diverse reactions to being objectified as the Other.¹¹⁹ In drawing connections from Dominican women to black women in diaspora, however, I do not aim to make quick assumptions about the lives and experiences of women of African descent in the DR. Rather, my project responds to Dominican women's increasing identification with blackness and their interest in and engagement with US black feminist scholarship, as well as mainstream global discourse about blackness from which Dominicans are not exempt.

In *Scattered Hegemonies*, Grewal and Kaplan posit that the methodologies of transnational feminism begin with collaboration. With this project, I have taken on that responsibility by engaging contributors as collaborators with ownership over their own words. My role has been to draw out narratives and themes that might educate readers about the issues these particular women negotiate daily. Additionally, Kaplan and Grewal call on feminist scholars to do better work by complicating ideological constructions that uphold the cultural hegemony of the West, doing away with concepts such as "hybridity." They argue that an investment in these types of ideological constructions in fact reinforce powerful native/other, us/them and center/periphery dichotomies.¹²⁰ Therefore, they call for a transnational feminism that goes beyond a race-gender-class triad in order to be more comprehensive and resist what they see as having become a global-local monolithic dichotomy that inevitably subordinates the local. The two rightly argue that communities are in fact organized across a more extensive diversity of levels, and that within each there are unique and context specific structures of power. This is certainly the case in

¹¹⁸ Smith, 164

¹¹⁹ Collins, 83.

¹²⁰ Not unlike the argument that in places like the US an investment in "mixed race" as a social category merely reifies race, which is in fact a false construct.

Santo Domingo, where color (and with that defining hair type) holds significant sway and is integral to gender identity and to class. The conversation in this context is not easily transferrable to issues of race and identity, though outside scholars continue to attempt to apply this language.

Ella Shohat's edited collection of essays and images, *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age* reflects the same "postmodern moment" as Grewal and Kaplan's text. It is a moment in which to exist in the world as transnational subjects, women must construct their identities from often disparate cultural influences. Transnational women are no longer left to feel torn across constructed boundaries but can articulate themselves as whole, even as they exist in fragmented global formations that take the shape of a dynamic "constellation" of different sites. The artists and activists make up a "polyphony" of voices whose transcultural experiences are pieced together to form something like what Fredrick Jameson refers to as a "postmodern pastiche," drawing on diverse signifiers to create something pleasing in sensory ways. Or, as Mark Anthony Neal puts it, this is a more recent "post-soul aesthetic"—an amalgamation of aesthetic values that are grabbed from elsewhere and combined to create something new, possibly forgoing its original meaning.¹²¹ In this way, the essentialism of modernity gets traded in for an assemblage—and assemblages, like music "mash-ups" in which an old song is revitalized by being blended with a new one, are all the rage today.¹²²

In his 1990 essay, "Nationalism, history and ethnic absolutism," Paul Gilroy himself argues for a nearly transnational feminist approach to the analysis of social structure as localized and globalized.¹²³ Nation, as a construction must be contended with in new ways if more than one tenth of Dominicans live outside the bounds of the territory to which they attach themselves. Nation is just one of many frames through which we might understand people as connected to place, culture, ideology and institutions. Yet, according to Aiwā Ong, beyond marking a relationship of power—and ideology tied to

¹²¹ Fredrick Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); Mark Anthony Neal. *Soul Babies : Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

¹²² With "assemblage" I draw on Jasbir Puar's 2006 work. *Terrorist Assemblages*.

¹²³ Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993).

that power—the nation is no more a territorialized construction than the concept of “diaspora.”¹²⁴ Further complicating this, individuals as neoliberal subjects increasingly pledge allegiance to multiple nation-states—a Dominican American, for example, has been shaped by a particular cultural experience and has allegiances to multiple homelands, their identity and their nation “unbounded.”¹²⁵ While they may identify themselves as Dominican (which accounts for both cultural and racial differences), they do not necessarily want to live in the DR, and they may never have lived there.

Steven Gregory has written about the local and specific sites of Boca Chica, along the southern coast of the Dominican Republic, and the neighboring town of Andres. The spaces themselves become transnational through the presence and influence of multinational corporations—and the US military.¹²⁶ As a black scholar, Gregory is conscious of the influence that his race, class and color have on his ability to do research in the DR—his phenotype and outsider status often lead him to be misidentified by strangers as part-Haitian. In this way they make sense of his familiarity yet Otherness in the Dominican context. As an anthropologist, Gregory is also careful to acknowledge his own subjectivity and how others perceive him in these spaces, aligning with transnational feminism through his self-reflective positioning and the gender politics he expresses. When he hands over his microphone to his Dominican research assistant, Milquella, he acknowledges the authority of her cultural, gendered, racialized, regional experience (her epistemic knowledge).¹²⁷ Eventually, the research produced becomes multidimensional out of necessity—the people we interview teach us *how* to tell their stories.

Today’s transnational scholarship reflects tremendous changes in how societies, communities and individuals are formed across borders, and the new way in which scholars attempt to understand these transformations.¹²⁸ Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La*

¹²⁴Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

¹²⁵ Simmons, 65.

¹²⁶Steven Gregory. *The Devil Behind the Mirror: Globalization and Politics in the Dominican Republic* (2007)

¹²⁷ Subsequently authoring her own interviewing technique, Milquella not only teaches Gregory to do better work, but for the moment holds some power in their relationship. This is something about which the two of them share an awareness. Gregory’s recognition of this dynamic is essential to a transnational feminist approach to research that values the knowledge of those about whose lives we write.

¹²⁸ Shelley Fisher Fishkin. “Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn In American Studies” Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004. I am in agreement with Fishkin when she

Frontera: The New Mestiza remains essential to the genealogy of women of color and transnational feminist theory for good reason. With this text (which has pushed the limits of what is permissible in academic scholarship), Anzaldúa identifies herself as sitting on the Texas-US-Southwest/Mexican border both literally and metaphorically. This experience of identity that Anzaldúa writes about in 1987 existed long before US academics made popular the term “transnational.”¹²⁹ In bringing together a range of writings, she metaphorically embodies the contradictions of her own mixed racial and cultural identity as a lesbian Chicana (of Indigenous, Mexican and Anglo ethnic heritage). The visibility she achieves complicates the presumably firm boundaries of the nation state that we are told to believe in and her identity disrupts socially constructed boundaries of race and sexuality.¹³⁰ By making her own voice central to the text, she is a subject as well as a site of contestation throughout.

In *Pedagogies of Crossing*, Jacqui Alexander, presents a key methodology of transnational feminist theory: the need to know the *specificities* of each other’s histories of oppression before building an alliance with one another.¹³¹ This means not attempting to write someone else’s story from afar. Alexander, who writes from the personal to convey her experience of the transnational and its complexity testifies, “A set of conflictual convergences of my own migrancy, rendered more fragile under empire, and the genealogies of feminist, neocolonial, and ‘queer’ politics that are simultaneously transnational, all reside here. It is a place from which I navigate life, using the foot I keep in the Caribbean, the one I have had in the United States since 1971...and yet a third foot.” Her third foot places her in the Kôngo and as subject of diaspora she claims a landed space not framed by nation as we know it.¹³² As it turns out, a transnational

urges students to do transnational research that is not in English, and engage the work of non-US-based scholars not only to broaden our knowledge of the world but to de-center just a bit the production of knowledge. Sadly this is becoming far less feasible as time to degree is shortened within the industry of Ph.D. production.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

¹³⁰ Marisol de la Cadena expertly writes about this malleability and context specific nature of racial identifications on the local level in her 2000 publication, *Indigenous Mestizos: The Politics of Race and Culture in Cuzco, Peru, 1919-1991*.

¹³¹ Mohanty.

¹³² *Pedagogies of Crossing*. Lorde asks similar questions to those posed by Alexander (as do Mohanty and so many transnational scholars of color located in the developed world) about her own implication in the imperialism of the nation that she grew up, as it attacked Grenada, the island nation of her mother’s birth.

approach that combines these various methodologies is much like playing a game of Twister®.¹³³ While Alexander's contortion seems at first unusual, it is not. In this moment of transnational experience an awareness of my own subjectivity and how it shapes what I see, what I look for and what questions I ask is vital. I have one foot of my three legged pot in the US, where I was raised with many of the privileges of American citizenship; another foot in Ghana, West Africa where I have lived and where my father and many relatives live today. My third foot I have placed in Santo Domingo, seeing and understanding the influences of the US and the African diaspora, in so many ways marked on the bodies of the people who live there. With this transnational multi-sited optic, I understand that "No standpoint is neutral because no individual or group exists unembedded in the world."¹³⁴ Therefore, as I study hierarchies of color that are so much a part of daily life in the DR and as I think about Dominicans as part of the African diaspora, that many of them claim (though many others do not) I recognize that globalized dominant cultural representations of blackness shape the significance of Dominican racial categories today, whether or not this is explicitly defined.¹³⁵

Finally, a strength of transnational feminist theory and women of color feminism in which there is room to recognize the epistemic knowledge of transnational experience, is the space made for that which is sacred from our diverse cultures and communities. "Magic," "the sacred," and even "feeling" or other emotional experiences referred to by the scholarly term "affect," are often marginalized in the academy as inexplicable, and therefore not worth explaining.¹³⁶ In the context of the DR, it is vitally important to recognize—as Alexander does (and Lorde before her)—that amidst the struggle there is something *magic* in all of this, which women of color are attempting to reclaim.¹³⁷ This magic keys in to African and thus Caribbean traditions, belief and spiritual practices,

¹³³ The game, produced by Milton Bradley, was a global phenomenon that crossed many class and cultural barriers.

¹³⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*. p. 33.

¹³⁵ Michele Wallace and Gina Dent; bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1992); Gilroy. *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*. (New York and London: Serpents Tail, 1993).

¹³⁶ Moves towards understanding identity and experience on the level of the abject and/or in trauma works like Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* or histories like Sybille Fischer's *Modernity Disavowed*.

¹³⁷ As in Lorde's essay on the erotic, it is a silenced and powerful piece of one's self that reflect different knowledges.

such as Santeria and Voudun, that are an integral part of life on the island of Hispaniola. It is the same type of magic we see in the Latin American literary tradition that incorporates a magical realism.¹³⁸ In Dominican society, such traditions of the sacred that sit outside of Catholicism are frequently embraced within the cultural arts, especially the work of Haitian artists, yet they are frequently referred by scholars as “primitive” and “naïf.” When Alexander calls for “pedagogies of the sacred” as part of our work as black, feminist, transnational, women scholars, she is urging us to reclaim embodied knowledges and thus she is placing greater value on such beliefs and practices that would otherwise be dismissed.¹³⁹ The scholarly inclination to put aside the spiritual, the unexplained, or the erotic, because dominant culture devalues it or is uncomfortable with it, effectively silences alternative knowledge and *power* of the type that women of color so often bring to the table.¹⁴⁰

My “theoretical optic” then is one that draws on all of the aforementioned theory because it is necessary to utilize a diversity of texts to cross-read contemporary Dominican culture through a transnational feminist cultural studies lens. If imagined in linear progression, I seem to reach back past transnational feminist theory to draw upon a women of color theory that takes a minority stance, as the activists I interviewed for chapter 4 have done. I use women of color and transnational feminist theory in this way because I have made the concept of difference central to my analysis.

Throughout the dissertation as a whole, I capture the social climate among progressive young people living in Santo Domingo today. I offer some context through Dominican history of the last few decades, using the public university as a site through which to view the impact of neoliberal development as well as the social impact of new technologies and the Internet (Chapter 1). I examine some of the many ways that Dominican women discuss and negotiate the cultural expectations placed upon them within the DR and abroad, their own relationships to existing stereotypes of the Dominican female, and the experiences of racial ambiguity that shape their worldviews (Chapter 2). I then explore the implications for consumption of Dominican women’s

¹³⁸ See the work of Gabriel García Márquez. This magical realism can also be found in Junot Díaz’s *Oscar Wao* and in the work of Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa, for example.

¹³⁹ M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*.

¹⁴⁰ The Combahee Women’s Collective calls for this reclamation of power as well.

racially ambiguous bodies through the example of Hollywood actress Zoe Saldaña; her body is fetishized and useful because of its racial ambiguity (Chapter 3). Lastly, I look at the impact of US black feminist writing on Dominican women and how these works inform their activism and the shift they are making from identifying as Latina to identifying as Afro-Latina in the DR (Chapter 4). Across each of these chapters, I highlight four central and intersecting themes that I have introduced with this introduction: 1) the experience of racial ambiguity; 2) the cultural impact of neoliberal development on women in Dominican society; 3) the production of a transnational identity through new technologies and the internet; and 4) the ongoing use of visual culture to disseminate cultural ideologies within a rapidly changing transnational Dominican society.

Writing Race, Writing Self

I am not Dominican. Yet, as a transnational black feminist queer scholar (in no particular order), my own identity shapes my praxis.¹⁴¹ Although this dissertation project is decidedly about Dominican women, and not about my own identity, my body and everything about who I am has shaped the knowledge I am able to produce, and my access to the communities about which I write. I have now spent more than a year and a half navigating Dominican culture in order to gain insight into the unique context in which Dominican women shape transnational subjectivities. I have been shaped ideologically by Dominican culture.¹⁴² I have constructed a story about the DR that highlights aspects of Dominican society that I believe are important yet often overlooked. The story reflects both my own perspective and the values of the women with whom I have spoken, who have identified these elements as important to who they are.

In *Reconstructing Racial Identity*, Simmons narrates the story of her own African American identity in relationship to the Dominican Republic as the site of her research. She offers important insights into the context within which she is writing about racial

¹⁴¹ Paul Gilroy in *Small Acts* quotes Gramsci (Selections from Prison Notebooks “The Study of Philosophy”) in his use of the concept of the “critical self-inventory,” saying “The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory.’” p.69

¹⁴² Simmons, 7; Chiqui Vicioso, Julia Alvarez write about this, as does Ginetta Candelario..

ideology. She also demonstrates clearly the value of epistemological knowledge through her informed perspective as a light-skinned black woman. Simmons' family who are also African American can likewise "pass" as Dominican because of their light color and fine hair texture. She informs us that her young children, who spent their first years in the DR, claim Dominican identities. As Paula Moya writes in the introduction to *Reclaiming Identity*, " 'identities' are evaluatable theoretical claims that have epistemic consequences. Who we understand ourselves to be will have consequences for how we experience and understand the world. Our conception of who we are as social beings (our identities) influence—and in turn are influenced by—our understandings of how our society is structured and what our particular experiences in that society are likely to be."¹⁴³ Ultimately, I recognize individuals to be the experts of their own experiences, no matter what kind of analytical frame I choose to place on their lives.

As a US scholar doing research in the DR, my freedom to come and go at will due to my US passport sets me apart from many in the community I have joined. As Shohat reminds us, our movement as scholars across national borders from the so-called "first world" to our chosen sites of study is a privilege we might easily view as little more than "late imperial travel culture." I aim to produce academic work that does minimal harm to the individuals and communities about which I write.¹⁴⁴ I believe that the existence of this type of scholarship can have a positive impact on the communities about which I write. I find not only is the project valued by those who choose to participate in it, but it inspires their own writings and the conversations broaden their perspectives on themselves and they worlds they inhabit. When I use the words of Dominican men and women in my work, and I offer my best faith effort to convey in English the full significance of the statements they have made in conversations with me. I share with them the work I have produced about them and I consider the ways that our relationship may or may not be mutually beneficial. I take this approach as a transnational feminist cultural studies scholar because I do not want to be yet another *gringa* academic poaching

¹⁴³ Paula Moya, *Reclaiming Identity*, 8

¹⁴⁴ Writes Patricia Hill Collins, "I often use the pronoun 'our' instead of 'their' when referring to African-American women, a choice that embeds me in the group I am studying instead of distancing me from it. In addition, I occasionally place my own concrete experiences in the text... These conscious epistemological choices signal my attempts not only to explore the thematic content of Black feminist thought but to do so in a way that does not violate its basic epistemological framework." p. 203.

ideas and representations from communities in the DR solely for my own benefit. Nevertheless, I cannot escape the gaze of those who might choose to view me as such; they are rightly wary. This is another type of transnational transaction that has become commonplace.

I close this introduction (and open the rest of the dissertation) with a poem by New York-based Afro-Dominican writer and performance artist Josefina Báez. She published the poem, “Sinceyouseemtoknowmorethanmyself” on her blog in July of 2011.

¹⁴⁵ With Báez’s work, I ask readers to privilege the words of the women who make up this project and their stories. I hope that you will hold me accountable to the women whose words have allowed me to piece together a “snapshot” of their world for this project. I write about their lives in order to produce knowledge of some scholarly significance for communities on and off the island. I aim to tread lightly as I join a longstanding conversation about Dominican identity. In the following piece (as in her other work), Báez demands that each of us think carefully about how scholarly research projects inevitably reproduce dominant structures of power, recognizing that there is an inordinate amount of details that gets lost in translation.

Permissions, translations and presentations
of the self-for the self.
In the constant journey filled and full of MY history
according to others.
Reactions to the other’s angle.
Cynicism to survive.
The hunter’s story.
When me is not enough.
And the other thinks she/he knows more about me than myself.
Permissions.
Pardon for living...
May I be me?
Can I be me?
Would you allow me to be me?
Listen, I am me regardless of your discourse.
Listen, I am able to articulate MY history.
MY stories.
I am the only one that can give a seal of
approval to my journey.
By the way: your discourse is quite passé.

¹⁴⁵ Posted July 17, 2011 at <http://excusemeexcuseus.wordpress.com/>

Translations.
The artist is trying to say...
The artist meant...
Here the artist is attempting to...
This means...
Thanks but no thanks.
Hello. The presentation card project.

Chapter 1

Sites of Identity: Education, Anti-Privatization, and the Internet

Somewhere between the local and the global there must be a place for the nation-state and indeed for the myths and dreamed of national or ethnic collectivity that condition our political predicament even as the relationship between the local and the global is itself transformed... what value should we attach to the claims which nationality makes when we weigh them against the other political and theoretical options we encounter in the writing of history?

–Paul Gilroy

“I am not sure that if Junot Díaz would have studied at *la UASD*, he would have written *The Brief Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao*. I doubt it.”

–22-year-old Inez, Santo Domingo

Location, Location, Location

On a day in late February of 2010, I head to *La Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo* (*La UASD*—pronounced “wha-s”). The campus is flooded with undergraduates, streaming across broken sidewalks and sitting out on cement benches and low walls, beside weather-worn concrete buildings that hold blocks of classrooms. Glancing across the campus it is immediately obvious what many students have told me, that the majority undergraduates at *la UASD* are women.¹ These days, the university is gated, surrounded by high walls with tall rounded arches at each of the four main entryways. The north entrance, which slants down the hill toward campus, is narrow and access is pedestrian-only. Although it is a main thoroughfare for students, the doorway floods during torrential downpours. At the center of campus, the cross street *Alma Mater*, runs from north entrance to south, along the side of the library and past the front of the *Aula Magna*, the school’s signature building with its round red roof and distinct pinnacle on top. Just

¹ Lucero Quiroga, “Feminización universitaria en la República Dominicana: 1977-2001” in *Miradas Descendentes: Los Estudios de Género en la República Dominicana al inicio del Tercer Milenio*, Ginetta E. Be. Candelario, compiladora (Santo Domingo: Centro de Estudios de Género, INTEC, 2005), 51-65. In 2002, numbers of graduating women were at 62.6%.

outside the southern entryway, there is a metro station named after Marxist student activist Amín Abel Hasbún, who was killed under Joaquin Balaguer's government.² Palm trees, almond trees and other vegetation planted across the campus, provide much-coveted shade. Scraggly shrubs take a beating in the heat. While in some areas the grounds are maintained with sprinklers, in others there are plenty of bare patches of dry cracked earth with a few clumps of determined crab grass. Playing fields for volleyball, baseball and soccer at one edge of campus are worn from use. Concrete bleachers flank some of the fields for students to hang out and watch their friends. Although the *UASD* campus is sprawling, it overflows with students on the days that classes are in session and cars line the narrow streets within the campus walls.³

La UASD is the main university in Santo Domingo. Founded in 1528 as *La Universidad Santo Tomás de Aquino*, it is the oldest public university in the Americas. It was, as Tirso Mejía-Ricart notes, constructed for the purpose of educating “administrators both spiritual and material” of the new world.⁴ In the first decade of the twenty-first century, nearly half of all university students in the Dominican Republic were students at *la UASD*.⁵ Education is a key element in shaping the lives, opportunities, futures of the young Dominican women about whom I write. Public education is for most, their only option. Working class Dominicans, those who cannot afford the many private schools that emerged throughout the country after 1961, study at *La UASD*. The institution also serves a greater number of poor and working class Haitian students than other universities in the capital.⁶

Equal access to education is how the “playing field gets evened out,” a friend tells me while walking me to campus one day. Students from diverse class backgrounds can all afford the cost of tuition, which at the time of my research was a remarkable \$100

² Amín Abel Hasbún was a Dominican of Palestinian descent. He was killed September 24th, 1970.

³ In 2010, student protests responded to the removal of yet another section of trees in order to create a faculty parking lot.

⁴ Tirso Mejía-Ricart, *Historia de la Universidad Dominicana*. (Santo Domingo: Ciudad Universitaria), 1999.

⁵ Quiroga, Lucero. “Feminización universitaria en la República Dominicana: 1977-2002” in *Miradas Desencandentes: Los Estudios de Género en la República Dominicana*. 53.

⁶ Upper class Haitians can and do attend private colleges in the DR, facing discrimination for either their poverty or their wealth. After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the university waived many educational fees for Haitian students. In the past, *la UASD* has provided fellowships for Haitian students <http://www.elnuevodiario.com.do/app/article.aspx?id=52370> (May 8, 2012).

Dominican *pesos* per class, about \$15 dollars per semester for a full course load; transportation to and from campus throughout the semester costs far more. The school has housed and graduated numerous generations of Dominican professionals, artists and intellectuals. Leading Dominican scholars teach at and publish works out of *La UASD*. Credentials from *la UASD* (unlike many other institutions of higher learning in the DR) are recognized worldwide, a factor of great importance to the many students that aspire to leave the country for further education abroad. Professionals throughout the country don the *UASD* class ring—the school’s emblem engraved against a square black background—as a symbol of educational attainment and class status.⁷ The school has also long been recognized as a site of political struggle and remains a bellwether for political activism throughout the DR.

With this first chapter, I position the reader at the site of the public university and locate Dominican identity within a dynamic youth culture centered on *la UASD*. I have focused my gaze on the ongoing influence of neoliberal development on the public university over the last few decades, considering how that influences student life and youth culture. *La UASD* is a key site of cultural production, knowledge production, and information dissemination in the DR. Like the city of Santo Domingo, the *UASD* campus at its center is layered with history and symbolic meaning. With this chapter, I make a connection between past students’ use of the visual for communicating political concerns and a present internet culture, which is shaping how current generations of students see their world. Readings of two different murals on campus—one commissioned, and one student produced—allows me to scrutinize some of the specificities of Dominican identity and changing contemporary life in Santo Domingo. By uniting ethnography and visual culture studies, I produce a multifaceted account of the culture within which in which Dominican women are constructing their identities.⁸ Additionally, my research on the public university has led me into more private spaces: interviews in the home of Rafael and Rocío, two social activists who attended *la UASD* as undergraduates during

⁷ Doctors and politicians appearing on the nightly news can be seen waving it around on their fingers, as well as actors on local TV and in advertisements in the newspaper.

⁸ Lisa Nakamura writes in her Introduction to *Digitizing Race*, “Visual culture studies has the potential to intervene powerfully in the study of new media if it is prepared to discuss the Internet and shared spaces of online communication and identity formation.” p. 10

the 1990s, contribute numerous insights to my study. Finally, I consider the simultaneously public-private space of Facebook and its impact on Dominican youth who readily employ new technology to mobilize around political issues, new and old. This initial chapter as an overview, offers clues into the roots of identity-based student movements in the DR over the last couple of decades and how they are shifting over time. Whether I am reading a mural on the wall of a university building or a post on the “wall” of a Facebook page, I decode some of the many transnational cultural values and a swirl of signifiers within which Dominican women produce ideologies of self.⁹

Reading Dominican culture through the lenses of education, activism, and technology allows me to frame my larger study with insight into how neoliberal development shapes their lives. By accounting for the visuality of the public university campus, the cultural motivations of contemporary youth activism at *La UASD*, and the role of Dominican transnational community online, I unite aspects of Dominican culture that the women I have spoken with render as highly interconnected. Writes Paul Gilroy, “The seemingly trivial forms of youth subculture point to the opening up of a self-consciously post-colonial space in which the affirmation of difference points forward to a more pluralistic conception of nationality and perhaps beyond that to its transcendence.”¹⁰ Indeed the young people I write about see themselves as marginalized by mainstream Dominican culture and thus produce new forms of transnational identity. “Painting” a picture for readers of a rapidly changing Santo Domingo becomes impossible when technology is constantly transforming and so much of daily life involves circulating digital images, short videos, and dynamic web pages that serve as spaces of communication and self-expression. Dominican women in Santo Domingo are, as Lisa Nakamura suggests, “Choosing to visually signify online in ways that must result in a new organization and distribution of visual cultural capital.”¹¹ What is necessary to understand here then is the history of oppression in the DR and the patriarchal culture. Dominican women’s transnational identities are in no way exempt from that culture or

⁹ Until 2012, Facebook users could write on each other’s “walls”. This has, along with the formatting of the Facebook page, been changed to “Timelines” and all material posted on a user’s page will be eternally electronically archived.

¹⁰ Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts*, 62

¹¹ Nakamura, 17.

that history, even as successive governments work hard to control how the national grand narrative is remembered. (How are Dominican women reorganizing visual cultural capital?)

Punto Com: @Dominican History

Inside the UASD library, there is a mural on canvas that tells an often-recited narrative of Dominican identity—yet with a contemporary twist. Painted by Garcia Espina (and his collaborators), the mural was installed when the Pedro Mir library opened in 2005. The mural is hanging to your left up above you on the Western wall when you enter the library. You can view it in its entirety when standing along one of the three landing in the library. Stretched across an enormous wooden frame several floors high, canvas has already begun to sag under its own weight.¹² Espina's mural narrates a Dominican history of conquest that remains the backdrop of this contemporary story of Dominican identity. As usual, male historical actors drive the narrative with only a few women represented; those that are present no recognizes.

This story begins in lower right hand corner of the mural, with the arrival of the Spaniards. At first encounter, the Taíno people have their arrows drawn (at the left side of the mural). The Spanish *Conquistadores* on the right reach land, waving their flag. Immediately behind the image of the triumphant Spanish, however, is an illustration of the period of *encomiendas* that would follow, in which the Taíno are enslaved and eventually killed off by the brutal labor conditions, and violence and abuse sanctioned by the Catholic Church. Espina depicts the native people in loincloths and headdresses, forced to pan for gold and carry heavy goods under the watch of Spanish overseers on horseback. Africans also provide a backdrop for this story of Dominican history, as mostly nude, monochromatic and anonymous figures. Although located at the center of the mural, the image of them pouring sugar is so faint that it almost disappears into the background.

Continuing upward along the mural, one finds the figure of Gregorio Luperón, famous for winning a second independence for the DR, ending the country's annexation

¹² From each of these floors, you can enter a different reading room to access collections of books. UASD students and the general public can check out books for use within the library only. Although book displays show new works available, I often see students reading from books that are old and worn.

to Spain in 1865. Dominican history is portrayed anachronistically in this mural inside the library, since above Luperon at the top and center is Juan Pablo Duarte, standing in trinity with Matías Ramón Mella and Francisco del Rosario Sanchez. The three led the country's war of independence from Haiti in 1844 and are recognized as founding fathers. To the right of these figures is the *Aula Magna*, of *la UASD* and to the left is a group of students in a class.

What is unusual about this mural is that amidst this story of patriotism are symbols of a technological present. For example, behind the students, a satellite drifts in orbit and a satellite dish nearby points out into space and beyond the nation. Furthermore, there is an IBM desktop computer, circa 1995, painted at the bottom left hand corner below the Taíno. The entire history that the mural has captured appears to emerge from the computer below. According to the assistant to the director of the library, Eddy De los Santos Nuñez, who worked at the library at the time of the mural's installation, Espina intended to convey how all of this Dominican history can now be accessed through the internet.

"I would have put an *aroba* [@] on there to indicate that the computer was connected to the internet," Eddy tells me. Certainly, it is a highly recognized symbol, used on internet cafés signboards throughout the country. Rather, in order to tell this tale of past and present, Espina has painted rays of light bursting from the computer screen; they wind their way up the mural through the story portrayed. The commissioned work reveals key values around the organization of information in the DR and access to knowledge for Dominican students of the 21st century. It also reflects the Dominican government's investments in new technologies for the future of the nation. Today, students at *la UASD* access information freely via the internet, with banks of 40 black Dell computers on each floor of the library so that students can access the card catalogue. Computers with limited internet connection are scattered along the walls of several of the study rooms, and limited access is available wifi in many areas in the building. Some of the computers work, while many do not. It is far easier for students to get online at home, on a Blackberry, or at an internet café, to answer questions they might have, than to find books from the sparse collection at the *UASD* library. Often books they are looking for do not exist in the catalogue of the university. The practice of reading in English that

many Dominican students take up, even when they do not speak English, broadens their access to resources tremendously. The mural directly references how the internet now contains—and controls—the narrative of Dominican history, and thus Dominican identity. Espina’s work is one of many illustrations of the ways that past and present are ideologically linked.

Put up a Parking Lot

Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s Dominican President Joaquin Balaguer used *la UASD* to co-opt leftist activists who might otherwise prove a threat to his regime.¹³ According to Dominican historian Frank Moya Pons, “Intellectuals and professionals were mollified by their appointment as professors to the state university with total disregard for their professional qualifications. More than a thousand members of the minor leftist parties became professors or employees of the *Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo*.”¹⁴ Though they may have come across as revolutionary in their political discourse, writes Moya Pons, these new administrators did bring a new approach to the university after the Trujillo era.

Many of the DR’s government offices were working under US supervision during the occupation, “The National Police and security forces were advised by 15 experts on matters of public security, one third of them members of the CIA.”¹⁵ The US had its hands in setting up the “new” administration as the country transitioned from the dictatorship of Trujillo.

When Joaquin Balaguer assumed the presidency on June 1, 1966, the Dominican government was dominated by some 400 US functionaries and advisors. The military were practically managed by a US military team of 65 advisors. The ministry of agriculture was controlled by 45 US technicians who made almost all the decisions.¹⁶

Balaguer got rid of much of this US intervention soon after he took office and returned things to his personal control. “Balaguer used the university as a ghetto for the left,” Rocío would later describe it to me, “The police could not enter. It was if it were a

¹³ Moya Pons, Frank. *The Dominican Republic: A National History*. 395.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Moya Pons, 395.

¹⁶ Ibid.

little free zone. For the prosecution it created a concentration of all of his enemies.”¹⁷ By allowing revolutionary organizations to feel ownership of the UASD campus community as their own space, Balaguer could keep any and all organized acts of resistance contained. Nevertheless, Dominican intelligence agencies kept university groups under close surveillance.

Student activists at *la UASD* have attempted to maintain a space within Dominican society that is Leftist-minded and carries an ongoing critique of the state, typically resisting neoliberal capitalism. The press is infamous for misrepresenting the ongoing conflicts that play out between student groups, university faculty, and national police on the university campus. In part, this is because the government controls the press and is invested in discrediting the university administration in order not to fund an institution where politically engaged students foment the greatest anti-government agitation and decry privatization projects. In 1993, when moves toward privatization of the public university were in full force, there were 45,000 students at *la UASD*. A couple decades later, there are now 170,000 students who in 2012 could enroll in classes online for the first time.¹⁸ This rapid growth reflects the dramatic population increase in the DR, as well as the steady migration towards cities, and a desire on the part of Dominicans of all classes to have access to education as a means of social advancement.

Students currently involved in various activist groups at *La UASD* explain that there are now four main student activist groups, ERA, M-19, FILOBEL and [one other—find out].¹⁹ They organize rallies and make demands on the university, and its faculty leadership, as well as press the state government to provide the funding for which they are responsible. ERA and M-19, Rafael tells me, have a similar angle and mobilize around the same issues, albeit separately. Students shape an identity based on movements of which they are a part and the social moment in which participate.²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid. “La policía no puede entrar...Era como Fuera un pequeña zona libertad...para el ejercicio. Pero también que hizo le concentro todo el enemigo de él.”

¹⁸ According to Rafael. Need statistic here.

¹⁹ Each group has a different legacy and is known for its different memberships; each is recognized for its history and previous members.

²⁰ Amaury Germán Aristy, Virgilio Perdomo Pérez, Ulises Cerón Polanco y Bienvenido Leal Prandy, conocidos como Los Palmeros, son recordados como héroes y mártires, al ofrendar sus vidas luchando por las libertades públicas en el período de los 12 años del presidente Joaquín Balaguer.

On the western end of the UASD campus, the university has begun an expansion that students imagined would never be completed. Construction had slowed to a standstill in 2010, and seemed only to pick up speed again when election season neared in 2012. According to most, this is because the money allotted for the new buildings rarely if ever reaches its destination. Political corruption becomes a part of daily life to which citizens are resigned, this is reflected in the comments they make under their breath about government-funded projects and initiatives. Students' presumptions about embezzlement by government officials are not unfounded and are frequently confirmed in national news. Such was the case when *El Diario Libre* revealed that the parking deck completed on the university campus in 2011 cost the country over \$26 million US dollars.²¹ While numerous university buildings are in a state of disrepair, the new parking deck has four elevators and high-tech security cameras throughout. According to the daily paper, rector of the university was looking into using the state of the art structure for classroom space since so many of the engineering and law classrooms are in such poor condition.²² This prioritization of individual private property (cars) over education (the public good), and the provision of such benefits to those who can already afford to own cars, is a reflection of the shift of priorities under neoliberalism. Most of the students I interviewed are critical of the neoliberal values of the Dominican government because they inhibit opportunities for access and social advancement for all students, and because these youth can imagine a different world (perhaps one with communist values) in which there is enough to go around for everyone.

Neoliberal Rhetoric and Education Funding: 4%

In keynote speech to the Dominican diaspora, Raul Yzaguirre, US Ambassador to the Dominican Republic beginning in 2011, professes a US commitment to the advancement of the people of the DR. He suggested that investment in education is what fosters the economic growth in the DR:

²¹ June 3, 2011. http://www.diariolibre.com/noticias_det.php?id=292961 "Parque UASD habría costado \$800,000 RD por unidad". Retrieved August 4, 2011.

²² Diario Libre, August 1, 2011.

http://www.diariolibre.com/noticias_det.php?id=300182#.TjcZH21Tpr8.facebook (August 4, 2011).

Economists will tell you that there is a direct relationship between a country having a well-educated population and enjoying sustained economic growth...education is key in developing an equitable society that provides opportunities to all its citizens. Dominicans understand this, and it is Dominicans who will play the leading role in improving its educational system. The private sector is already working on this cause. Civil society organizations have highlighted this issue and have initiated a wide debate. And the United States, through USAID, has provided millions of dollars in assistance to support the Ministry of Education and its ten-year program to improve the quality and development of basic education in the country.²³

Yzaguirre extends what I see as a sort of neoliberal rhetoric of “equality” in his push for the private sector, as well as NGOs in leading the way in this area of development.

Several realities that go overlooked in this ideological speech about equality. For example, sustained economic growth within advanced capitalism rarely involves equality if it relies on the exploitation of labor, as so much of the economy of the DR does and has for centuries. Furthermore, although the DR’s 2004 constitution assures 4% of the GDP be set aside for education that percentage of funding has yet to be realized.²⁴ Dominican citizens of all classes have organized a national movement in protest against the willful underfunding of education by the state.²⁵ For more than a year now, they have dressed up in bright yellow and on designated days marched in front of government offices, carrying yellow umbrellas stamped with “4%” (“*cuatro por ciento*”) and making their voices heard.

Yzaguirre’s agenda is “To promote the interests and values of the United States by working together with Dominicans for the continued development of a democratic, equitable and prosperous Dominican Republic.” Yet, life in the DR is imbedded in a hierarchical political, economic and cultural system that gestures to a democracy even as

²³ Keynote speech given by US Ambassador to the Dominican Republic, Raul Yzaguirre, at the 14th Annual Summit of the Dominican American National Roundtable (DANR). October 8, 2011. Bronx, New York. <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/NilP-FYI--The-Dominican-Republic-and-Its-Diaspora--Final-Version--.html?soid=1101040629095&aid=T8QifjrwpmI>, (October 29, 2011).

²⁴ Article 197 of the *Ley General de Educación* 66-97 states “The annual public expenditure on education should be achieved in a period of two years from the enactment of this Act, a minimum of sixteen percent (16%) of total public expenditure or four percent (4%) of gross domestic product (GDP) estimated for the current year, choosing whichever is the greater of the two, from the end of that period, these values should be adjusted annually at a rate not less than the annual rate of inflation, without prejudice to the progressive increases in percentage terms for public expenditure or gross domestic product (GDP).”

²⁵ With marches around the country and concerts to bring awareness, this became a 2012 campaign issue drawing extensive public discourse and numerous editorials in the local paper. Nevertheless the funds for education have not yet been produced.

few experience it as such. Yzaguirre attempts to involve Dominicans in diaspora as critical forces in fulfilling the needs of Dominicans on the island:

You, the Dominican diaspora, have the potential to be the most powerful asset the United States has in achieving our goals in the Dominican Republic. Because of your familiarity with the nation, your own motivations, your own special skills and leadership, you can be, as Secretary Clinton has said, ‘Our Peace Corps, our USAID, our State Department, all rolled into one.’

Yzaguirre’s assumption that Dominicans in diaspora could be the authority on what the Dominican Republic is like today is problematic in that it contributes to a notion that people back on the island are stuck in time. They are not, even as they bang up against the limitations of their educational system and go without because of underfunded schools

The UASD campus today hardly compares to the many private universities that have emerged throughout the Dominican Republic since the 1960s. The facilities at these other local universities, such as UNPHU (*Universidad Nacional de Pedro Henríquez Ureña*), INTEC (*Instituto Tecnológico de Santo Domingo*), and APEC (Universidad Acción Pro-Educación y Cultura), each known by their acronym, appear to be better maintained. However, the *UASD* business school’s elegant construction, and the soon to be completed engineering building, contrast starkly with the sparse and decaying classrooms of the humanities block, where there are not even enough chairs for the students in each classroom. It is a general rule that if you do not arrive early, you will be responsible for hauling your own heavy desk-chair to your classroom.²⁶ Disparities in classroom resources are yet another reminder of the ways neoliberal values are shaping cultural values within the system of education, and the landscape of the public institution in material ways. Students clearly observe which fields of study and facilities are being funded at *la UASD* and may choose their course of study accordingly. As protesting students at *la UASD* know all too well, the privatization of public education changes the

²⁶ If you are unable to locate one, you are out of luck because it is not permissible to stand or sit on the floor for class. The situation has been like this long enough that the students know to arrive early.

priorities of the public university culture as a whole. In shaping the concerns of students, or lack thereof, it also shapes the demands they make on the administration. Today few students pursue history degrees or anthropology for example. In a society in which individual wealth is sought and celebrated at whatever cost, undergraduates are steered towards degrees in fields in which they could make the most money, not necessarily be better citizens or make greater contributions to Dominican society. Certainly not if their plan is to leave the country.

Just as resources and facilities at la UASD differ dramatically from those on other campuses, so do their student bodies—and the actual bodies of their students. Generally, the students on *la UASD* campus are noticeably darker in color than on private school campuses. As in most of the world, class is tied to color in the DR and private schools campuses have far more fair-skinned, upper class students. Less privileged Dominicans have suggested to me that private school students do not work as hard for their degrees because they feel they are purchasing it, and the professors are merely providing them with a service and, as in the US. This general sentiment, repeated by students and faculty alike, is captured in the popular Dominican comedy *Ladrones al Domicilio* (2008), directed by Ángel Muñiz. The main character, Bruno (played by Manolo Ozuna) is a college professor who quits his job at a Catholic university out of sheer frustration—the school has revoked the tuition waiver they promised to provide his daughter right before she takes her high school final exams. Bruno speaks plainly to his supervisor, about how this is an issue of discrimination. As he sees it, he is being discriminated against because wealthy parents at the school do not want his working class (dark-skinned) daughter mixing with their privileged (white) children. In a pivotal scene in the film, Bruno reaches his limit when a wealthy student shows up late again to class. There is little Bruno can do but threaten the youth, and run him out of class. The camera pans across a classroom full of light-skinned Dominican students, several of whom have straight blond hair, sitting in front of open laptops, in designer clothes and polo shirts—some with Macs (which are more expensive and more difficult to repair in the DR). The filmmaker's self-conscious gesture provides a visualizable reminder of the racialization of class in the DR. The students' light skin and expensive accoutrements effectively serve as shorthand in the film to convey a humor tinged with exasperation. Once again, Bruno is reminded that

because of his color his hold on a middle class status is fragile; his labor expendable. His wealthy students and their families treat him as if they own him. With few social connections, little wealth, and his hopes to send his daughter to private school dashed, his chances of getting ahead in life are slim.

The Writing on the Wall

On the outside wall of a block of humanities classrooms at *la UASD* there is a fading mural pertinent to this story of neoliberalism in the DR. Painted by the student group known as ERA (*Espacio de Reflexion y Accion* [Reflection and Action Space]) in the late 1990s, across the top it reads: “PAREMOS LA PRIVITIZACION! CONSTRUYEMOS EL PODER ESTUDANTIL! [WE WILL STOP PRIVATIZATION! WE WILL BUILD STUDENT POWER!].” The mural demonstrates an elaborate student critique of the cultural changes occurring in the DR under neoliberalism. It is a critique of not only the privatization of the university but also to the foreign cultural values fed to students by greedy and powerful leaders that aligned with the US and its capitalist agenda. It tells an important story about Dominican student movements opposed to a free market development plan for the DR put forth under the DR-CAFTA. Nestor García Canclini describes in 1995 neoliberal shifts in Latin America that have also shaped the Dominican Republic:

All of the tendencies we observed a decade ago, toward abdicating the public in favor of the private, the national in favor of the transnational, have been accentuated. Two new processes, at the time only just emerging, contribute to this historical direction. One is the digitalization and mediation of rural processes of production, circulation, and consumption, which transfers the initiative and economic and cultural control to transnational corporations. The other is the growth of informal markets, the increasing scarcity of employment, and in its most spectacular form, the narcotics driven reordering of a great part of politics and the economy, with the resulting slow destruction of social ties.²⁷

At the center of the mural, a cartoonish figure represents the US: a bearded Neanderthal with a bulbous nose leaning back confidently on the spiked club in his right hand. He is wearing a tall top hat striped in the red, white and blue of the American flag. Behind him are a bulldog, a wolf, a pig and a vulture—each representing greed—along with figures including the Pope, and the president of the university at the time, who was

²⁷ Ibid.

in support of its privatization. To the right, two Dominican students with brown skin stand in front of this Neanderthal. Directly above these students' heads are funnels overflowing with different symbols of capitalism and corruption. They are wide-eyed and dizzied by the effects: looking as if they are on drugs, the centers of their eyes contain dark spirals. Their heads, the mural appears to be saying, are being filled with vices from the West such as drugs, alcohol, guns, money and other codes of degenerate materialism. These capitalist cultural values are also represented by the foreign emblems of the BMW, the Nike swoosh and Toyota symbol. As the mural suggests, Dominican culture has been for decades saturated by cultural symbolism from the US. It is no more a recent phenomenon that the visual culture and style of the political cartoon the students employ.

The mural also includes female college student portrayed as lighter in color than her male counterpart. She has hair that is notably straight enough to be cut into bangs. How she has been depicted captures the way that color is gendered in the DR and how lightness in color can produce femininity. The artists went to the trouble of lightening the paint used for the young woman on the mural in order to conform to this gendered code. It is a minor observation in terms of the other symbolic meaning captured within the mural; however, color and the ways it is bound to gender is significant in Dominican culture, and a key aspect of this project. For this reason, the funnel above the young man's head contains a figure of a white woman, along with a bottle of alcohol and the US dollar. The female student has a marijuana leaf above her and a copy of *Jasmín*, a well-known trashy romance novel (of the ilk of the Harlequin paperback), viewed by Dominicans as damaging to society. She has also let go of the book she held in her arms, figuratively letting her education slip away, while the male student clutches his firmly under one arm. In his right hand he grasps a picket sign that reads "Made in *Gringolandia*," referring to North Americans who are derogatorily called "Gringos" throughout the DR.²⁸ Behind the students on the lower right side of the mural is the image of the landmark building, the *Aula Magna*, with its recognizable round red roof, as a symbol of the university. Hanging from it is a bar code, or effectively a price tag.

²⁸ The term "Yankee," a derogatory term meaning northerner, which was used in protests of US occupation in the 20th century is not to my knowledge spoken today. However, graffiti declaring "Fuera Yankee [Get out, Yankee]" Can be seen spray painted around the city.

At the right side of the building, streaming out at an angle from the top of the Alma Mater building, like the stripes of a flag, are the colors red, green, and yellow. They represent for the ERA group not claims on an African heritage but the themes of passion, hopefulness of youth, and the glow of light under which they were to educate themselves.²⁹ The ERA's logo is a drawing of a hand grasping a pencil, which symbolizes the students' fight for "public and cost-free education."³⁰ In the mural, the fist belongs to an unclothed male figure running forward, almost out from the wall. *UASD* students used visual culture to express ongoing critiques neoliberal development and a neocolonialism brought on by advanced capitalism, though the privatization of public education was a clearly a symptom of a larger problem.

Espacio de Reflexión y Acción/Space of Reflection and Action

In order to learn more about student activism against neoliberal development at *la UASD*, I seek out one of the creators of the student anti-privatization mural. A friend introduces me to Rocío, who understanding that I am looking for one of the activists who painted the mural, invites me over to speak with her husband, Rafael. Sitting in their living room on a rainy afternoon, the wood floors and dark wood furniture make the place feel familiar. We are in a ground floor apartment, looking out at a tree-lined street just after a torrential rain. The windows are open along the street without screens, only the iron bars common to most households in Santo Domingo, for security. I feel at home in this living room. Framed artwork lines the walls from top to bottom, including some of the couple's 5-year-old child's pieces tacked up on doors and in extra spaces. Rafael does not produce much artwork these days they tell me. As it turns out, he is a stay a home dad.

"We are a bit unconventional," Rocío explains almost apologetically, when she invites me to stay for *pan y chocolate* and Rafael heads to the kitchen and prepare it. While Rocío has the fulltime desk job, Rafael is responsible for the cooking in the house, an uncommon dynamic for the DR, indeed. Yet, every household in the DR develops unique ways of getting by—all members of a house contributing from their income in order to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table, often accommodating

²⁹Acapite 1 – "Los colores de ERA son" p. 1

³⁰ "Normas" Acapite 3 – "Nuestra Logo" p. 2

extended family as well, as is common in the DR.³¹ Rafael is also unconventional in that he makes the hot chocolate using milk. Hot chocolate with water is the more favored recipe in the DR (thickened with corn flour); out of necessity comes cultural preference.

Rocío is a tall and lanky Dominican woman with light brown or dirty blond hair and blue-green eyes.³² When we meet at her house, she is wearing a pale blue blouse, with denim shorts and a blue glass evil eye as a necklace, the type they sell at the tourist craft tables in Samaná—or in Eastern Europe. She sits with Rafael on a long low sofa, its narrow wooden spindled arms framing the dark upholstery. Rafael is also tall and thin but with a darker coloring so that their child has a slight brown skin tone, with thick dark curls. Rocío's parents pass through the living room during our afternoon conversations; three generations living together in the same apartment. The child hops in and out to loudly ask questions throughout our conversation. When a rain begins to fall, a stream of ants comes in, crossing the tile floor of the apartment at first unnoticed. However, they then bite the 5-year-old on the foot and after that Rocío on her foot. When Rocío's mother pours cinnamon where the ants have gathered, they disperse in a matter of minutes.

Rafael tells me he is one of the students who painted the mural in 1997.³³ As one of my first interviews for this project, I stumble through unrehearsed questions and mispronunciations as I try to keep up with his high-speed Dominican Spanish. Indeed, the practice of ethnography may be viewed as a kind of performance in and of itself.³⁴ I carry on a conversation in a manner that will evoke meaningful responses from my interviewee, not yet knowing what kinds of responses will be most meaningful for my research.³⁵ I find myself nodding, even at moments I am not completely clear, suggesting

³¹ And increasingly common in the US.

³² I find that often I remember her as much fairer than she appears in the photos I see of her later online—this is likely because the majority of bodies in the Dominican Republic are brown skinned and in contrast she is indeed white yet when back in the US, in an academic context that is predominantly white, she darkens in comparison.

³³ As it happens, he is the only Dominican man that I interview for my entire transnational feminist project and I am self-conscious about placing his interview first here.

³⁴ Taylor, 75.

³⁵ Reviewing the recorded interviews months later, I have a much greater understanding of what was said, not merely because my proficiency in Spanish had improved, but because my cultural understanding had expanded.

a mutual understanding that I hope will take our interview that much further. I search for a rhythm in the conversation between us; I do not necessarily find it. In spite of this, Rafael graciously responds with many details that illuminate the significance of Dominican culture and student movements at *la UASD* during the 1990s in contrast to today. He and Rocío are, like me, in their early 30s. He was a student at *la UASD* from 1993-2000, he tells me.³⁶

During our interview, Rafael speaks with an ongoing passion about student activism during his time at *la UASD* and the issues they rally around presently. At moments, he lowers his voice to talk about particular political figures, embodying his familiarity with a culture of political repression. Throughout our conversation, he remains aware of the digital audio recorder I am shuffling around the room. At times, I push it closer on the coffee table or propped on the arm of a chair. I see him occasionally self-edit, before allowing his words to go on record. Rocío sits with us and chimes in throughout my interview with Rafael. While my questions start out primarily directed towards him, I soon realize I will need to find a way to come back and interview *her*. Rocío has carefully kept all of ERA's papers; she proves herself an essential historian of the period, eventually bringing out a covered plastic bin filled with folders containing an archive of ephemera. Flyers, photographs, newspaper articles produced by the students then inform my understanding of the period and the era of student protest to which she and Rafael were witness and in which they were involved.

ERA's founders articulated in their bylaws what inspired their collectivity. They claimed the public university community as their own, and referred to *la UASD* as a "university family." They envisioned an organized student and youth movement working for progressive change and democracy without discrimination due to race, gender political ideology or religion. They acknowledged their political position on a global level: "A progressive movement, a popular and revolutionary space, where we are not

³⁶ It is typical to take this many years to complete coursework at *la UASD*. For this reason it is known as the "Universidad de la vida [School of life]," where you learn so many different things during your time there; sort of like the "school of hard knocks."

only worried about national problems, but also international ones.”³⁷ It was impossible for them to *not* imagine their own destinies as tied to actions beyond their borders. They carried with them a memory of US occupation from 1916 to 1924 and again from 1961-66, following the death of Trujillo.

As a “político-cultural” project, young ERA members name themselves as anti-imperialist. They fought for the improvement of public education, and called for community intervention that would hold the *UASD* administration accountable. Such investments in state institutions prove increasingly rare under a neoliberal mandate. The push for reform was about aspiring for something better for Dominican society.³⁸ For students of *La UASD*, education has been tied to the high hopes that they have for their country—not necessarily their plans to leave it. Not all have that option and not all want to leave.³⁹

Rafael was one of eight students who founded the “*Espacio de Reflexión y Acción*” or the ERA at *la UASD* in 1993. It was, he says, a response to “the menace of privatization of the university.”

“[*La UASD*] was in the process of being privatized,” he explains, “with greater policing and control of the students.” The ERA was the only student group addressing the issue of privatization at the university beginning in the 1990s. “It started with 2 or 3 projects of privatization at the university that the students became aware of.” Such things as properties from the public university being sold off and barbed wire fences being put up around areas on campus began to shift the culture of the university, which had previously been understood as a open community. The administration denied this accusation of privatization, but under Roberto Santana, from (‘93-‘96) the university’s administration was aligned with Balaguer, he tells me. “They had a rather fascist mentality,” Rafael says flatly.

³⁷ “Normas Estatutarias del ERA”. Enero 8, 1997. Article 2. –De carácter- part A “una expresión de unidad de acción entre personas preocupadas y decididas a resistir el proceso de privatización de nuestra universidad, y empeñados en defender el carácter democrático y crítico de la misma”

³⁸ García Fernández, Porfirio. *Hoy*. September 2000. “Impulsemos las reformas universitarias” From interviewee personal archive. “*La sociedad dominicana apoyará una reforma que haga la UASD una academia que tenga respuestas certeras a los principales problemas del país. Ahora es el momento para iniciar este proceso, manteniendo los principios constitutivos de la institución y reconquistando la confianza de la nación*”.

³⁹ *Ibid*. The kind of nationalism that García describes is that of “reconquistando” or “re-conquering the confidence of the nation,” in a context in which narrative of conquest plays repeatedly.

Post-Trujillo, Balaguer had been running the country with an authoritarian regime supported by the US, stealing elections and maintaining his hold on the presidency into his 80s, at which point he had become completely blind.⁴⁰ He would continue to run for president into his 90s. Some of his success appeared to be based not only on election fraud but anti-Haitian propaganda, and culture of patriarchy in which Dominican voters supported a paternal figure.⁴¹

During the three decades after Trujillo's death, some 40 private schools opened up, yet as Rafael tells me, "*la UASD* was the only state institution... There were *institutos* that opened and closed, but they didn't have credentials or rigor they were businesses and they couldn't find students."

"Without a doubt the only public university was *la UASD*. Poor people were able to study there and nowhere else. So, to privatize the *UASD* as well meant that there would be nowhere for poor people to study... We realized if they privatized it we would not be able to study there." Rocío, listening into our conversation all this time, is moved to jump in and point out that the Dominican government offers very little for the people and now they wanted to take away public education.

From the box of student brochures that Rocío has shared with me, I pick up a leaflet printed in August of 2000 by the student group known as FED, (the *Federación de Estudiantes Dominicanos*), which is affiliated with the ERA. It is a call for support "*Pueblo! Salvemos la UASD* [People, Save *la UASD*]," on the back of the brochure it states that it is in accordance with the bylaws of the ERA from 1994, 1995 and 1996. The leaflet answers questions for readers regarding why the *UASD*, why now, why support public education. It highlights the importance of the student movement, explaining, "*The Movimiento Estudiantil* has been one of the protagonists of one of the most important fights that has freed our people in the last decades, playing a fundamental role in the fight against the remnants of the Trujillo Tirany, since the 1960s, and a first order element in the fight for democracy and guarantee of the rights that poor students of our country have

⁴⁰ Maríñez, Pablo A. *Democracia y Procesos Electorales en la Republica Dominicana*. (Santo Domingo: Editora Alfa y Omega, 1994), 247-252.

⁴¹ See for example Hipolito Mejía's 2012 bid for office, in which his campaign slogan, "*Llegó Papá* [Dad arrived]," which might well translate into "Daddy's home."

to a college degree.”⁴² Following Trujillo’s death, students and faculty organized to make *la UASD* a self-governing entity for which the Dominican government was obligated to provide 5% of the national budget to funding the public institution.⁴³ Decades later, student activists identify themselves with these resistant movements that led to brutal fights against oppression. *UASD* students were fundamental to the resistance movement against the dictator, known as “*el Jefe*,” who exerted his power over the populace through the use of the visual.⁴⁴ Trujillo placed his own image throughout the country and required that his portrait to hang on the wall of every Dominican household. After his death, *UASD* students destroyed the countless pictures and statues of Trujillo situated about campus.⁴⁵

According to Rafael, in 2000 the last founder of ERA left *la UASD*. “Today there remains a group, sometimes they look for someone to come for a project but really they are timid in their movement, afraid of confrontation. This is a loss not just for them but for the student movement as a whole. There is little leadership, little activism, this includes the *grupos juveniles* [youth organizations] that are outside of the university...” Rafael looks back at another era when things were different in terms of student movements. Today it is not clear where activism is centralized. He tells me, “These groups, that are organizing against the cement companies, against Barrick Gold, they are having more influence than students in the university, the student groups.”

A Visual Response

The anti-privatization mural at the center of campus remains as a fading signpost to student discourse of the 1990s. No longer existing at *la UASD* are these enormous *vallas*, that students once constructed, which were positioned in major thoroughfares in order to

⁴² El ha sido uno de los protagonistas de las luchas más importantes que ha librado nuestro pueblo en las últimas décadas, siendo parte fundamental en la lucha contra los remanentes de la Tiranía Trujillista, a partir de la década de los 60’s [sic] y elemento de primer orden en la lucha por la democracia y garante del derecho que tiene los estudiantes pobres de nuestro país a cursar una carrera universitaria.

⁴³ Franco, 282-83. By the end of 1961, Dominican law 5778 had made the state-sponsored university autonomous, meaning that the faculty and alumni would be able to make their own laws and elect governing officials. Unfortunately, as Dominican historian Franklyn Franco states, the professors who then obtained influential positions at the university were of the old guard. They ruled as if they were still representatives of the Trujillo state and much tension between the administration and student ideals emerged.

⁴⁴ Franklin Franco, *Historia de la UASD*, 278.

⁴⁵ Franco, 281.

have student concerns *seen*. *Las Vallas* were big metal billboards of sorts where the students painted political messages and placed them, for up to a week, at central locations on campus or in particular departments where students and faculty would pass by, see and discuss.

Inciting political discourse through visual culture can certainly be seen elsewhere in the DR, a society in which the comic strip *Boque Chivo*, by Harold Priego, is enormously popular. His series of comic strips also emerged in the mid-1990s and has had a longstanding influence on Dominican culture.⁴⁶ Many of Priego's cartoons mock government corruption, and poke fun at the ignorance of the common man—and woman. They also perpetuate racist images of Haitians and Asians (predominantly Chinese and Japanese), who live in the DR, with racial prejudice regularly being the punch line of the joke. In explaining the culture of *las vallas* that day, Rafael makes what he seems to think of as an obvious link for me between students' artistic renditions of their political concerns and the lively culture of performance in Santo Domingo. "We also did a lot of theater, the theater, too, carried a lot of symbolism, you know?" Rafael explains, "Like the *caja de muerto* [casket], which symbolized the privatization." For a few years before attending university, he had participated in activism in through a theater group.⁴⁷

"Our group didn't have much money to support ourselves..." says Rafael. "We were not beholden anyone and could do what we wanted. To get a *valla*, we had to appropriate them in some way, carried by 20 or 30 students and bring them to campus, big pieces of billboard from whatever company, Coca-Cola, Pepsi Cola..."

"It was the size of this wall," he gestures with his hands, "but wide and low with images and brochures." "We covered it with paper or painted right on the metal doing art, we would make art on it," he tells me. Different from how today's youth use the internet for organizing, I point out, yet, with some surprising connections. Facebook and other social networking spaces are the preferred tools used to incite discourse today. Rafael agrees, it is "*otra media de publicidad abierta* [another means of open communication]."

⁴⁶ Beginning in September of 2010, popular comics from his series were displayed in an outdoor exhibition along the walls of the Parque Independencia, where capitaleños could view them strolling along the outside of the park or driving by.

⁴⁷ Theater shaped a generation of Dominican intellectuals. A handful of Dominican scholars write about this era since the 1960s. Raj Chetty is currently researching race and theater in the DR for his dissertation at the University of Washington.

Like virtual spaces on the internet, *las vallas* could draw the attention of 300 or 400 people. The images, symbols and written discourse were equally highly effective for inciting debates and discussions on the university campus.

“I don’t know if there are images of this,” says Rafael, but eventually we discover a newspaper clipping in Rocío’s archive with a picture of one of the *vallas*. It is a color photograph in which two female students stand gazing at the enormous billboard. The photographer snapped the picture over the left shoulder of one of the female students facing the *valla*—the one who is lighter in color. We see the *valla* from her vantage point. Her left hand is raised to her cheek as she presumably reads the message from the ERA: “RETROCESO EN LA UASD [Setback in la UASD]”.⁴⁸ The *valla* responds to ongoing organizational troubles at the university throughout the 1990s.⁴⁹ Along the left side of the *valla*, the ERA has painted a life-size cartoon Neanderthal with a club in his hand and a red swastika on his bare shoulder. In the newspaper’s caption to the image, the student onlookers are described as indifferent in their response to the *valla*, but this commentary seems far more to reflect the politics of the national newspaper, *Listín Diario*, than the women’s intense gazes upon the information being presented outside.

The use of the visual, in the form of the *valla* was also an effective way to bring up sexism on campus and garner public support. Explains Rafael, “once a woman made a *valla* when several women were being harassed by a professor in the Economics department. There were several women, sometimes crying, because this professor would have them come to his office to take their final exam, then ask them what grade they wanted to get.” The *vallas* were a visual response to misogynistic behavior of faculty and the abuse of power within the university.

“[A female student] brought us this issue and first we went and investigated it, because you can’t just go accusing professors or you could get yourself into trouble. But understanding our *super machismo* [culture] and other things, we said yes, we could take action... We made a *valla* and left it there in the Economics department for a week.” In

⁴⁸ Photo credit to Miguel Gomez. *Listín Diario*. The caption to the photo reads: “*La crisis de la UASD tuvo un respiro ayer con el reinicio de las clases del curso de verano pero persiguió la discusión en torno a las causas y las soluciones para los problemas permanentes que afectan esa institución. En la foto uno de los murales con la posición de un grupo estudiantil es desplegado en las pasillas del alma mater ante de la mirada indiferente de varios estudiantes.*”

⁴⁹ Nor at the point of writing this in June 2011, when summer classes once again have come to a halt abruptly in the second week of the term because of a lack of finances to pay teacher salaries.

this way, through the tools of visual culture, the students dared to call out many of the professors engaging in these practices. “Then we had an assembly with the students and they gathered in front of the *valla* to testify about all the things that this guy had done.” The painted images became the backdrop for the young women who were speaking their own truths. Ultimately, the *valla* produced around the issue of sexual harassments by professors was so threatening that the administration destroyed it late one night, says Rafael. In response, the students painted another, this time in front of their peers. With such support, they felt confident enough to make a confrontation: “We went to [the professor’s] class with a mass of students, and the woman who he harassed, and he pushed us out of his classroom.”

“This was a truly interesting process,” he says, “because maybe we never could have imagined that it would awaken such discussion and debate in the street.”

Though the administration’s first inclination was to protect the faculty member because he was part of what Rafael referred to as “the brotherhood,” ultimately the school responded by suspending the professor. Too much attention was being brought to the issue.

“After this they took measures against many professors for harassing students at that time... The rector, Gilberto Cabral left the university in 1996-97 because the police were looking into things. And the story of our protest came out in the afternoon paper.”

“The issue, I imagine, still continues but they cracked down,” says Rafael about the sexual harassment that takes place in a culture so—in his words—*machista*. The story conveys not only some of the obstacles young Dominican women face in their struggle to get an education but offers a concrete example of the action that students were empowered to take with visual culture as a tool, and the influence that they had within the campus community at that time. “It was another type of pressure on the administration, with *el muralismo, las valles, la caracatura*” he says.

Rafael informs me that over all these years, not one woman has been president of the student organization. Presently there are more than 27 political student groups at *La UASD*, ever expanding with numerous young (male) leaders who want to be heard, the

student activism comes to look like any other bureaucratic nightmare.⁵⁰ I describe what I have also observed within student groups. On multiple occasions, I have seen how the young men posture for leadership positions while the young women labor in positions of less status, making the workshops and marches happen. I witnessed a two-hour workshop on feminism within the socialist movement at which a male leader showed up only to speak at length to the women about the organization he was leading, yet he was too distracted by his cell phone to listen to their comments or interests directed towards him about the organization.

“There are few dominions in which men can have influence in the first place and so the politicians in the bunch take a role of leadership, making promises, even without a plan,” Rafael he explains. Even if the organizations are equal parts women and men, says Rafael, the women do the labor of coordinating, secretaries. I have also witnessed this. Young men standing to make their contribution to the activist event but when they have all had their chance to speak, the women sitting and taking notes offer up viable suggestions for how to gather the community and proceed with the political action. As Rocío says, “the women take on the role of the *segundo plano* [second floor], a low profile, because of the culture, the woman are not in a position to move up...this is the case in some groups more than others.” Furthermore, with student groups like FILABEL, says Rafael, “the culture of the group is very combative.” They often take to the streets to fight the police; the women are not at the frontline with this. “In many mobilizations, confrontations with the police, it is sometimes better to not have women,” says Rafael. “For example [the young men] are throwing rocks and the men are looking for water, trying to help.”

“I think that in our group we were the most equal, most open of all the groups,” says Rafael about ERA, “of course the machismo still exists.” Indeed it does. It permeates the patriarchal culture of the Dominican Republic, in which men and women contribute to hypermasculinity.⁵¹ When I ask another interviewee, 23 year old Masiel,

⁵⁰ “Veintisiete grupos estudiantiles se disputan hoy presidencia de FED” *ListinDiaro.com*
<http://www.listin.com.do/la-republica/2011/9/30/205485/Veintisiete-grupos-estudiantiles-se-disputan-hoy-presidencia-de-F0ED> (March 2012)

⁵¹ This machismo is present in same sex relationships between women, about which I would like to do further research.

about her role in student activism presently, she has her own critique. She has been involved on and off in the activist movements taking place at *la UASD*. She is consistently present at marches I have attended and involved in organizing but she is not terribly vocal. However, when I finally see her speak up at the end of a student organizing meeting, her insights were invaluable. She tells me that she has been frustrated by the current movement and became tired of being affiliated with any one group so she dropped them all to do activism as she pleased.⁵² She has little patience for the egoism of it all. The organizing can be tedious, and as Masiel puts it, “There isn’t much integration of women, there aren’t a lot of women who get involve. Those that are there, don’t have the same interest [as the men], to be outspoken, for example, I don’t like to get on TV....I stay back, throwing rocks...” We sit along concrete tables and there is trash all around us.

Independence

One of the ways that the university privatized in the past, and the way the government continues to privatize the university today, is that different individuals appropriate valuable campus property and sell the prime real estate off to individuals for private projects, under the guise of construction for the university.⁵³ Rafael informs me that administrators, under Roberto Sandoval began building with money from *la USAD* on land owned by the UASD and yet no one knew for what.⁵⁴ They closed access to the university on different sides, narrowing access through different guarded gateways.⁵⁵ “Barbed wire was put up.... around the campus to keep people from crossing in different areas.”

⁵² Saturday, February 12, 2011

⁵³ In March of 2012 this same controversy arose when the Oncology hospital built on the grounds of La UASD with public funds was purportedly reassigned to private company when the project neared completion. Students and faculty organized in protest. URL (accessed 20 April 2012): <http://eldia.com.do/nacionales/2012/3/30/78968/Movilizaciones-estudiantiles-en-la-UASD-suspenden-clases-hasta-manana>

⁵⁴ Today, the campus has numerous unfinished buildings towards which state money continues to flow. But they are never finished, and no one can say where the money ends up.

⁵⁵ One of the main entryways to campus on the north side, a narrow doorway which leads to many of the public transportation stops, floods regularly with torrential downpours creating an enormous obstacle for student to even get onto the campus.

The privatization was physically felt as what was previously public space no longer belonged to the people. Rafael tells me that the language of privatization was not used, it was the “capitalization” of state businesses that was being pitched to the people, and capitalism was supposed to save the country. Instead, it has caused a great deal of damage. “I tell you so that you can see how we are living here,” Rafael confides in me. “The government does not attend to the public services. The social programs do not serve the people. Institutionalization, but not to serve the people rather institutionality in the sense to control the people. And that is what they want.”

During this period, the students of ERA were reading Fukiyama, *El Fin De Historia* [The End of History and the Last Man] as they critiqued the changes occurring in the DR. Fukiyama’s insight’s around liberal democracy resonated with Dominican youth. His declarations about privatization and technologies impact on society decades before the existence of the Blackberry and the personal computer, also held resonance: “Technology makes possible the limitless accumulation of wealth, and thus the satisfaction of an ever-expanding set of human desires. This process guarantees and increasing homogenization of all human societies, regardless of their historical origins or cultural inheritances.” As is reflected in the student mural, the fears of homogenization are well-founded. Fukiyama continues,

All countries undergoing economic modernization must increasingly resemble one another: they must unify nationally on the basis of a centralized state, urbanize, replace traditional forms of social organization like tribe, sect and family with economically rational ones based on function and efficiency, and provide for the universal education of their citizens. Such societies have become increasingly linked with one another through global markets and the spread of a universal consumer culture.⁵⁶

Rocío’s description of being a student at *la UASD* in the 1990s, under the administration of Miguel Rosada as “insane,” due to his brutal, aggressive, and oppressive regime. “Students were being terrorized. They had to sleep outside of their homes for fear that he

⁵⁶ Fukiyama, *The End of History*. p. xiv

would go after them.” Her anger contrasts Rafael’s calm and matter of fact descriptions of the period.

Rafael recalls the look of the mural when it was brand new. The paint had been donated and the students camped out overnight, “with a lantern, *pan y chocolate*,” working to complete the it before graduation. Many of the graduates that year had their pictures taken in front of the mural. “Surely many people have pictures of themselves in front of that mural with the colors bright and fresh.” He says. I haven’t seen any. When I share the photographs of the mural that I took, I leave them copies for their archive.⁵⁷ Looking at the photographs I have taken, the mural faded over the last decade, we discuss the symbolism they chose to include in their critique. He reads for me the image. “It was a figure to say that if he was naked, he had nothing to hide, healthy, using a pencil like a spear,” says Rafael of the naked man pictured in the mural. A student on campus said she imagined the figure with his brown skin, simple sandals, and bare chest, to representing a *cimarron*[maroon], an escaped slave symbolizing resistance and liberty. “*Tío* [Uncle] Sam,” representing *la intervención* of the US in 1964. “This represents the Independence,” he points to the wolf, “but it is a caricature because independence from what?”

“From the Haitians!” Rocío pipes in, full of sarcasm; we all laugh at the grossness of her humor.

“Yes, from the poor Haitians,” Rafael responds with a knowing grin. It is only laughable in fact because of the painful truth of it. The DR celebrates its independence on February 27th each year, not from Spanish colonialism but in honor of the day in 1844 that the Dominican people overthrew a 22 year Haitian occupation. It was this same Haitian occupation that brought the abolition of slavery and freed an estimated 8,000 people enslaved in Santo Domingo at that time.⁵⁸ Dominicans attribute their independence from Haitian rule to Juan Pablo Duarte and celebrate him with parks, statues and roads in his name. The DR would later be country to seek annexation from their previous colonizer, in 1861 only to fight for independence from Spain in again 1865. This day, August 16, is now recognized as Restoration Day, and amounts to a day

⁵⁷ There was a third mural, that I haven’t seen yet, painted on the other side of engineering.

⁵⁸ Turits, Richard Lee. *Foundations Of Despotism: Peasants, The Trujillo Regime, And Modernity In Dominican History*. Stanford University Press, 2004,p. 49

off work but is hardly less celebrated by a nation in which Spanish culture has been so emulated.⁵⁹

“This is a vulture here,” Rafael points to the figure behind “*Tío Sam* [Uncle Sam]” with its head poking out and its body a large gray mass with other heads emerging from its back; each head is a caricature of a greedy politician or global figure, including as George Bush, Sr., the Pope and Omar Kadafi. When I ask about why this type of political action against privatization was fomenting at this moment. Rafael offers a nuanced explanation: A form of degeneration...They depoliticize and become indifferent to others because all that they have is imaginary: ‘it’s good to study in order to be rich and imitate the model North American lifestyle.’ You know? You for the United States, to live imitating the things of the empire. For example...you see poor people that can’t come up with 300 pesos to buy a book and understand reality but to buy a Blackberry, yes. It’s a mess, right? And the poor boys in the *barrio* rob, do it all, to have this type of thing.”

Connéctate

These days Dominican identity is less about looking backward at Dominican history to unite in a shared nationalism, than it is about looking forward through the internet and satellite technology, towards “*progreso*” within the country that can align it with global progress. Windows into the rest of the world that the internet provides shape who Dominican women are, whether via desktop computer, laptop, netbook, Blackberry or now Iphone. Organizing for social change looks different. Of the seventy young women I surveyed for this project in 2012, 40% were constantly connected to the internet via mobile phone—most commonly the Blackberry. They connected on laptops, desktop computers and netbooks. Only thirteen of the seventy women did not have computers at home. Twenty-five percent of these young women responded that they were connected to the internet eight or more hours a day, whether at work or at home. Facebook and Instant Messenger were the most popular sites although a good 20% were using the internet for other things besides social networking.

⁵⁹ In the 1990s, Torres-Saillant argues the opposite, that “Dominicans commemorate the War of Restoration, fought against white Spaniards, with as much patriotic fervor as they do the War of Independence fought against black Haitians...” Torres-Saillant, 1998.

The Santo Domingo-based non-profit CIPAF (*Centro de Investigación de la Acción Feminista* [Center of Investigation for Feminist Action]) clearly states in its mission statement that “as a center of feminist investigative-action its work is to fight against patriarchal oppression in the Dominican Republic and for gender equality and women’s freedom.” One of the ways that they do this work is to address head on the gendered technology gap. Led by founder and director Magaly Pineda, and currently celebrating three decades of existence, the organization produces educational programs and online guides that address issues of gender disparities and discrimination in education. They produce research in order to fight for policy change. The mission statement clearly conveys that CIPAF “promotes the participation and role of women as subjects of historical transformations, as key players in alternative Development and Democracy, educating and raising awareness among citizens and the general public about the need to transform situations of oppression and the subordination of women.” The first lady—now vice president of the Dominican Republic—Margarita Cedeño, has involved herself in the project of “breaching the digital divide.” She directed funds to technology centers throughout the country where community members could access the internet and learn how to get online. I have seen the buildings dotting the rural areas, yet my understanding is that they are rarely available for use.

Throughout Santo Domingo, you can walk into shops, corporate offices, beauty salons, art galleries—even the police department—and go unnoticed or as a visitor unattended because one or more young person at work there are leaning over their Blackberry phones, messaging friends or reading Facebook status updates. As in so many places in the globe today, Dominicans at concerts, talks, and birthday parties are recording video or taking pictures on their phones. From teen participants up to the executive directors, internet users are documenting their own life events, capturing images of those in attendance, and uploading it to their Facebook page.

In her hypnotic ode to “*Maldito Feisbu* [Damn Facebook],” Rita Indiana keys into the ways that our lives have been taken over by a virtual world online world and we can quite easily lose ourselves. Her nuanced lyrics above translate as, “I had everything/I have nothing/all for a computer/ I am hooked just like you/By this damn thing/Damn Facebook/I look at your photo/You look at mine/Every hour of the night and day/I tag

you without compassion/while in my house is a crook.”⁶⁰ The words ring true and carry a *doble sentido* [double meaning] showcasing the artists creative intelligence. She suggests that this character she represents in her song has been robbed while sitting at the computer, when in fact the crook is Facebook itself (or anyone on Facebook) taking your pictures, your information, and your identity. Internet users who are daily “plugged in” and online may feel ownership over the internet where they can share anything and everything within social spaces and have their individual voice “heard.” Yet Indiana points to a false confidence. The space feels private on the level of one’s communication with friends, yet it is public on the level of posting information to the whole Facebook community of users. It is privatized in that anything posted on Facebook becomes the property of the corporation.

Facebook, with its 483 million daily users worldwide (at the time of this research) is perhaps the most popular social networking interface on the web.⁶¹ It has far surpassed the once-popular sites HiFi and MySpace, and of its more than 845 million users worldwide, 80 percent of those users are outside of the US. Through Facebook, individuals can connect via their computer, smartphone or other internet-ready electronic device and share messages, images and video. It has outlasted earlier programs such as Friendster and MySpace, quickly adapting programming and applications for broad use. With Facebook, a user can invite friends and acquaintances to friend them on their personalized webpage and then have access to all of the pictures and images they post, links from the internet that they share on their page, and comments they make as “status updates.” You can also play games with other users, display your likes and dislikes, and send messages to friends and initiate live chat with friend while logged into the site. There are a series of privacy settings one can use to limit how much access others can have to your information, however all of your information becomes the property of Facebook, even if you delete your existing account. Furthermore, as you use the site, your

⁶⁰ “*Tenia De To’/No Tengo Na’/Todo Por Una Computadora/ ‘Toy Enganchá’ Igual Que Tú/ Por Esa Maldita Vaina/ Maldito Facebook/ Miro Tu Foto/ Mira La Mia/ A Toda Hora de Noche Y De Día/ Me Puse A Taggear Sin Compasión/ Mientras En Mi Casa Se Metia Un Ladrón*”

⁶¹ Statistics about the webpage can be found at <http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsAreaId=22>. (April 12, 2012).

activity is being monitored and shared with your friends just as you are able to see their activity on the site in realtime as well.

Facetiously referred to as “Crackbook,” for its elicit and addictive qualities, Facebook serves as a way for Dominican diasporic communities to stay connected to people back on the island and vice versa. There is a great deal of DR nostalgia that circulates, including FB quizzes and applications to test how Dominican you are, or give Dominican “gifts” to friends online. At the same time, popular pages such as “*Orgullosa de Ser Dominicana* [Proud to Be Dominican]” and “*Dominicanos Ausentes* [Dominicans Living Abroad]” boast tens of thousands of “likes.”⁶² As a social networking site, it does important work maintaining contact across the Dominican diaspora, and allowing people to shape who they are and what their lives are about. I have constantly relied upon Facebook in my cultural studies research not only to make connections with interviewees but as a dynamic window into the world of Dominican women’s lives in Santo Domingo.⁶³ The discourse emerging from this and other virtual spaces offers great insight into how Dominican women negotiate transnational identities, making it a rich site for cultural analysis.⁶⁴ Communication via Facebook is very much that, rich with cultural references and vividly illustrated through visual images and colloquialisms that emerge from specific social and cultural contexts—only to be tossed around the globe. As a rule, I never invited any of my interviewees to connect with me online but at least half of them chose to add me as their friend, after our conversation.⁶⁵ The website allows me, as a researcher, to connect with broad networks of Dominicans who are already organizing themselves. Group pages for LGBT Film Festivals, Dominicans in diaspora, and Expats in Santo Domingo, for example unite users around common interests, identities, and locations. Whether or not Facebook truly mobilizes social movements is up for debate

⁶² To follow a page on Facebook and have its images and information turn up in your Facebook feed you merely have to “like” the page by clicking on that button at the top of the page.

⁶³ For communication, I have also used MSN instant messenger, which is popular in Santo Domingo, as opposed to Google chat and Skype.

⁶⁴ “Nothing rules out the cultural analysis of spontaneously occurring discourse, if only that discourse is available in sufficient quantity and is sufficiently extended and rich enough,” writes psychological anthropologist Naomi R. Quinn ed. *Finding Culture in Talk: A Collection of Methods*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 11.

⁶⁵ Whereas in 2010 DR, not everyone I knew had Facebook, and some were still using MySpace and HiFi, 2 years later, even my host mother has “friended” me.

since it also contributes to a sort of passive political allegiance. It is all too easy to click on a button to show your interest in a topic but harder to get individuals to show up for activism.

In 2010, a YouTube video encourages all Dominicans to “*paraté y protesta* [stand up and protest]” around issues such as environmental degradation, protection of water, conservation and pride in the country. The video uses local celebrities as talking heads. The stars stand in front of a black background and speaking colloquially, directly to viewers, about these issues. The video urges viewers to speak up so that the Dominican government will represent their interests.⁶⁶ It encourages viewers to make sure that their friends and family watch the video. “*Mandalo por Facebook* [Send it by Facebook].” Says one of the talking heads, “*Por Facebook*,” chimes in the next, then the next, “*Mandalo por BB* [Send it by Blackberry].” “*Tweetealo*” “Twitter...” echoes one voice and headshot after another, of young hip Dominicans. “*Mandalo por HiFi, si todava esta allí* [Send it by HiFi, if it’s still there],” “*Messenger*,” “*Por Second Life*,” list the voices. “*En cualquiera manera tu puedes* [In whatever way you can]”.⁶⁷

Videos like this one circulate “virally” through networks of Dominicans that are not bound by national borders. Like a contagion, they move from one viewer to another across Facebook where individuals post the video to share it with friends. Their Facebook friends can then repost the video on their own Facebook page or a friends’ page with just two clicks. They can also “like” the posted video, thus confirming their alignment with the ideological values it portrays. The same is done for images, photographs, news reports, blog entries and status updates. Among many other things, Facebook is a new way of using technology to mobilize a political discourse through the use of visual culture. This approach to political sentiment is, a long-standing tradition in the DR, just as long before the presence of the internet there were *las vallas* that students produced. However, posting your thoughts on a subject online, from the comfort of your own home or as comment typed from your cellphone is quite different than standing up and speaking your mind on campus. Sometimes virtual participation in a movement appears as no more

⁶⁶ “Protesta-Dominicana” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxNRLqajT-4&feature=player_embedded (January 15, 2011).

⁶⁷ “Protesta-Dominicana” Uploaded July 2010 on YouTube at <http://youtu.be/OxNRLqajT-4> (June 10, 2011). Producer José María Cabral.

than clicking on a page to show your allegiance to a cause and does not require really showing up for the activism. Yet networks become visible, and the leftist community of Santo Domingo can quickly be mapped out.

Redes Sociales [Social Networks] as Sites of identity

What are the benefits of the internet (and Facebook in particular) for identity formation and how do online networks influence young Dominican women today? Lisa Nakamura writes “What has yet to be explored are the ways that race and gender permit differential access to digital visual capital, as well as the distinctive means by which people of color and women create and in some sense redefine it.”⁶⁸ Women of color have newfound access to virtual spaces and alternative ideas (as I address in chapters 2 and 4) but they are also newly accessible to others through the internet. They are subjects of interactivity in specific ways. Nakamura questions *how* women and minorities use their “digital visual capital” and “In what ways are their gendered and racialized bodies a form of this new type of capital?”⁶⁹ In the context of Santo Domingo, how much visual capital do Dominican women truly have and how are they able to exercise it? Embracing a range of cultural expectations for women while representing themselves online often means for young women, producing a sexualized pose or gaze for the camera. Photos of trips to the beach can look like Sports Illustrated swimsuit photo shoots, with little girls and adolescents stretched out in the sand or jumping not to swim into the water, but to have their picture taken in ways that provocatively show off their bodies. Even the tiniest girls learn to strike a pose as soon as the camera—or cell phone—comes out. When these pictures end up on Facebook and can be viewed by friends, by friends of friends or even publically by anyone surfing the internet of they are not made private. Adult men find it easy to contact young girls online after coming across their pictures publicly displayed.

Participating the virtual world of Facebook for so many of us today is about locating one’s self in a global culture as it rapidly scrolls past us. Said Daisy during our interview, “the people feel a little apart, they think the *revolución global* will leave them behind.” Therefore, they jump online and connect to people, goods and information

⁶⁸ Nakamura, Lisa. *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 15.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

swirling around them. A great number of Dominicans, especially those in Santo Domingo and certainly those of a middling class that have access to both education and technology are the ones able to keep up—at least ideologically.

“I really think Facebook has re-conditioned people to go to events,” Daysi told me. “For example it could be that people are not used to going to a poetry reading. But I think that it being in fashion, little by little, has brought other people in, so many people attend.” The social networking site is regularly used to create events and guest lists from all of one’s friends online. You can list the time and date with a picture illustrating the event, and wait as one by one, friends online RSVP electronically for the event. Many use the internet to keep up with the dominant mainstream culture, to remain current, valid and of value globally. Ella Shohat reminds us that a piece of the work in resisting global hegemony is understanding the transmission of the visual—which need be combated with our own images and media representing us as we choose. “Colonial hierarchies,” she writes, “have ramifications for the everyday negotiations of looks and identity.” Furthermore, “The hegemony of the Eurocentric gaze, spread by First as well as Third World media, explains why *morena* women in Puerto Rico and Mizrahi (African and Asian Jewish) women in Israel Dye their hair blond.⁷⁰ The Eurocentric gaze is inescapable in these virtual spaces, particularly through ongoing discourse about hairstyles and women’s self-presentation in the DR. At the same, all those who are marginalized find ways to connect and carve out a space for themselves via the internet.

As twenty-four year old Ingrid tells me, “What I love about the internet is that you feel completely crazy and then you find people who grew up in completely different cultures with the same fears and desires as you.”⁷¹ Her remark captures the ways that so many of the Dominican women I selected to interview live within Dominican culture yet feel far outside of it. They look to worlds and cultures outside of Santo Domingo to feel recognized and validated in their complexity, when Dominican culture reflects back at them limited ideas about the Dominican woman. Like several of the women I spoke with, Ingrid regularly blogs and surfs the net, posts on Facebook and connects with friends online. The line between her online identity and her actual identity are blurred, even as

⁷⁰ *Talking Visions*. Shohat, p. 27.

⁷¹ Skype conversation, 6/1/11

her image circulates the internet alongside her work. She actively cultivates an audience, reinforcing a particular identity that she has shaped and selected. Identities online are more than something that one *has* but are in this way something that one *does*; they are not fixed. Moreover, what an individual *does* with their identity online, offers traces of a record and possibility of re-representation. Diverse forms of representation offer moments of understanding difference and reflect ways of being that capture multiply-experienced oppressions in different discourses, visual and dialectical.

“Everyone can testify to my love for my Blackberry,” Ingrid tells me when I interview her with her friend Raisa. “It’s a love-hate relationship because it stresses me out too much,” Ingrid goes on, “but, for example, I maintain contact...with all of my friends, those who we started university together, now that they are finished some of them finished and are doing their masters in diverse parts of the world. Therefore, it makes it very cheap and very easy to communicate, we keep up, talking a lot, they send me music, we keep up as if they were still here.” She says her friends might send news about what is going on where they are, in Europe or in the US, and she can include in her blog. They open her world up even though she has not had the opportunity to live abroad.

Ingrid, Raisa and I have just finished eating a lunch that the two had made for me and a friend visiting from abroad. We are sitting at the dining room table in my rented apartment in *Los Jardines*. The two longtime friends engage in conversation with one another and enthusiastically respond to some of my then weary questions about technology, celebrity and Dominican women.

Raisa, who describes herself as not being “*muy* [very] *Facebook*” or “*muy* [very] *Messenger*,” says she just uses her Blackberry to send messages and make calls.

As for Facebook, she says, “I am always connected at work. I connect to Facebook and right there I can talk to *todo el mundo* [everyone—or literally, “the whole world”]. Normally at work, not at home. But yes, I share a lot of information, my new passions...information about cinema, new movies.”

She tells us she has family in Spain, the US, Canada, Mexico. “We connect in different ways, through messenger. Now we all look different, we can see each other and see who has had gotten fat,” she says. Messenger had recently added a video component.

“If you want to know anything, you enter Facebook, whatever thing. It’s incredible,” says Raisa.

“There are others who close their Facebook accounts,” I say, playing devil’s advocate.

“Yes, I am against Facebook,” Ingrid contributes. Raisa and I immediately ask her why.

“It seems very...maybe, impersonal, the people are delimited. Before Facebook, there were social relationships.”

“This was happening with Blackberry,” Raisa points out.

But Ingrid’s additional complaint is that people get their information about you via Facebook rather than going directly to you to learn what is going on your life. Furthermore, she says, “People construct false lives on Facebook.” They also construct false Facebook accounts in order to get information about people. Ultimately, Ingrid says she opened a Facebook account for the professional and contacts.

“How many hours are you connected to the internet,” I ask.

“24/7,” says Ingrid, “I am always connected.”

“Ay,” gasps Raisa at her friend’s response. She is connected only during her workday, from seven in the morning to five in the afternoon. “When I leave work I don’t want to know about Facebook, that nobody said anything, not messenger, nothing. I go to school and then I go home. This is my life.” Facebook is a window into another world while she is working and

They access books online, from websites where they can download them. Says Ingrid, “I spend a lot of time on the internet reading, when I don’t have other work. I love the blogs about feminism...My friends that are in Holland, in Germany, send me messages, ‘Look, read this!’ And maybe that page has a link to something else, that leads to something else. I like to read the news from BBC, the edition for Latin America.”

“The books, I try to download them in PDF wherever. It is really difficult to get them in the country because they are very expensive.”

“Yes,” says Raisa, immediately.

“In English here, they cost a lot of money,” says Ingrid, who is fluent in English and regularly reads American pop culture websites such as Jezebel and Gawker. If her

friends do not send her books from abroad, she says, she gets PDFs and prints them out, either at work or one of the many inexpensive print shops by the public university. Texts become newly accessible, new ideas and new information.

As a highly trafficked interactive social space, Facebook relies on a visual discourse as much as a verbal discourse and appeals to youth culture. Images convey humor, political ideology, and personal values. Like the broader internet, it is also a site for a wide variety of transactions. While many of use it as a tool for communication and dissemination of knowledge and production of ideology, it is also an indiscriminate tool of capitalism through which one can shop real and virtual goods. Within these networks, the bodies of girls and women of color in particular hold particular values. Pornography and sex-trafficking, are booming transnational economies today. I aim to understand some of the nuances of Dominican women's identities within advanced capitalism, in which their bodies are commodified by context, heeding what Jon Cruz writes in his essay on Marxism and commodity fetishization, "Identity formations are not strictly comparable to commodities. Yet they come into being as political, social, moral—and classed, raced and gendered—currencies; they draw their value not in and from themselves as isolated entities, but from within a socially and historically embedded grid of meanings and multiple powers of investment, brokerage, and exchange. Their values are not fixed and frozen, but subject to shifting configurations of power and multiple modes of appropriation that refract underlying social relations"

With this first chapter, I have drawn together snapshots of contemporary life in Santo Domingo, starting with the public university in order to convey the different worlds, both public and private that young people in Santo Domingo navigate, online and off, local and global. The university has led me to more intimate conversations and to topics about which my interviewees are most passionate. Throughout the larger project, I move from public spaces to private spaces, as a scholar and ethnographer I work myself into more intimate communities, either I am welcomed or I am tolerated. I could remain a cultural a bystander observing from outside but as revealed in the next chapter, I found it more interesting, more valuable to get to know Dominican women and learn from them about who they are and the issues they face.

Chapter 2

Me quedo con la greña: Dominican Women's Identities and Ambiguity

Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished historical fact... we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. But this view problematizes the very authority and authenticity to which the term 'cultural identity' lays claim.
—Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation"

It's because of this that nothing more than my afro is black.
I'll keep the afro.
Because it is me...
ME.

—Michelle Ricardo, *Negra Caribeña*

"There are people who are enslaved by the salon and spend tons of money on it," twenty-year-old Daysi informs me.

"The whole world here is enslaved by the salon!" shouts Michelle in agreement. Indeed, Beauty salons are everywhere in the Dominican Republic and some 70% of women in Santo Domingo go to the salon each week.¹

"The salon and the nail shop," Daysi goes on, "and I think many of the people could use the money to buy themselves a book that would help them with their careers." The two young women express opinions I have heard numerous times among educated working class and middle class Dominicans in Santo Domingo.² They are responding with frustration to gender roles within the dominant culture that fetishize a particular type of female beauty within patriarchal Dominican society. Like so many of the Dominican women I spoke with in Santo Domingo, they complained that the culture that surrounds them is highly superficial. Dominicans invest in symbols of status: the brand of clothing

¹ The importance of hair among Dominicans is one of the reasons that Ginetta Candelario focused her sociological research on a Dominican salon in New York. Find citation in her book.

² In her "Solo en Santo Domingo..." blog post on 11/29/2011, Carolina Contreras has this same conversation with a Taxi driver and they calculate it out. They estimate that his wife, who goes to the salon for twice a week, as many do, is spending around RD\$40,000 or over US\$1000 each year, just for one woman in a family. It is of course a life-long commitment, and this cost very quickly adds up.

they wear, the handbags they carry, and the straightening of their hair.³ Transforming one's appearance is frequently more feasible and more socially acceptable than transforming one's social position through educational attainment. Furthermore, there is a mutually constitutive relationship between the elaborate economic structure around which Dominican beauty salons are built and cultural values about how Dominican women should look.⁴ In the DR, beauty salons are almost exclusively owned by women.⁵ As a space of physical transformation, it is so embedded in Dominican culture that for many little girls their first hair straightening is a veritable rite of passage. Often the Dominican beauty salon is little more than a tiny storefront, a sole swivel chair in front of a mirror at the back of an internet café, or a woman's back patio (where the smoke from blow driers does not linger). The salon is such a ubiquitous space in Dominican culture that even if a woman does not invest in these types of mainstream beauty practices, she is still likely to spend time in this important community space.⁶ Women sit and wait for hours for their turn to have their hair straightened in rollers, under the blower.

The various young women I have interviewed for this project indicate that Dominican women are making astute choices based the society in which they live in the pursuit of social access and economic stability. By devoting time and money to physical appearance and transformation—producing a feminine Latina identity that conforms to social expectations—Dominican women work to increase their value within Dominican society.⁷ Could Dominican women empower themselves in a patriarchal, *machista*

³The plastic surgery industry is also vibrant in Santo Domingo.

⁴ Anthropologist Gerald R. Murray and Sociologist Sonia Ortiz have recently published a controversial book about beauty salons in the DR. Although misjudging the motivations behind Dominican women's beauty standards, the book *Pelo Bueno, Pelo Malo* (2012) makes some reference to the economy of beauty salons in the DR. It was funded by El Fondo para el Financiamiento de la Microempresa [The Fund for Small Business Financing] (Fondomicro) in Santo Domingo and mistakenly argues that there is no longer a pigmentocracy or "hair-ocracy" in the DR.

⁵ The amount of time and money spent by Dominican women in these women-owned small businesses is worthy of study, as Ginetta Candelario and others have shown. Women's investment in beauty as a small business is promoted an advertisement/short film entitled "*Magia* [Magic]" by the savings and loan bank ADOPEM <http://vimeo.com/40456810>

⁶ Men grow accustomed to dropping their girlfriends or wives off at the salon each week, and male children spent time their waiting.

⁷ Moreover, like playing the lottery at the popular *Bancas* throughout the country, many women are willing to invest a great deal of money for the possibility of being the lucky winner, of a man who has money. The women I interviewed said nothing to me about hoping to find a man to support them.

culture by, as my interviewee, Daysi, would have it, investing more in their educations and less in their appearance?⁸

With this study, I write within and against the stereotype of the Dominican woman obsessed with her appearance. To confront the essentializing ways that Dominican women are characterized within and outside of Dominican society, I look at how a select group of Dominican women negotiate the heteropatriarchal culture and neoliberal economy in which their mixed race bodies are valued in specific ways, far more than their minds. While considering how these young women negotiate social pressure about physical appearance in relation to Dominican womanhood, I offer their own analysis of the dominant transnational culture they navigate. Their own critiques emerge through our conversations, which reflect their choices, and their desire to inform me, as interlocutor, about the forces shaping their lives. In addition, I highlight the cultural production of one particular interviewee, poet and visual artist Michelle Ricardo. I focus here on Michelle and her writing as one vivid example of how the identity-based cultural productions of Dominican women often circulate transnationally, garnering response online.

During 2010 and early 2011, I interviewed thirty young women living in Santo Domingo.⁹ Each woman I spoke with educated me about the world she lives in and the transnational culture in which she is engaged. For this chapter, I have chosen excerpts from five different interviews that include seven different women. Four of these interviews take place with pairs of friends. I found this type of joint interview to be extremely effective in producing a rich and expansive conversational flow. Interviewees felt more at ease and offered more anecdotes in explanation, when sharing the conversation with friends. They provided examples that their friends could validate, even if I was unable to relate immediately. With this opportunity to be understood by a friend, the young women tended to share stories that truly defined them. One-on-one conversations, on the other hand, allowed others to reflect on their own identities and

⁸ Weekly there are articles in the paper about the violence against women in the DR, feminist activists Sergia Galván and Susi Pola respond to the question “¿Por qué siguen los feminicidios?” in the March 21 edition of *Hoy*. Currently, the website <http://femicidio.net> is tracking all news related to femicide in Latin America.

⁹ My questions and interview process was overseen by the Internal Review Board at University of Michigan.

share more personal experiences of race and gender uninterrupted. They may have felt more comfortable confiding in me as an outsider, seeing me as more objective than their peers. Often I required more explicit explanations and relied on them as invaluable “cultural informants.”¹⁰ Additionally, it is worth noting that the personality of each interviewee factored significantly into how much they shared with me. Likewise, how they related to my initially reserved and self-conscious presentation had some influence over the information shared.

As an interviewer, the discussions I initiated around issues of gender and identity typically required that I start from a common denominator. I therefore chose to ask questions about essentializing constructs around Dominican women’s identities that were so common they readily provoked thoughtful observations about race, gender identity, and the impact of neoliberal development in the DR. The women’s diverse responses, while far greater than I am able to present within this chapter, inform my study as a whole. They convey a transnational worldview critical of the narrow confines of the Dominican society in which they live and illustrate a transnational consciousness among Dominican women in Santo Domingo that informs how they see their lives within Dominican society.

This study responds to my own unwieldy question: Who are Dominican women in Santo Domingo today? My ethnographic cultural studies process offers a glimpse into who *some* Dominican women in Santo Domingo are becoming today. These are women who are crafting transnational identities informed by a rapidly changing global culture. With the six different vignettes that follow, I depict aspects of the overlapping themes of race, color, gender, and Dominican identity throughout all of my research in the DR. The interview segments that I share in this chapter capture particular details about the spaces that these women navigate, the society of which they are a part, and their own perceptions and critiques of neoliberal influences in the DR today. Decades ago, Dominicans were only exposed to new ideas about race and gender traveling or living abroad. Now, transnational influences within the DR are a part of daily life as individuals access other worlds through their Blackberries, smart phones and personal computers.

¹⁰ All of the interviewees signed a contract in compliance with a U of M IRB. Our agreement also dictated that they would have ownership over their words and have the opportunity to review any work I published that uses their interviews. All interviewees, aside from Michelle, are included anonymously.

Few of the women I chose to interview dedicate themselves to their appearance at the cost of their education. Their interests and concerns frequently conflict with social expectations for Dominican women, and because they are unwilling or unable to conform to dominant social expectations, most feel marginalized within their own society. Because they feel themselves to be outside of many of the cultural values of Dominican society, the women I have spoken with offer a unique insight into contemporary Dominican culture. Their identities and experiences contest the existing mythology—especially racialized and gendered stereotypes—yet their identities remain imbricated in dominant social constructions of Dominican womanhood. Beliefs about who young Dominican women are, and about the racialized gendered identities that they are expected to perform, regularly distort the reality of their existence. Equally hyper-visible and *invisible*, they are “products” of the transnational Dominican society that I depict in this study.¹¹ As we have seen in the previous chapter, cultural changes occurring in the DR due to transnational access, technological advancement, and neoliberal economics, have real ramifications for how Dominican women understand themselves, their possibilities and their limitations. Neoliberal values—including those placed on class and color—dominate the mainstream media to which these women have access.

Writing about Dominican women’s identities involves negotiating lines between Latinidad and blackness and so I read for both. Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins’s work illuminates the types of race and gender stereotypes that Dominican women negotiate as women of African descent. The mobilization of specific raced and gendered dichotomies that objectify black women, Hill Collins has argued, contributes to a broader understanding of black women as goods to be consumed.¹² Images of Dominican women’s bodies circulate widely with similar consequences to that of black women; that is to say that have historically been viewed as commodities.¹³ Yet, as I go on to explore in in Chapter 4, racial ambiguity factors significantly into the ways that Dominican women’s bodies are commodified.

¹¹ I take this from Matthew Kelly’s comments as editor of the magazine on mixed race experience. Matthew Kelly, “Exposure,” *MAVIN Magazine* (Issue 4), Spring 2000, 7.

¹² Collins, 69.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Stereotypes about Dominican women in the DR that emerge throughout my research correlate with US stereotypes about both black and Latina women. These include the figure of the saintly Dominican mother, lauded as the “*ama de casa* [soul of the house/homemaker],” who is a self-sacrificing and hardworking “*luchadora* [fighter].” This hardworking and reliable female figure is ever-present in local television commercials for micro-lending projects. The familiar stereotype echoes the tireless “Mammy” archetype prominent in the US. One can find for sale in the gift-shops of Santo Domingo, representations of the Mammy as a ceramic sponge holder to place beside your kitchen sink: a dark-skinned portly figure, her hair wrapped in a kerchief; she wears a brightly colored dress with a white apron wrapped around her wide waist that has “Dominican Republic” printed across it. In contrast, the hypersexual mistress/girlfriend (with a narrow waist) represents the costly sex object, the recently reinvented “*Mega Diva*” of Dominican culture.¹⁴ This figure both echoes the Jezebel archetype of African American history while doing double duty as the “fiery Latina.”¹⁵ She turns up repeatedly in films and on television shows in the DR.

Inspired by Hill Collin’s analyses of black women, my interviews and ethnographic observation explore the “controlling images” of the *dominicana* and how such images and stereotypes work in conversation to become the “ideological justifications for interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression.”¹⁶ In particular, I consider how experiences of race, color, and racial ambiguity shape Dominican women’s identities and thus influence their engagement with existing transnational discourse about who they are expected to be. The cultural significance of Dominican women’s racially ambiguous bodies shifts depending on context. Dominican women come into their identities while negotiating a virgin/whore dichotomy of social expectation fortified by cultural values of the Catholic Church. The Dominican woman in the social imaginary is not one figure but a composite of different intersecting beliefs that

¹⁴ A Dominican film by Roberto Ángel Salcedo captures this stereotype of the made up and money-grubbing female who spends her boyfriend/husbands money in plastic surgery to make her more desirable and able to capitalize on this power with men.

¹⁵ Maria Lugones citation

¹⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, in chapter “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling images” 77

reflect numerous social anxieties and expectations. The figure also reflects new social and economic pressures within a rapidly changing neoliberal culture.

My own survey of seventy young women from universities in Santo Domingo demonstrates that existing social constructions of the “authentic” Dominican woman portray her as a “fighter,” who is strong (meaning solid or durable), a hard worker, a good cook, talkative, friendly, and extroverted. She is conceived of as a well-put-together *morena*, her hair, makeup and nails done. She is sexy, with “a lot of ass,” and typically with “*pelo malo* [bad hair],” which is to say that “true” Dominican women have hair that requires straightening in order to be socially acceptable.¹⁷ Indeed, Dominican women’s process of self-identification involves reconciling their own reality with these existing gender constructions and ongoing social expectations.

To better facilitate interviews that broach racial discourse, I employed visual images. In each interview, I presented interviewees with a set of four photographs printed together on an 8 1/2 x 11 sheet of paper. I had copied the color photographs of four transnationally recognized Dominican celebrities off the internet. The images of Zoe Saldaña, Martha Heredia, Rita Indiana and Michelle Rodriguez proved an effective way to incite discussion about skin color, hair type, and class aesthetic.¹⁸ This approach also allowed me to engaged the aforementioned visual eye and narrative eye as informing cultural meaning. To the visual eye, these women are defining symbols of what Dominican women can and should *look like* in order to be “authentic.” To the narrative eye, symbol references within these women’s self-representations tell viewers a story about who they might be, informing why Dominicans may or may not accept them as representative.

The ways that Dominican women embrace cultural practices and identities from both in and outside of the DR is reflected in the language they use. Very many spoke English, read in English or otherwise consumed popular culture in English; our conversations easily swung back and forth between the two languages while we discussed

¹⁷ From 70 responses to the survey question, “What are the physical characteristics you most identify with the Dominican woman?”: 41 - “*well put together*”; 44 - “*morena*”; 28 - “*sexy*”; and 29 - “*pelo malo*”.

¹⁸ All but Rodriguez are holding a microphone in the photographs. Heredia and Indiana are singing, While Saldaña is answering questions on a panel at Comic-Con International and Rodriguez appears to be arriving at an event, like Saldaña there is a wall of advertising.

the popular culture we shared in common. As Carlos Andújar Persinal writes of Dominican Spanish, “Of course we are not speaking an academic Spanish, but a normal Spanish from the street, the colloquial, that is cultural Spanish and that is social Spanish that represents the history and culture of American peoples.”¹⁹ Yet these linguistic shifts are ongoing, as Dominican youth on the street in the DR, or on Facebook in diaspora, can tell you.²⁰ Words like “chillin”, and phrases like “*vamos al party*” and “*que hay de new*” and “full” turn up in conversation. Likewise, “*tomar un chance*” is just one example of how a combination of Spanish and English that works effectively to communicate about “taking a chance.” This type of mixing of language is particularly common among young people making quick adaptations to culture from *afuera* [outside].

Inez and Albania: Little Women

Most of the women I interviewed consciously distance themselves from the stereotype of Dominican womanhood that they so readily describe for me. Says 22-year old Inez, “For me the stereotype of the perfect Dominican female is a *mulata* woman, voluptuous, with hair that is very long and well-straightened, who knows how to keep house and is always pretty. This is all that comes to mind... a woman who takes care of everything in the home and you don’t see how she does it because she is always well put together.”

Her friend Albania responds, “For me, the stereotype is of a young woman. Because to be the stereotype the woman can be young but a homemaker with children. There are many in this country who marry very young. Physically, I cannot say that there is a specific stereotype of the Dominican woman because we are all very different.” In an effort to answer my question, Albania located what she sees as a “stereotype” of the Dominican woman and points to a class of women of which she is not a part. Her example reflects the reality of young women across the DR, both within and outside the capital. She suggests that the average Dominican woman is *morena*, a darker color than her own.

¹⁹ Carlos Andújar Persinal, “una perspectiva de la identidad cultural dominicana” in *Meditaciones de cultura: laberintos de la dominicanidad*. (Santo Domingo: Archivo General de la Nación, Volumen CLII, 2012), 27.

²⁰ Likewise, interviewers such as myself translating Dominican language for North American academic audiences observe the rapid adoption and adaptation of language.

“Sometimes extravagant in her way of dressing,” she goes on, “sometimes not, the Dominican woman really likes to express her sensuality a lot in her way of dressing”

“Too much,” says Inez.

“Too much,” repeats Albania. “The more sensuality they show, the more they feel. I don’t go along with this but it’s the majority.”

Inez tells me that Dominican men like to have a woman on their arm that draws the attention of other men. She was quick to offer another example illustrating how women are hypersexualized in Dominican society: “The women who work on television are not a representation of the women on the street who go every day to their work, you understand? But it’s what media projects, that they must be a woman with an exaggerated bust line, with extra-long [hair] extensions...”

“Very made up, very snug clothes, very short, normally very little clothing,” Albania contributes. In the middle of the day, she says, you see women dressed up on TV like they are going out at night, “They show a lot, considering the hour.” The comments of the two young women reflect many contradictory social expectations for women in the DR. Ideas about respectability that they carry with them from their grandmothers conflict with messages that encourage hypersexuality and thus women’s accessibility for men. While there has long existed a virgin/whore dichotomy in Latin America, Inez and Albania readily blamed contemporary media for its negative influence on young girls.

Says Inez,

“I asked my little nieces sometimes to dance for me and they dance in a way that isn’t for children. I say ‘where did you learn to dance like that?’ ‘On the program on television in the afternoon, or midday.’—Ay, what an example! Then in the paper, the same people [upper class people who program what is on the television] are saying they are very concerned about teen pregnancy. But if you give an example to a girl that they have to dress in whatever, to dress in a short little thing, showing everything, flirting, before they are of age, this is what they are going to do.”

“No, girls don’t dress like children,” Albania chimes in.

“Little women,” says Inez.

“The same way the mothers dress themselves, they dress their little girls: miniature women. When I was little you didn’t see this. I had my big dresses and stockings.”

The two young women make a common assumption about children's dress and young girls' promiscuity. What is left out of the conversation here, and often omitted from discourse around adolescent pregnancies, is the fact that girls are frequently impregnated by adult men who have pursued them. Nevertheless, culpability is placed on the girls for how they dress and for succumbing to pressure from the men who pursue them. Moreover, society blames mothers for setting poor examples for their daughters (See Figure 5 in Appendix)²¹ Men are not challenged for sexually desiring pubescent girls. Inez and Albania point to how media influences what girls in Santo Domingo are wearing, yet when they imitate particular dress they see on TV or online, it is encouraged and rewarded outside of the home. In public spaces, young girls and women constantly receive male attention for dressing in ways that Albania describes as "sensual." When economic opportunity for women in the DR often means finding a man to support you, this type of validation is desirable. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for mothers to encourage their young daughters to leave behind education in order to find a man with money to support them as this benefits the family as a whole.²²

I interview Albania and Inez one evening at a popular café at the end of *El Conde*, the central promenade in the colonial zone. We are outside, on the corner of *Parque de Colón*, watching dusk fall, surrounded by upscale tourist shops, filled with jewelry made from Dominican amber and the blue stone, Larimar. Around us are galleries stocked with paintings for sale, much of it Haitian artwork, both originals and replicas, and numerous cigar shops. The two friends drink coffee and smoke Marlboro cigarettes (manufactured in the DR), as they have likely done in this spot a thousand times before. They both wear dark eye make-up and black clothing that contrasts their already relatively pale skin. Sitting here, you are bound to see someone you know pass by; we encounter friends we share in common and they stop to greet us. One could sit here all day and late into the night watching tourists and locals walk past, witnessing a myriad of exchanges. Tour guides wait in the park en mass, hoping some new arrival to Santo Domingo will hire them for a few hours work. Schoolchildren feed the flock of pigeons in front of the

²¹ A friend in the DR posted the comic on Facebook in May of 2012; an acquaintance in the US said she had seen the same thing in English.

²² FUVICREF did an educational performance on this theme in the community of Sabana Grande de Boya in December of 2011.

Cathedral of Santa Maria on the plaza. Families take an evening stroll. You also see older men from Europe with their young Dominican girlfriends or wives, sometimes with little children in tow. As darkness arrives, so do women in tight dresses, low cut tops, even an ill-fitting bustier. They introduce themselves to white men, offering companionship and hoping at the very least to be invited for a drink.²³ A mother pushes her toddler in a stroller, and then stops to ask a stranger for spare change. People sit on park benches texting on their smart phones, drinking beers from plastic cups. The National Police and the Tourist Police in the area wander about with little to do. Middle and upper class Dominicans show up in shiny expensive clothing and extravagant shoes; Blackberries and smartphones in hand, they head to the Hard Rock Café a few doors down for a concert.

This reality of Santo Domingo is enormously frustrating for many of the women I interviewed. An evening at *Parque de Colón* captures much about the limited options for women within Dominican society. Those who are not born with privilege learn early that their color and their gender, as informed by both cultural expectations and the workings of a global economy, will likely significantly limit their options within the DR. In reality, marrying an older European man is one of the better options for economic mobility and so it is commonly observed among young Dominican women. As is becoming the mistress of a married man—or woman; this type of relationship is not exclusive to heterosexual couples. It is a manner in which women might use their sexuality as a tool to gain a particular type of power within a heteropatriarchal society. Partnering for the purpose of economic security (or economic freedom) is common. Older, well-established men very often take on young lovers, assuming financial responsibility for them, their education, and sometimes their family's household needs. Such power seems far more viable and obtainable than the prospect of gaining the respect of men on less superficial terms.

Paloma: *La Calle Será La Calle*/The Street Will Be the Street

²³ At the opposite end of *El Conde* there is another café where you can sit and watch young Dominican men come up and introduce themselves to gay male tourists, many of whom are African American.

I meet Paloma in a corner of the *UASD* library, on the third floor. She finds time to talk to me in between classes in journalism and social communications. She tells me she had been to the US. Like many students in Santo Domingo, she has studied English and went abroad through a summer work program to improve on her language skills. When she was 18, she paid a US company to travel to a small town in rural Georgia for four months, where she would earn minimum wage while working at MacDonald's.²⁴ After that, Paoloma spent three months in New York City visiting relatives on a tourist visa and then traveled to Puerto Rico and Colombia., To our interview at the library Paloma carries a beaten up laptop that does not pick up wifi or have a working battery. When I ask her what she uses the internet for, she says mostly for reading the news, for Facebook, and to communicate with family abroad.

As Paloma puts it, Dominicans are “officially Catholic,” but now embrace all kinds of different religions. “This is a very conservative country, very conservative,” she wants me to know. “People don’t go to church every Sunday but they identify as Catholic.” She herself has been a Hari Krishna for two years at the time of our conversation. She said a friend brought her to a meeting and she liked the philosophy and stayed; they meet and talk about vegetarianism and do workshops to educate others. I would later witness her involvement in educating those outside of the community about her religion, observing her work with the community of Hari Krishnas both in real life and by way of her postings on Facebook.

Religion did not come up in a great deal in my many conversations, although one interviewee, when I asked her how she identified, declared herself to be “first and foremost a child of God.” Most of my interviewees were Catholic by culture, but they and their families were less and less observant. Nevertheless, as in so much else in daily Dominican life, the Catholic Church makes its presence known, often to detrimental effect, such as its homophobic culture and political lobbying against women’s rights.²⁵

²⁴ Work programs like this one court college students, particularly those studying tourism, but often place them in isolated locations without public transportation to leave on their days off. The student commits an amount of money to participate but and their minimum wage salary barely covers their room and board while they work cleaning rooms and serving guests.

²⁵ As Sara Pérez puts it, the patriarchal system “has its favorite victims,” those who are most vulnerable in Dominican society because of gender, age, class, color and health. Perez, Sara. “La Iglesia patriarchal dominicana” in Torres-Saillant et al., 2004.

The presence of the Catholic Church in politics and community life is a frequent frustration for the women with whom I spoke, particularly because of its many blatant contradictions. Paloma tells me,

It's double standard [*“doble moral”*], because here in this country there is what is, officially—we are Catholics, moralistic—but when you go out to the night life, when you go to the zone, and the areas that are criticized, you see the same people who criticize them. They use the double standard a lot, speaking against what others do...therefore, religion influences a lot.

This contradiction is plainly visible in the street where you see young women wearing crosses around their necks that fall down between exaggeratedly exposed cleavage; the irony is not lost on those who post pictures of this on Facebook, which circulate among friends worldwide. It is also evident in the contradictions around homosexuality in Dominican society, which seems to be on some level accepted as part of the culture, even as individuals are persecuted for their difference. It is this very culture of the *doble moral* that allows so many extreme contradictions to coexist in the DR.²⁶

When I ask Paloma about existing stereotypes about Dominican women, she has little difficulty naming the aspects with which she is familiar, ones I had by then heard many times before.

I have always thought, kind of, that the stereotype of the Dominican woman is that she is very sensual, that she is very extroverted, that she is very...um...affectionate, that she works hard...but that she is also conservative in many things. That she has to have a big butt. That she has to know how to dance, that she has to like to party...That all *dominicanas* know how to dance, that all *dominicanas* know how to cook; that all *dominicanas* have an ass, that all of us are hot, that...we are very *comparona* [compares one's self to others].

“Where do you get this?” I ask, impressed by specificities of her list. “You hear people talking about this? Or you see images?”

“You see it in the street. For example, the manner in which they refer to a woman...Also you see the same in foreigners because when you talk with foreigners, they have in mind the image that they have of us...Talk with a Puerto Rican and their image of a Dominican woman is submissive, hard worker, good body, very sensual, knows how to dance, knows how to cook. Things like that,” she says, seemingly

²⁶ Yuderlys Espinosa Miñoso, “*Homogeneidad, proyecto de nación y homofobia*” in Torres-Saillant, et al., 367.

detached from these constructions though highly observant of them. What Paloma described, however, were the ways that these dominant constructions of Dominican womanhood today, unlike fifty years ago, are informed by not only Dominican standards but by transnational desires. Outsiders come with a social construction in mind and look for a particular type of woman, wanting a color, a body shape, a cultural aesthetic and behavior that they already have in mind. Furthermore, these understandings circulate broadly, as Paloma says, on the street.

Paloma is brown in color, *morena*, and growing out her own tight curls into a natural hairstyle. At the time of our meeting, I do not see her as particularly “feminine” in regards to her dress or mannerisms. In contrast to the many other female students on campus, she is taller and heavier, not dressed to fit in. Over time, our friendship expands and I see her in old pictures on Facebook in which her hair is in fact straight, or out at parties where she is wearing bright red lipstick, with which she reclaims a particular type of femininity.

I explain to Paloma that people in the DR see me and think I am Dominican. Yet because I wear my hair the way I do, medium length curls in their natural state, they have asked me to my face why I haven’t combed my hair.²⁷

“They ask you why you haven’t combed your hair? People ask you that?” Paloma sounded surprised at first, but she clearly understands.

Because....yes, here *el dominicano* feels at liberty to comment on these things...because it’s part of our culture. *El dominicano* is very extraverted, likes to make commentary. You can get in a *guagua* next to a person that you don’t know and they feel at liberty to comment on your clothes, your hair, what cream you should put on your face because *el dominicano* is like that...we are like that. Sometimes we don’t try to do it, but we can’t help it...*zafa* [it just comes out].”

This constant policing of personal aesthetics in Dominican culture, and more rightly people’s bodies, profoundly shapes individual identity. People live in close quarters and travel public transportation in even closer quarters. Strangers will quickly make clear to you when they feel you are stepping out of line, particularly in terms of how you look. If a woman is not feminine enough—if she has not straightened her hair, if she does not perform her gender identity to meet external standards—then others have no qualms

²⁷ This has changed over just the last few years—I now receive compliments about my “pajón”(afro)

about commenting on it. Women, far more than straight men, are subordinated in this way because of expectations placed on them due to their gender. Even though alternative performances of gender (and sexuality) are prevalent in Santo Domingo—as prevalent as the homophobic comments one hears on the street—pressure to conform to heterosexual gender constructions constant.²⁸

In many of my interviews, women have educated me on how their own culture, is particularly conformist. The general population has historically striven to fit in to a homogenous traditional culture.²⁹ More recently, this desire to conform has been reflected in the adoption of new fads from abroad. Social behavior is policed and failure to meet social expectation is punished. Incessant commentary about one's difference is just one example, and common experience for many Dominican women I know who are now growing out their permed hair and opting for a natural hairstyle. This social pressure informs my own experience of Santo Domingo as well: One evening stepping out of a full *carro public* after a day trip to the beach, I thanked the driver. Glancing in his rearview mirror he responded, “Goodbye, *joven* [youth].” Then he swiftly followed with an explanation of his word choice, “I say ‘youth’ because I can’t tell if you are male or female.” In that moment, as in so many others, a Dominican man felt entitled to publicly chastise a (presumably Dominican) woman for not performing a female identity to standards he upheld. One shrugs off these incidents, but when they are constant and never-ending, it becomes obvious to me why it is that women “choose” to conform. Whether in public or in private, a patriarchal power structure produces these binary options for women. Walking out the door involves facing this type of constant evaluation, yet coming home to family can be equally restrictive.³⁰

Yessica y Ambar: Different Razas

²⁸ For example, the 2012 Carnival included a trans contingent early in the parade. The handful of transwomen were met cheers that were mixed with hooting and howling that reflected both a larger social discomfort with trans bodies and an expectation that these bodies were meant for objectification.

²⁹ Espinosa Miñoso, 362.

³⁰ Many have suggested to me that this “conformist” tendency comes out of living under Trujillo’s dictatorship in which not conforming could mean certain death. Generations learned to do as they were told and following the directions of their paternalistic leader, who in an era of fascism demanded that they performing a particular type of Spanish Catholic Dominican identity.

I meet Yessica at her house, around the corner from where I lived when I first moved to Santo Domingo. Having known Yessica's family for a few years, I have seen her at 16, 17 and 18 dressed in tight jeans with bare midriffs, plunging necklines and tight dresses that are so short they inadvertently "ride up." I remember when she got her bellybutton pierced at 18. I am aware that her extended family members are occasionally startled by the "mature" manner in which she chooses to dress, but her parents seem to support and encourage it. Her typical choice of attire starkly contrasts with what the majority of the young women I have interviewed were wearing—skinny jeans and t-shirts, with sandals—so I was eager to talk with her. She agreed to do the interview with me because we had known each other for some time. Yessica then suggested that her friend Ambar, who she had recently introduced me to, might also be interested in being part of the conversation.

Ambar calls Yessica a bit later after our conversation is underway to let her know that she is on her way over to join us. She showed up complaining that her hair has turned out badly after her mother straightened it at home. Yessica brings Ambar into the conversation explaining to me that she was an example of someone who is "*clarita*," or light in color, almost white. Eighteen-year-old Yessica, in contrast, is dark in color. In Dominican society, this difference alone separates the two young women and among other things, shapes their perceptions of the world in which they live. Their mothers were childhood friends and they are now neighborhood friends in *Los Jardines del Norte*. The neighborhood is just north of *Avenida de la Kennedy*, across from the *Rica* juice and milk factory. The two friends are my youngest interviewees.

At 19, Ambar is more talkative and appears more self-assured than Yessica. She is studying business administration at la UASD. As soon as she joins us, the tenor of the conversation shifts. Ambar is not nervous about answering my questions and quickly feels at ease, while Yessica appears uncomfortable being recorded and remains aware of my little red digital voice recorder up until nearly the end of our conversation. She even shoos her parents out of the room at one point, telling them we are recording. Neither of the two young women immediately understand what I mean when I use the term "stereotype" and I try to explain. After I reformulate my questions, I find they have much to say on the topic. They are armed with as clear a sense of what it means to be a

Dominican woman as they have of what an “American” signifies to them—a category that they do not think I fit well. Most people I meet in the DR are surprised when I tell them I am American because I do not look like what they think Americans look like. I said as much to Ambar and Yessica, and Yessica exclaimed in agreement. According to Ambar, “*Americana-Americana*,” is usually imagined as a blonde female, making clear that what it means to be “American” is to be understood to be white.

“There are *Americano-morenos*, but...” Ambar drifts off.

“Of course,” Yessica jumps in, “the President!” referring to Barack Obama.

Yessica is a student of tourism at Universidad Pedro Henríquez Ureña, known as UNPHU. She tells me she would like to work in resort hotels in Bávaro or Samaná, where they pay in dollars and tourism is more developed than in the capital. She hopes to have a job working at the front desk. In her field of study, what she wears and how she presents herself has significant consequences. Undoubtedly, she constructs a femininity that responds to and works against social beliefs about her dark color that would assume her sexual availability, particularly in the field of tourism. We sit in the living room area of Yessica’s home, on the sofa and chairs squeezed in beside a large wooden coffee table. Yessica has her hair up, wrapped around her head with a net cap over it that is held in place with several bobby pins. This temporary style will keep her hair straight until she takes it down to go out. Her long, thick hair requires weekly trips to the salon in order to keep it straight the way she likes it, as well as a monthly chemical treatment (which sometimes takes place in the back yard). On the day of our interview, she is wearing jeans and a blue t-shirt, covered in silver studs. In her casual dress, she does not look particularly feminine, reminding me of the considerable effort she puts into her public presentation.

Yessica said her mother helps her with her style, “There are no ugly women, only unkempt women,” she explains. I learn that she reads magazines such as *Mujer Única* and *Cosmopolitan* (in Spanish) at the salon each week. Although she compliments me on my natural hairstyle, she says that her own hair has curls that are too tiny, what is referred to as “*pelo malo*,” she explains. Straightening her type of hair is, she says, “*obliga’o* [obligatory]”.

“For me, the *mujer dominicana* is very cheerful...Physically, they are more like this, *morenita* of my color, with kinky/*crespo* hair... I am very typical, very cheerful,” Yessica says. She identifies herself as a “typical” Dominican woman, through both her physical appearance and personality.

Ambar further complicates my inherently essentializing question, “I can’t identify a Dominican woman by her style of clothes, because this is global...One can copy what people are wearing in New York. You can only identify a Dominican woman by her way of life in la RD.” In her statement she identifies directly to the ways that a global popular culture influences Dominican youth and that what they are participating in is, in fact, a transnational mainstream culture. She points to New York City reflexively, because indeed it is common for Dominican styles to come straight from that central location in the Dominican diaspora. People in the DR who are unfamiliar with the geography of North America commonly refer to the US as “New York”; for generations that was where they have had relatives located abroad.

“But you can identify them by their physical appearance too, right?” Yessica asks her friend, regarding Dominican women. She is correct that there is far more to the cultural construction of the Dominican woman than style or way of life. There is the matter of physical appearance and what Dominicans believe Dominican woman can look like, which is racialized. “I think that the Dominican woman always has a lot of everything...a lot of ass, a lot of tits,” said Yessica.

“Straightened hair, a little brusque,” Ambar added. “I identify with the *mujer dominicana* that picks the first fight, tries to get everything she wants, when she has it she wants to castrate everyone...when she has it all, she wants to escape...” Ambar describes a particular type of *tigueraje*, or Dominican street smarts or aggressiveness that although it is attributed to Dominican men is recognizable in Dominican women as well.³¹ Her statement suggests that while there are many ways to be a Dominican woman, this aggressiveness is one of the particularly recognizable personality attributes.³²

Yessica say, “Before, too, it was like, they had been...the *mujer dominicana* identified more as being the *ama de casa* [homemaker]. I don’t know, she always had to

³¹ Silvio Torre-Saillant writes about “Intellectual *Tigueraje*”.

³² Fiery latina?

be. The husband always worked. So, it's been at least ten years that the woman has developed herself as an educated person." Yessica's measurement of a decade is a long time for an 18 year old but what is worth noting is that she is aware of the changes in the expectations for Dominican women during her lifetime.

"It's more than that," Ambar jumps in, "It's since the Mirabal sisters fought Trujillo to make him recognize the value of women and the rights that women have, you know everything changed. Now women have a voice, and vote, now women can rise above men." Ambar uses this common example of the Mirabal sisters to explain the rights that women have gained in the DR. Her narrative of gender activism is overly-simplified yet it represents a common explanation of women's "freedom" in Dominican society. Her ideas about the freedom of women also likely reflects her own privileges and access as a light skinned and educated working class young woman in the DR.

Ambar confidently shares her views of race and gender that echo underlying rhetoric regarding social identity constructs that pervade many circles in the DR, both educated and undereducated. "There are women who are tough, there are women that are weak," she explains. "This also depends on race." The meaning of the term *raza* in the DR, which is typically translated into English as "race" is further blurred by our conversation when Ambar goes on to describe women grouped in this way, connecting the term "*raza*" with "*rustica*" and yet another term. She says, "*Hay raza rustica, como fuerte—Moyeta, fuerte...*," meaning there's a "rustic" or less refined race of people. She uses the term *fuerte* to mean "strong" but adding the term *moyeta* she is referring to color. *Moyeta* is a Dominican term used to describe a woman who is both brawny and also *morena* or dark brown in color. Yessica's mother later explains to me that there is no such thing as a white woman who is "*moyeta*."

With Yessica and I, Ambar is outspoken with her opinions about racialized difference—and open about the logic behind her opinions. She says assuredly, "there are women that can plant to harvest, drive a crane, that are a race that is strong and rough. The others are women who are *una raza empresarial* [an entrepreneurial race], they don't know how to cook dinner, they only know their mathematics or physics. There are many kinds of women..." Her logic seems to reveal a racial bias that confirms her own trajectory in getting a business degree.

“There are women who are Dominican and they don’t have the same strength, or structure of their body. I think that Yessica is stronger than I am,” Ambar tells me. Her delineation between herself and Yessica points to their difference in color, and perhaps other aspects of their phenotype even as the two women are around the same age and same size.

“Ay no,” says Yessica emphatically. It becomes clear that being a female and a race apart, that is stronger and tougher, “*fuerte y áspera*,” as Ambar describes it, is not a complement. Ambar’s description contrasts the femininity that Yessica works daily to construct, through her feminine or sexually provocative clothing and trips to the salon to straighten her hair and polish her nails.

“Why?” I ask Ambar about what she has said about her friend.

“*Porque sí* [Because yes]. She is stronger than me—you don’t think so?” She turns to ask Yessica.

“It’s because I eat a lot, and she doesn’t eat meat,” Yessica tries to explain, but she seems to laugh off some embarrassment. There is something uncomfortable about Ambar’s assertion regarding the difference between the two young women, one light and one dark. She goes on, “For example, there are Dominican women who play basketball. *Dominicana-Dominicana*, therefore these are games of *gente rustica* [unrefined people]... I am much weaker, she isn’t; she is much stronger. It could be because of nutrition but also it’s also a hardiness they have...it’s because they are strong women—*¿tú me entiendes?* [you get me?]*—*that they can do that.” Ambar’s reference to the unrefined is clearly tied to color in this instance. When she speaks about color and the difference between herself and her friend, her use of the term *raza* seems to reflect a true slippage in meaning and cannot convey the same meaning of the term as understood in the US, based on historically constructed and legally delineated racial categories. The difference that Ambar describes, about an investment in meaning that is signified by color, is a window into the ways that color categorizes individual women differently and consequently shapes their lives.

Ambar goes on to further explain this difference to me: “I say that by race there is differentiation...it’s not that I have encountered a name, it’s to differentiate, not that they are from a different country...the style of being, the strength, or what they believe in,

because it also depends on upbringing.” Her explanation, as she tries to sort out the differences between two groups she sees as innately dissimilar, wound its way from a nature to nurture argument. As is the case with race, there is no clear line and yet she was quite sure that the fundamental difference did exist.

“A lot of traditions have changed in the last 6 years,” says Yessica, “Look at the celebration of *Semana Santa*, there were many different rules that people do not follow now.”

“How women dress has changed a lot,” says Yessica, even young girls in the street are wearing short skirts when they used to wear skirts that fell below the knee. Like Inez and Albania, these teens were well aware of the cultural shifts that have occurred within their lifetimes. “There is a lot more *dilenquencia*. Fathers drinking in the street, doing drugs.” Frequent talk of how things used to be, how much safer it was on the street, and older generations recall the era under Trujillo as one in which you could leave your door unlocked at night. While there are many who remain nostalgic for that period as a safer time and a cleaner city, many others were touched by the violence of the dictator and remember it vividly with horror.

When I ask Ambar and Yessica a question about the prevalence of prostitution in the DR, Yessica talks freely about the topic but sits hugging a pillow in front of her stomach. I am particularly curious about her thoughts on the subject because of her career choice. When I hesitantly bring up the topic, she speaks about it at length, albeit a bit uncomfortably. “There are a lot of Dominicans that prostitute themselves,” says Yessica, referring to both men and women.

“You learn about this and discuss it in your classes?” I ask.

“I have learned a lot about it in my classes. The professors did a debate with us about it.”

Their teachers tell them stories about women in administrative positions who are pressured for sex by the men who work above them and at risk of losing their jobs if they do not acquiesce.

“We are taught to respect ourselves,” Yessica says, but there is a lot of gray area in this and the reality is that the amount of money women working in tourism can make

by sleeping with male suitors is significant. Also significant is what is at stake if they refuse to sleep with their boss: their job, their future in the career of their choice, their income. And they may subsequently face ongoing sexual harassment. Women are in a precarious position in which to “respect themselves” when they are not treated with this same respect by men around them.

“There are many woman who want to improve their lives but they have these options in front of them to make money more easily,” Yessica adds.³³

At one point, Yessica’s mom got on the phone to call the *colmado*. Not long after, the delivery guy from the corner store walked in with a cold beer and small plastic cups on top. Later, there was food frying in the kitchen, and by the end of our conversation we were be presented with a plate full of *tostones* and fried salami.

“So, do you think you are very Dominican?” I ask Yessica.

“Yes, I think of myself as very Dominican and I love my country.”

Ambar says she felt less Dominican than Yessica, with her taste for cornflakes and other things introduced from abroad. “*El cornfla'* comes from over there, it’s something from America,” she says. “I don’t like *habichuelas* [red beans]...these are things of my culture.”

“Yes, but you like *sancocho*, and *mofongo!*” Yessica assures her.

“But there are other things about my culture that I don’t like. And people tell me, ‘look, but you don’t seem *dominicana*’. This is a theme for many of the women I spoke with, that others tell them that in some way they are not Dominican enough. Ambar also does not seem to perform the kind of femininity that her friend Yessica does.

Nevertheless, she describes herself as “*dominicana-dominicana*,” and like her friend Yessica, she consumes a lot of US popular culture.

“I like the movies a lot. Action movies, of Vin Diesel, Will Smith, a *morenito* that I can’t remember the name of,” Yessica tells me. The “*morenito*,” or black actor she cannot remember the name of may very well be Denzel Washington, whose name I heard over and over again from his many female fans in Santo Domingo. She is like so many teenagers across the globe, consuming plenty of Hollywood films. At home, if not at the theater, thanks to bootleg copies available throughout the country by young men on the

³³ As Cabezas shows with her work.

street who, thanks to the internet, can get you pretty much whatever you want to see. Vin Diesel films are in high demand. His action films and his racially mixed appearance appeal to a broad Dominican public making his movies extremely popular.

Yessica goes on, “I like Julia Roberts...and the one married to Marc Anthony...and the actress in *Fast and Furious*.” She does not immediately recall the names of Latina actresses Jennifer Lopez, or Michelle Rodriguez, nor does she recognize Rodriguez in the set of pictures that I show her. Ambar tells me she listens to music and watches videos online, “Honestly, I don’t like to read. That’s why I am studying administration, it’s more mathematical.” She lists just a few stars that she likes by name, including Angelina Jolie.

“Why do you like Angelina Jolie?” I ask, curious.

“She is in action films, but she doesn’t look like a strong woman. Yet she does her action roles. That’s a good actress.” Ambar highlights the appeal of *looking* feminine, even when you are in fact tough. Additionally, she identifies an actress whose racial identity is also played up as ambiguous. Even as a white woman, Jolie’s physical appearance (including broad lips and tawny skin) made it possible for her to play Mariane Pearl, the French, Dutch-Cuban wife of Daniel Pearl in *A Mighty Heart* (2007), a role for which her skin had to be “brownd up” a bit.

“Vin Diesel, I like,” Ambar adds.

Looking over the set of pictures of transnationally recognized Dominican women that I use in my study, I ask Yessica—as I have done with and all of my interviewees—my basic research questions: “Which are the most *dominicana* from this group?”

“Martha more than the rest, for her way of being and because of her color, and her hair too...the way she speaks, also, it’s distinct.” Through popular support that involved endless text messages from Dominican viewers in the US and the DR, Martha Heredia, won the 2009 Latin American Idol. She grew up in the DR, in Santiago, though many of my interviewees think of her as having grown up in the diaspora. Some women I speak with identify her as having a working class background and so her self-presentation is most *dominicana*, or “Dominican York.” However, YouTube videos reflect the privileges of her middle class upbringing in Santiago.

“Did you call or send a text in support of Martha?” I ask Yessica about the singer’s win on Latin American Idol in 2009.

“Of course, everyone did!” she exclaims, and this is indeed what I have heard.

“Martha, she’s not from here, she’s from Miami but she...yeah... [Zoe] looks more Dominican... and Martha too, they look the most *dominicana*...because of the physical form of her face, and her haircut...” The two make an effort to point to specific physical markers, perhaps for my benefit, but the challenge was also that these observations and an awareness of their significance were already a given in *Dominican* society—there exists a tacit understanding about color within which people work. Although Ambar declares that hairstyle is something that can be a “global” style, Yessica reminds her that no Dominican would choose a woman with *pelo crespo* [kinky hair] to represent them. The Miss Universe Dominican Republic is a barometer of this, in which all of the contestants are expected to have bone straight hair for the competition—headshots posted on Facebook capture this convention.³⁴ The sole contestant in 2012 who wore her hair natural for the shoot faced extensive criticism online and off.

When I show her the set of photos of the transnational celebrities I selected, Ambar, like Yessica, does not recognize Michelle Rodriguez. If I had had an image of Rodriguez as her character, Letty, in *The Fast and the Furious* and its sequels with Vin Diesel, she might have been more familiar to her. Ambar recognized Saldaña as an actress, though Yessica initially confused her with a past Dominican Miss Universe winner, presumably Amelia Vega from 2003. Vega is much lighter in color than Saldaña, however, though both have the requisite straight dark hair that falls past her shoulders. Said Ambar, “Yes, Michelle has it, she looks *dominicana*...”

“But she looks *cibaoeña*, o *santiaguera*, right?” adds Yessica, suggesting that the regional differences (of the Cibao and Santiago) are made apparent by the star’s color; she looks to Ambar for confirmation.

Yessica recognizes Rita Indiana immediately from my set of photos and says, “When I [first] saw Rita I didn’t think she was from here. My impression was that she wasn’t from here. She seemed more Puerto Rican.”

³⁴<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.303597246373462.73084.135540866512435&type=3>
Retrieved April 14, 2012.

“Probably because of her color and her size?” I suggest. Though there are many “white” Dominicans, also known as “*blancos de la tierra* [whites of the earth],” Indiana, in other ways, looks like few Dominicans you would encounter on the street. She is especially tall and thin, often capitalizing on this otherworldly-ness in her performances. Yessica’s quick evaluation of the singer reflected the ways that people assume racially mixed bodies to be Dominican and whiteness to be foreign.

“Yes, she’s very big.” Yessica agrees. At the moment of my research in 2010, Rita Indiana is wildly popular. Like many of the women I spoke with, Yessica and Ambar claim that she is as especially Dominican in her way of *being*, if not in how she looks. Her style is provocative and sometimes outrageous: White pantsuits with bellbottoms, hair cut or shaped into a mohawk, thick chains worn like jewelry on her tall skinny frame.³⁵ Ambar sees Rita as being more *dominicana* than the other women I have identified, in that she draws on Dominican folklore in her music, performances and visual representations. Rita “speaks Spanish in a way that is more local and of the people,” Ambar tells me. Indiana is famous for using the language of the streets in her songs.

“I think she seems more Dominican because of her accent,” says Yessica.

When I ask whether it matters that Rita is not heterosexual, Ambar tells me “No because the role of Rita is that she expresses what she feels in her music.”

“It’s her personal life,” says Ambar, with Yessica in agreement. Ambar brings up Ricky Martin as another example of why this no longer matters because perceptions of homosexuality have begun to shift. At the same time, however, what is permissible for performers is not permissible for her. When she talks about a greater acceptance of gay and lesbian artists at this moment, she refers to a global public. These artists are able to find their place in transnational communities that these young women who are not yet transnationally mobile cannot: “She is an artist and she is gay, right? But I am not an artist, and I live here in *Los Jardines*, right? And if I were gay, it isn’t the same. They could reject me but not her. Because I’m not, you know, I’m here...*dominicana*, this is something here that they see as bad...although other countries this might be something common.”

³⁵ Indiana started her career as a model.

The two young women laugh at the thought of seeing Dominican men kiss each other on the cheek in greeting, the way women do or the way men do to women in the DR. On *telenovelas* they have seen men greeting each other this way. It happens in other parts of Latin America they tell me, but it is something one would never see in the DR because the homophobia and hyper-masculinity embedded in the culture.

“All of this has to do with the culture...and the development we have in the country,” says Ambar. “Development,” is thought of as both structural and socio-cultural, in the way that she uses the term. Thus, she suggests that development would mean progressive politics around gay and lesbian identity as well.

“Do you think it is changing?” I ask them both. Yessica is quick to say yes. Says Ambar, “It is changing...people are accepting more the reality, and discriminating less against homosexuality.” The reality is that gay and lesbian people are present and highly visible in Santo Domingo. Publicly, they face stares and abusive comments. In dance clubs, and after dark they are part of the attraction in a local nightlife and tourism-based Caribbean economy in which some of what is being sold is sex. That said, the presence of queer bodies causes a great deal of anxiety within Dominican patriarchal culture and are often met with constant belittling comments and violence. Like women, gays and lesbians are (on talk shows and award shows) publicly made a spectacle of or made the butt of all jokes.³⁶ There is not necessarily greater violence against these groups than in the US, yet overtly state-sanctioned discrimination is common due to the influence of the Catholic Church.

Michelle and Daysi: Ambiguity and Alienation

“*Mágame una visa!*” the taxi driver shouts at Michelle, “Snag me a visa!” I am standing with Michelle and her childhood friend Daysi on the grounds of the *Plaza de Cultura*. As we exit the gate and walk along the street, taxi drivers talk at us from their parked cars. They speak to Michelle as if she were an *extranjera*, not from the DR. At the time of our

³⁶ Dulce Reyes Bonilla notes this was common in the 80s and 90s on *El Show de Medio Día*. During the internationally-televised 2012 Cassandra Awards in Santo Domingo, jokes about women and gays were part of the programming, which included a living Barbie doll on the red carpet (an live woman rolling around a pink plastic box) and a stereotyped gay interior designer dressed in pink, as part of the staged comic relief during the show.

interview, Michelle has recently returned from studying in Mexico, going back and forth from the DR over the course of several years. Something about her demeanor may also make her appear foreign to these Dominican men, as she is just beginning to settle back in to life in Santo Domingo.³⁷ She tells me that street harassment in Mexico was far worse for her than in the DR because the men actually grabbed her and even followed her off public transportation. In contrast, women in the DR “merely” face the constant barrage of sexually suggestive verbal commentary from men, referred to as “*piropos*” or “compliments.”³⁸

As we walk away, Daysi tells her friend that she looks like a *gringa* and that is why the taxi driver stopped her. Michelle told Daysi immediately that this comment irritated her. Michelle is fair-skinned, what is considered white in the DR. Yet, as is a common story in the DR, her thick curly hair made her “black” in her own family, as it belies her African roots. Today Michelle has pulled her hair back with a headband. It is true that her hair worn in its natural state, along with other details about her “look,” might lead other Dominicans to perceive her as foreign, since the majority of Dominican women straighten their hair.³⁹ The necklace she wears is one that she no doubt picked up in Mexico: a black cord, with three black hand-shaped clay figures on it, one of them is shaped like a chunky cross. It gives her a bohemian look, which she balances out with long dangly earrings that have orange clear plastic beads at the ends and match her plastic narrow-framed eyeglasses. Daysi says later that Dominicans typically wear gold jewelry, as symbols of class status; because Michelle is not wearing these things she is not recognizable as Dominican. Her demeanor, too, as a woman, reflects a different sense of independence.

Sitting under a tree just behind the Museum of Man, I explain my dissertation project to Daysi and Michelle. They are interested, enthusiastic about the opportunity to express their own opinions on this subject of Dominican women’s identities and life in the DR. The afternoon conversation is lively, as the two women have known each other

³⁷ Young Dominican women who have been abroad have a different sense of independence, Hoffnung-Garskof (2006) has written. Chiqui Viciosa describes this as well, in the AfroLatin@ reader.

³⁸ My language school provided me with a page long list of common *piropos* in translation, so that I might recognize the diversity of statements shouted on the street each day.

³⁹ This has begun to change in the last two years as natural hair has come into fashion.

for nearly a decade now and the rhythm of the interview is, in and of itself, entertaining. Michelle is a performer, she has a big personality with much to say; Daysi frequently interjects thoughtful comments with a youthful hesitance. Both of them are intelligent, well-informed young women and the subject at hand matters to them.

“I feel exaggeratedly *dominicana* in every context because the stereotype is an alienating stereotype, that is, it doesn’t fit,” says Michelle.

“How does that work?” I ask about the stereotype, “and why does it continue?”

“Aha,” she said, “but it isn’t authentic in reality. Like, the stereotype of the Dominican woman is an alienating stereotype, not a stereotype you can say is real. The people have to change their hair, have to change their eyes, have to change practically everything to achieve the stereotype and to be *dominicana*.” Michelle’s distance from the social construction allows her to harshly critique the ways that it is controlling while she refuses to conform.⁴⁰ This contrasts Yessica’s understanding, for example, of the freedoms that women have today that they have not had in the past.

Daysi responds to Michelle’s comment, turning first to her friend, “Like you say, you nor I nor Rachel fit this stereotype, but there’s another Dominican stereotype that is taking over through the arts [scene]...” She is referring to an aesthetic among privileged Dominican youth, who, like in the US, are known as “hipsters” in their efforts to be cool and alternative.

“That is other bullshit too, excuse me. I am the first to criticize because I am a woman of the stereotype ‘so cool’ I am an artist,” says Michelle. Daysi and I laugh at and with her about her claims on this particular stereotype of the artist. She reveals the same loathing I have heard from many other Dominicans about a widespread hipster culture in the DR. These are youth whose parents have provided them with the money to buy whatever they want in the way of cars, expensive clothes, and the newest electronics.⁴¹ They are often art students and they manufacture a bohemian style, dressing down, assembling a look that becomes uniform among them, for all of its effort to be edgy and different—and they spend a whole lot of money to look this way. The critique that I have heard repeatedly is that, like the style they embrace, their thoughts on culture and the

⁴⁰ This contrasts Yessica’s experience in which she remarks on how much more freedom women have; she does not see obligatory trips to the salon as oppressive.

⁴¹ Often derogatorily referred to as “*hijos de mamá y papá*,” to signify their dependence on their parents.

state of the DR are completely superficial. Yet these youth, the ones with buying power, are the ones to which the Dominican government seems to cater, as they spend and consume at the level that youth outside of the DR are able.

It's "an aesthetic vision," that you project, Daysi assures her friend, "that you are beautiful as you are, that you can have curly hair."

"No, no this is still being the stereotype of 'cool,' according to the people 'so cool.' I'm an artist, I'm alternative, I like Indie music, I am *super* Rita Indiana. I can listen to Omega, I don't like los *Jevitos*, 'so so fucking cool,'" she underscores with her hands making quotation marks. Her taste in music, from Rita Indiana to Omega, is almost expected of her "I can be included exceedingly well in these categories: *una mujer alternativa*, writes poetry...I dunno. Without a doubt, I didn't notice the transformation. I do not wear my hair curly because it is so fucking cool...I wear my hair curly because my hair is curly, but there are people who do it because it is 'cool, so fucking cool.'" She draws out the o's for further emphasis. Michelle points to the ways that she inadvertantly takes on the culture around her, even in her efforts to be different from the mainstream. She remains a product of the culture of which she is a part.

Michelle searches around for the right word and then tells me frankly, "It's a pigmentocracy." She understands this privileging of whiteness as most educated Dominicans do, "Trujillo set and advanced this ideology." Yet my curiosity about identity pushes me to ask, "But how is it changing?" Who perpetuates new values around race, color and identity today? In what ways do individuals continue to participate in this prejudicial color hierarchy? Does every Dominican family still talk of a distant European relative? As another interviewee remarked matter-of-factly, "Yes of course, everyone talks about a very, very far away grandfather or ancestor that is from Spain or Italy, like mine. I don't know where the black part of my, myself comes from, but I do know that some part of myself comes from Italy. Thank you. Pretty fucked up. But I'm blacker than whiter. So, really, what's the important part?"

Race and gendered expectations take their toll on young women, particularly those who have no interest in conforming. Michelle explains well her relationship to her

own culture and her own country: “I had a war with the country, *era una guerra*...I, with myself, with my appearance. In Mexico, I made peace...” The war with herself began in adolescence, as quests for identity typically do. Not until she left the country to study art in Mexico, was Michelle able to come to terms with her own identity. Her return four years later was one more step in the process. Her own “blackness,” tied to her hair texture and coloring within a “white” Dominican family, has everything to do with how she self-identifies.⁴²

“All of my life, I have struggled with this issue of my hair and it has pushed me to think about who I am,” she confides. I would later see Michelle present on a panel with women talking about their experiences in the DR when wearing their hair natural. There she tells a story of her high school teacher not allowing her to enter his class with her hair out in a natural afro. She had to bring her case to the head of the school and fight for the right to take his required class in order to graduate.⁴³ She conveyed the story as a moment of triumph, since ultimately the professor was forced to publicly apologize for his discrimination and eventually she ended up being his best student.

During our hour and a half interview, Daysi takes out her camera several times. With her digital SLR, she takes candid snapshots of our conversation and then at some point begins recording us on video. One of the photos would later end up as Michelle's Facebook profile picture the next day.

“You will never find a photo of me with straight hair,” says Michelle, “Because I don’t have straight hair and I wear my hair like this, I like my *greña*.”⁴⁴ Rather than her childhood friend’s testimony at that moment being enough substantiation, Michelle immediately gives this example of the photographic image as proof that she has never straightened her hair. Photographic representations actively construct Michelle’s identity

⁴² I use quotation marks here for North American audiences because these Dominican terms of race do not translate directly.

⁴³ Another panelist, after “going natural” was one day handed money by an older Dominican man she did not know. He wanted to pay for her to go to the salon because he preferred her hair straightened. These examples not only illustrate just a few of the ways that mainstream cultural beauty aesthetics are upheld and maintained, they reflect a level of machismo in Dominican culture in which men continue to feel entitled to exert their will over women.

⁴⁴ Meaning “hair,” “mop,” or “entanglement,” which perhaps better translates into “nappiness” and is often used as a derogatory term.

as cool. In professional photos with the hip hop artists of Quilombo, her image circulates on Facebook. She is wearing a huge afro and hip artsy attire. Her afro becomes a signature part of an image of the group, representing blackness and counterculture.

Daysi spoke up to say she does not change her own hair, which is long, thick and dark brown. It easily flows past her shoulders or she folds it up on her head with a hair elastic in very organic ways, much like the other art students at her school.

Michelle responds, “Listen, it’s different, your hair...your hair isn’t curly, your hair is wavy, except that. My cousin, my aunts, are straight-haired women...my grandmother. They wear their hair straight. But I don’t have straight hair, I don’t wear my hair straight,” said Michelle.

“Do they want you to change your hair,” I ask her.

“No...not all,” she says laughing. “Not anymore...”

“My grandmother is ‘*my* open-mind’” she explains in Spanglish, “a person, a woman, with a very open viewpoint and I have to say that I have never had problems. This is my hair. She taught me to be proud of who I am and how I am.

“My mother is a white woman, you understand?” Michelle asks me. As it happens, I do. “When they see me she says to people ‘this is my child.’”

“Yes,” I say, “my mother is a white woman too.” We exchange a knowing laughter. I am aware of how this particular difference, this otherness, has shaped Michelle’s identity.

“I have a little sister who was born *rubia*, [fair and blonde] with eyes a little bit clear,” Michelle explains. “I know that I was born looking more like my mother, but with the only exception of my color and my hair. And my little sister doesn’t look anything like my mother. Yet when they see her, people say [to my mother] ‘this child is identical to you.’” This example, is one that is common of narratives of mixed race in North America and highlights the way that Dominican experiences of racial identity can at moments parallel a “mixed race experience.”⁴⁵ We make a connection around this experience, as I, too, look like my mother but strangers rarely recognized this at first

⁴⁵ Claudine O’Hearn, ed. *Half + Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural* (New York: Pantheon, 1998); Naomi Zack ed. *American Mixed Race: The Culture of Microdiversity* (Landham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield), 1995.

because of my color. Instead, they told me I looked like just like my sister—who is brown like me, but adopted.

Michelle is clear about it, “We are a culture, unfortunately, we are a country that lives for appearances.”

“You can see it,” says Daysi, “you can see it because really all of the neighborhoods you don’t see, you don’t see books... here there are four book stores, four books stores!” She pointed to a major frustration for intellectuals and writers in Santo Domingo, the population does not read books with much voracity, and they rarely can afford to buy books. Michelle says to her friend, “but you just have to look at the politics of this government, which is...?”

“*El progreso*,” Daysi responds so quickly that I can see that as a Dominican the language of “progress” has been drilled into her.⁴⁶

“Exactly! And what do they base this progress on? ...the *macroconstrucciones*, in making parks, *coño*, that are very badly constructed but that look “*super bonito*” [super beautiful],” clarifying that she holds the term in quotation marks. Architect Melisa Vargas writes bitterly about the changing landscape in Santo Domingo, “The Dominican Republic reflects a long history of the United States impositions and influence on Latin America. Today the country builds its image on a clumsy idea of progress, in a collective dream that its society synthesizes in the image of one city: New York.” Vargas concludes, “Maybe if making parks, creating programs for education and organizing the population were more profitable for the engineers and entrepreneurs that donate to political campaigns, probably the small New York would be less about expensive roads, tunnels and metros and more about its organization and the qualities of its public spaces.”⁴⁷

“I mean, this is an embellishment,” says Michelle, in reference to how Santo Domingo has been made to look through numerous and various recent development projects including luxury condo towers, malls and metro stations. “We are a culture and a people of appearances...and this is what you are, up until what your personal image is, so as to what foolishness this is...*carajo*.” She emphasizes her disdain with a few choice

⁴⁶ Hoffnung-Garskof explores this construction in his book, *A Tale of Two Cities*.

⁴⁷ Melisa Vargas. “Little New York” *Monu* October 9, 2007 Accessed online 2/12/12

swear words. Extensive construction is taking place in the DR but on a superficial level, Michelle explains. It is a superficial way of doing things that she identifies as typical of Dominican culture. For most Dominicans, life remains a struggle and a skepticism about government continues.⁴⁸ This skepticism is often reflected in graffiti around the city, communicating sentiments of antiestablishmentarianism to the many Dominicans stuck in traffic: “*Ese no es mi constitución* [This is not my constitution]” and the classic “*Fuera Yanki* [Get out Yankee]!” A photo of a wall tag circulated via Twitter in 2009 (see Figure Appendix). It read “Leonel=Balager+Internet” and typo and all, it reflects a critique of the way that the existing government perpetuates the same abuses of power. Made up of just a few words and symbols, the phrase likens Leonel Fernandez’s presidency, to that of Joaquin Balaguer, who is known for merely extending the rule of Trujillo. New technology allows for easier dissemination of propaganda. Sadly, without the funding of education, the names of history’s actors are misspelled, as with the name “Balaguer.”

I ask Daysi and Michelle about the recent popularity of natural hair in the DR in just the last year, “Do you think it is changing or is this just a fad?”⁴⁹ Increasingly, photographs of women with natural hair are used in advertising campaigns and can be seen on billboards in Santo Domingo. The sudden shift was highly unexpected.

“I see it changing,” says Michelle, “but it also has to do with fashion. Now an afro is in style...men were able to do it, and now bit by bit women were able to.” This significant cultural shift is notable in 2012 in political advertising around the city. Young people that show up in the posters for Presidential candidate Danilo Medina’s—both male and female—have natural hair.

“We are in a *machista* culture” she says, almost reciting a fact of which we are all well aware. “For men, kinky hair was seen badly, it reflected badly on their character. They might be viewed as *mariconas* [faggots], or as drug addicted...but now it is in fashion for men.” Still there are consequences, as experienced by the young man in a

⁴⁸ The 2012 election results did not change this.

⁴⁹ According to Simmons, what is acceptable in terms of hair presentation has changed in part because Dominicans have spent more time in the US and are exposed to the aesthetic there. They then bring the fad back to the DR in the form of cultural remittances (84).

town outside of the capital who in 2012 was kidnapped by police who did not approve of him wearing his hair long. They took it upon themselves to shave his head.⁵⁰

An understanding of the nuances of Dominican culture, along with a perspective on how things are different outside of the DR, has provided Michelle with a unique perspective on her own identity as a Dominican woman, empowering her to further critique her own culture and her position in it. Like so many women who have lived abroad and then returned, she wrestles with the question of whether to try to leave again or make a life as a liberal-minded, educated woman within the constrictions of Dominican culture. Her perceptions of Dominican culture remain framed by her understanding of culture beyond the bounds of her home country. In this way, like so many other Dominican women I have spoken with, she embraces a truly transnational identity. Michelle's process of growth was shaped in part by her own racial ambiguity, as she is someone who is read in different ways depending on where she is located. Michelle has many stories of such experiences that have shaped her.

Michelle narrates a story about her experience while living in Texas, where she has family.⁵¹ One day she boarded the wrong bus and ended up in a neighborhood that she described as “*muy* creepy.” She found herself out of her element in a poor black neighborhood when a black man at the bus stop asks her, “Where are you from?” She responds, “I’m Dominican.” He then tells her, “I thought you were from here [the US]...I thought you were from Florida.” Michelle explains to me that this brief interaction revealed a lot to her about US preoccupations around race and difference. At that moment, she realized that she was being read within a racial framework that was different from her own.

“I said ‘no,’ I was not from Florida.” She explains, “It was at this moment I realized that everyone thought I was a black woman. Now, I wasn’t Latina. I wasn’t Latina because I wasn’t *Mexican*. I was black.” The man who spoke to her was aware of her foreignness, and asked the standard question that racially mixed and racially ambiguous people are asked; if not, “What are you?” then, “Where are you from?” The language used to politely inquire about someone’s racial identity in order to place them,

⁵⁰ Jorge Mejía. 9 Febrero 2012, “PN ‘pela a caco’ a joven barbero ‘por *greñu*’”
<http://www.eldia.com.do/nacionales/2012/2/9/74836/PNpela-a-caco-a-joven-barbero-por-greñu>

⁵¹ She tells me that although her interactions that day happened in English, she remembers it in Spanish.

to make racial meaning. In this case, the man tried to contextualize her identity within the bounds of the US. What Michelle realized was that it was possible to move across racial categories depending on one's social location—even just relocating your body across town and into a black neighborhood. The moment was memorable because it changed how she understood herself in the world. She came into consciousness about her own racial ambiguity.

Michelle jokes with Daysi and I about how illogical racial constructs are, “Whatever part of the world I go to I am going saying no, I have a white ancestor so I am white...because people here say this.” We all laugh at the thought of this truth.

“You are white because you have a great-grandfather, or great-great-grandfather who is white. Spanish or German...They say that here,” adds Daysi. “Imagine me going to Finland and saying ‘I’m White!’” she says. We had a good laugh about what we know to be true about the how race does and does not work, each of us understanding its instability because of our experiences of racial ambiguity across national borders.

Michelle understands the cultural influence, since the 1980s, of New York City and hip hop music having informed how Dominicans in the *barrios* see themselves as black—“black” meaning African American. They identify with the marginalization of African Americans, she explains. “This you can see with the boys in the *barrios*, they began to assimilate themselves as black...of course, not the same black as the Haitian, but they, too, in the barrio, began to assimilate like a group of people that aren’t white.” As she describes it, the poverty of the barrios of Santo Domingo “blackens” Dominicans. Here again it becomes clear that in a world in which the majority of people are of African descent the term “black” gets used in numerous different ways, with modifiers that contribute to the underlying narrative of what it signifies.

“Ultimately, we are never going to assimilate as black people,” Michelle concedes. “Maybe not white, but not black...Like in my poem, ‘*Como indios, no indigena*’...here there are so many *indios* because there are no blacks,” says Michelle, frustrated. She is openly critical of Dominican desires to distance themselves from blackness. While she enjoys privilege because of her color and her class, she is also familiar with outsider status.

Daysi offers, “It is strange that we haven’t revolutionalized this,” suggesting that these concepts of race in the DR have not moved forward, as if there is a clear, linear direction for ideological change, one that looks like other development projects in the country. She has her own stories and experiences of being racially misinterpreted. She is a Dominican of Iranian descent, with light skin and long, thick brown hair that falls nearly straight down her back. “Before people thought I was Spanish. Now people think I am from the Orient, my father is from the Orient. Before, it was Spanish or Arab....Spanish or Turkish. Never placed...but now the people are assimilating more things, more culture.” She says someone finally identified her as being of Iranian descent because they actually knew of Iran and therefore they could conceive of her identity.

The two friends also share a laugh about the culture of primary school in the Dominican Republic in which it is always the fairest students who are selected by teachers to play the lead roles in school performances. “And that was me,” Daysi tells us. She was the one always chosen, always preferred.

“You are white,” Michelle says to Daysi in an accusatory tone, teasing her. Yet Daysi, too, has traveled abroad and had experiences in which she definitely was not white. Like other middle class Dominican youth, she has been to Europe. In countries such as Holland, Belgium, and Germany, she quickly learned that she was no longer white. She tells us that it was in Spain where she experienced the most discrimination. According to Daysi, there are many women who travel there for work, who become domestic laborers. Employers want them to be attractive because they are “expected to use their sex appeal to advance themselves,” she says. Thus, as a Dominican woman in that context, she too was viewed in racialized and gendered terms, as part of a narrative of Caribbean emigration to Europe that would consider her no more than a commodity.

The challenges of life in the Dominican Republic are integral to who the people are, as Michelle describes it. There is such a hierarchical culture, she says, that people are submissive, unwilling to talk back to a boss. Obviously, doing so has real, negative consequences, therefore complaining happens behind people’s backs. For Michelle this is frustrating because, as she says, “I am not a person that can keep silent.” And clearly, she has never been. She describes herself in school and in work as arriving on time and getting her work done. She is serious about the tasks at hand.

“Everyone knows that *no soy facil* [I am not an easy person].” Her uncharacteristically direct personality has made her feel that she is far outside of Dominican culture; she has many frustrations with the contradictions of her identity as Dominican.

“I am a person who is very direct,” Michelle tells me and this has certainly been my experience with her.

“Is this very Dominican?” I ask.

“—No, it’s very my grandmother,” she responds with quick wit. “I don’t like to talk crap...Dominicans like to talk just to talk,” she says.

I ask the two friends, digging into the broad generalizations, “And this thing about the strength of the *mujer dominicana*, it’s a way of being in the world? Of getting what you want?”

Daysi said, “Yes, this is very powerful.”

“Honestly, I think that yes,” said Michelle, “*la mujer dominicana* has a plus and I don’t know if it’s just the *dominicana*, that’s all I know. She is a person...very strong. I can’t consider...all the people that I have known to be *luchadoras* [fighters] and they are very strong...I think it’s a question of survival. We are in a society *machista*. But here, *las mujeres se comen en cualquier tiguere* [the women take up with whatever guy].” Women’s options are limited.

It’s about survival, these two young women explain. Daysi educates me about the reality of trying to get work in an art gallery in the DR, “You have to know people...and you have to be pretty.” As a woman, to get your work in a gallery, you have to sleep with the owner of the gallery, she tells me. At 19, she is well aware of the obstacles she faces to advancing herself in Dominican society. Like Michelle, she comes from a matriarchal household in which the women do not rely on men for support.

Daysi lays out the predicament that poor Dominican women are in: “I am young, I want a career, I have to marry *con capo* [a drug dealer]... Women now look for men who have a *yipeta* (an SUV), not just men who can afford to buy them a stove and a washing machine the way it was in the past.” As Daysi explains it, they are happy to have a man who can pay for everything for them. Because, what they quickly learn is that no matter how much a woman studies, when she is no longer pretty the boss will no longer want

her. Just as unskilled labor is expendable in this context, pretty young women are ubiquitous—particularly since so many are trying to be socially relevant in this way in order that they might gain social access.

“I have friends who say, ‘I am *fulano*’s [so and so’s] woman,” Daysi says, horrified by the way that the women describe themselves as little more than men’s accessories. Yet they soon come to realize, “I’m intelligent, but I’m a woman,” and so they focus on getting married in order to have economic security. “I don’t know if you have noticed,” she asks me, “they start going to the salon...”

I have noticed.

“They reach an age of 20-25 at which they say ‘okay, I’m not going to make myself beautiful. I’m going to study. Now I have to marry, and I have to have two boys to keep a man tied to me so that he knows that if he divorces me he still has to support his kids.’” The scenario was well scripted in Daysi’s head; Michelle corroborated her story.

“They have kids so that they have the money secure,” says Michelle, matter-of-factly. The two women talked about women they know—and those they imagine—in ways that distance themselves from these same cultural values and experiences. Because of their racialized, classed, gendered experiences and their perceptions of the world, which have been influenced by their education, class privilege and their travels abroad, Daysi and Michelle are unable to imagine sharing these same cultural values.

Nevertheless, they understand what it means to live within the culture of the DR and why these women make the choices that they do. No woman is exempt from the overlapping structures of power that limit how men perceive her because of her gender, race and class. Daysi says something in our interview, which I had heard elsewhere in the DR, about how Dominican women are already thought of as old and less attractive by the time they reach the age of twenty. Of course, as my research reflects, it is women over this age who are better educated or have obtained greater life experience. They are thus more likely to recognize and critique their own precarious position as women in Dominican society—or in their personal relationships with men. Furthermore, Dominican women are encouraged by their families to have children no later than the age of 25, which very often slows down or completely diverts any educational plans they might have had.

Michelle: Black Caribeña I Am

*Negra Caribeña
por Michelle Ricardo*

*En la Isla se práctica
Una cultura de idiosincrasia colonizada.
Pelo largo, pelo lacio, pelo blanco.
Que se Metan el Pelo por el...Miedo.
Miedo de asumir que de negros tenemos tanto.*

*--- ¿Negra? ¿Tu? ¿Y quien ha dicho? Si tú eres
indiecita caribeña.
Que de negra, nada más la greña. Y si a caso.
Porque en verdad, tus moños no son tan malos.*

*Entonces, me ponen una "I" en el tipo de piel en
la cédula.
Porque en este país el indigenismo se limito a una
letra, a ese color sacro.
Que expiaba al demonio africano.
¿¡Ofrécome y que grosería es esa!?*

*¿India Yo?
Yo no.
Y no me malinterpreten.
Que si yo fuese la nieta de Enriquillo, sobrina de
Caonabo o la hija de
Guacanagarix. Yo fuese la primera que lo
estuviese diciendo MUY ORGULLOSA.
Pero aquí, el ser indio ahora mismo
es sinónimo de muchas otras cosas.*

*A los indios de ahora lo que más les gusta asumir
es la postura de los esclavos.
del teléfono, de la radio, de la tele, del dinero, de
los carros, de las jevas, de los tenis, de la droga y
de decir que tenían un antepasado que era
blanco.*

*Es por eso que si de negra nada más mi greña.
Me quedo con la greña.
Porque es que yo...
Yo.*

*Negra Caribeña soy.
Negra Caribeña soy.*

Negra Caribeña

by Michelle Ricardo

On the island they practice
A culture of colonized idiosyncrasy.
Long hair, straight hair, white hair.
They get in the hair through... Fear.
Fear of assuming that we have too much blackness.

--- ¿Black? You? And who told you that? If you are
a little indian *caribeña*.
What blackness, nothing more than the mop of hair. And just in case.
Because in truth your hair ain't that bad.

Therefore, the put an "I" for me under type of skin on
the identity card.
Because in this country *indigenismo* is limited to
a letter, for this sacred color
That atoned for the damn African.
¿ Ofrécome and what rudeness is that!?

India ¿Me?
Not me.
And do not get me wrong.
Even if I was the granddaughter of Enriquillo, niece of
Caonabo or the daughter of Guacanagarix. I would be the first
that would be saying so VERY PROUD.
But here, to be *indio* right now
is synonymous with many other things.

To the *indios* of the present what they like most is to assume
The position of slaves.
of the telephone, of the radio, of the TV, of money, of cars,
of the pimps, of the girls, of the tennis shoes, of drugs and
saying they had an ancestor who was
white.

It's because of this that nothing more than my afro is black.
I'll keep my afro.
Because it is me...
ME.

Black Caribbean I am.
Black Caribbean I am.

Directing her energy into her writing, into her poetry, Michelle tells me, has been about coming to terms with some of these internal conflicts about identity, and her place in the world. The first time we meet, she is standing out on the street in front of a local bohemian bar. She had just finished a performance of her poem “*Negra Caribeña*.” She was wearing a t-shirt that had a map of the Dominican Republic with the collar cut to fall over her shoulder. Earlier that evening, readying for her performance, I saw her bent over the bar with a thick black sharpie drawing in the other half of the island of Hispaniola; Haiti had not been included on the map on her shirt. Afterwards, we ran into each other in different circles until I finally requested an interview with her. Eventually, we connected on Facebook where the site quickly confirmed for us the friends and acquaintances we held in common. Online, I could see a different way that she represented herself. I would later see her perform her poem a second time before it went up on YouTube as an audio track. Michelle’s work critiques the racial hierarchy in Santo Domingo that is alive and well, even as the roots of it continue to be buried by new narrations of Dominican identity emerging from elite circles.¹ Like many young women I know in Santo Domingo, Michelle is frustrated by daily injustices living in the DR; things like a disregard for human life or lack of care or respect for the natural environment increase under the economic calculations of neoliberalism. Michelle is someone who chooses regularly to talk back.

In her live performances of the poem *Negra Caribeña*, Michelle verbalizes her displeasure with the Dominican tradition of obfuscating blackness. She speaks in fast, syncopated bursts, putting an emphasis on every third or fourth word, imitating the sounds of Dominican Spanish and animating her slam by using her hands, posturing, taking up space. True to the social moment, and this young poet’s level of transnational engagement, Michelle also produced *Negra Caribeña* as an audio track on YouTube. There, it is set to the hippest of jazz tones. On YouTube, you also see an image—like album cover art—with Michelle’s name in large white stenciled letters, slanting above

¹ Murray and Ortiz’s book, *Pelo Bueno Pelo Malo* (Santo Domingo: Fundomicro, 2011) is an excellent example of this in that it argues that Dominican women’s investment in straightening their hair has nothing to do with living within a white supremacist culture in which white bodies have a greater value but rather it takes women’s explanation of wanting to be “beautiful” at face value.

trees and toward a blue sky; the name of the song is written in smaller black letters below.²

The image captures the full statue of Christopher Columbus, with the Cathedral of Santa Maria, known as the first church in the Americas hidden behind him. Columbus stands proudly immortalized in bronze, his left hand outstretched, like so many statues throughout Santo Domingo. At Columbus' feet, however, climbing up the concrete base of statue is another bronze, that of a scantily clad Taíno woman. Michelle sits to the far left on the steps of this monument. It must be early morning because there is no one in sight. She is a small, almost indiscernible figure, in the frame; her hair is cut short. The photograph reflects a moment of contemplation, while the sound of her voice that emerges from the track is vibrant and certain.

With *Negra Caribeña*, Michelle angrily responds to what she sees as a racial ideology specific to the peculiarities of Dominican culture. Michelle writes of the “*idiosyncrasia*” that Dominicans “practice,” as if it were a local religion, not representative of self-love but rather the impact of colonization. Colonization by the Spanish and the imposition of numerous other nations has left the minds and cultural beliefs of generations of Dominicans inscribed with a legacy specific to the island, one that values and rejects particular bodies accordingly. For Michelle, this marker of difference is hair. She does not have an experience of being denied entrance, access or opportunity, because of her skin color or her accent. At the end of the second stanza, she makes reference to the many ways that Dominicans talk about difference, and make exceptions for those that they want to include: “in truth, your hair is not so bad.” In the context of the DR, these aspects of the body are changeable. Dominicans invest in hair, and according to Michelle they do so out of fear. A fear of blackness.

In the written version of the poem, a third stanza conveys here resentment toward the state-sanctioned categorization of Dominicans. The issue of the ID card is one that matters to people. Numerous friends, colleagues, and acquaintances have brought up this state sanctioned racial categorization of Dominican citizen for the purpose of identification. Some have even pulled out their ID to show me how they have been misidentified. Michelle defiantly rejects the label “*indio*” put on her by others because

² The video is a production of the transnational hip hop group Quilombo Arte.

her skin is not “too dark,” and her hair “isn’t so bad.” She clarifies for her audience that this rejection is not about a shame in having indigenous roots, but recognizing that this is not in fact what being *indio* means. Although she leaves the stanza off of the version for YouTube, she refers to the mark on her national ID card, which categorizes her as *indio*, presumably erasing the black heritage that most Dominicans have. Today, to Michelle, claiming “*indio*” means being invested in the superficial, and becoming a slave to a consumer lifestyle (not unlike the one represented in the ERA mural). With her slam poetry, she conjures up an image of *indios* as re-enslaved by present technologies—the instant gratification of drugs, money and television. She does not include the Blackberry phone or Facebook on this list of vices that keep Dominicans trapped. Perhaps she is holding herself outside of the net she casts so wide with her writing.

The term “*Negra Caribeña*” becomes a chorus, offering an interlude after the first three stanzas of the audio version. While Michelle’s point is about blackness and the many ways in which most Dominicans actively elide their affiliations with it (“to say they have an ancestor who was white”) her articulation of the experience of being black can go no further than a discussion of hair texture and what it means to feign indigeneity. Michelle’s experiences of otherness are rooted in her hair and with that her unwillingness to conform. Her experiences with the social restrictions of Dominican society have had a profound impact on her identity. At the end of the poem Michelle writes “I will keep my [mop of hair],” using the common term *greña*. It is a political issue, an issue of identity and exclusion or inclusion.

Michelle’s video version of the poem garners a few responses on YouTube, including one viewer who posts this in Spanish: “*Muy chulo* [Very cool], but I think that ‘*la isla*’ still isn’t totally ready for the profundity of this writing. I think that’s why Rita Indiana left. But keep at it[,] if it is not there it will be here :))” The comment reiterates the challenges of living within Dominican society and suggests the assumptions that are made by those on the outside: Dominicans on the island are stuck in the past. In fact, they are stuck in an extremely patriarchal present. The commentator reassures Michelle directly that she should keep expressing her convictions through her art and she should rest assured that if she is not successful there on the island, “it” (her success) can and will

be “here”—where the commentator is—in diaspora.³ In this instance, the commentator is located in Spain.⁴ The YouTube commentator evokes Rita Indiana as a contemporary of Michelle (though seven or eight years older), as an example of someone who did leave in order to escape the heteropatriarchal conservative culture of the island. A constant theme for many in the DR is that they have been left behind. Life beyond the boundaries of the island is understood as being more liberal-minded about gender roles and sex and race. It is imagined as a safe place from which to be critical of the DR—even as those in diaspora no longer know what life back “home” is actually like. Many of my interviewees have said that they intend to stay and do what they can to make Dominican society better.

Conclusion: Misinterpretations

As my conversations with Inez, Albania, Paloma, Yessica, Ambar, Daysi and Michelle convey, Dominican women’s transnational identities are produced in and through dialogues between Dominican cultural norms within and outside of the DR. Those experiences may or may not happen through travel, as Ambar suggests. Familiarity with cultures outside of the DR occurs through *telenovelas*, US television shows and movies, and contact with friends and family who live abroad, if not local news that looks North. Young people come to an understanding of other ways of life in which their racialized, gendered, or even queered bodies are perceived differently, with different social expectations placed upon them, for better or worse. The interviews also reflect how Dominican society is rapidly changing under neoliberal development. Narratives of Dominican cultural identity are not fixed and young people walk around well aware of the ongoing shifts, even if these changes are not reflected in the cultural histories that they are taught in school or are that to which those of us located outside of the DR are exposed.

Dominican women navigate a world in which color and hair are constantly remarked upon. Their identities are imbedded in experiences of racial mixed-ness and racial ambiguity. Because of this, individual Dominican women very often have

³ This reflects my translation (with assistance from Dominican friends) of the following comment made online: *“Muy chulo, pero creo que “la isla” aún no está del todo preparada para la profundidad de esta letra. Creo que por eso se fue Rita Indiana. Pero sigue adelante que si no es allá será por aquí :)”*[sic]

⁴ As indicated by the website, YouTube.

experiences of moving in and out of positions of power and thus they develop unique views of these structures and of race and gender. This sharply contrasts the experience of North American whiteness. A key component of racial privilege lies in the fact that most white youth live unaware of the power that they hold within structural racism.

Experiences with the blurred lines of race, and the pressure of Dominican gender roles come across in the majority of the interviews represented above. What my research then demonstrates are the intricate *ways* that race and color matter in the lives of women in contemporary Santo Domingo. The ability to transform one's identity, whether that means acting more "feminine" while moving closer to a type of *hispanidad* that celebrates whiteness, where straightened hair and lightened skin is significantly rewarded.⁵ Rewards may come in the form of male attention, such as the chance to be claimed as the personal belonging of an influential man, which, within a patriarchal structure carries an undeniable value. Access to privileged spaces or permission to advance to degree may also be a "reward" for altering one's appearance to conform. Michelle has the option of straightening her hair in order to access the privileges of Dominican whiteness, but she has never done so. In contrast, Yessica chemically relaxes her hair and dresses herself in "sensual" ways in order to take on some of the femininity that her own peers see her as lacking because of her color and stature. Only with straight hair and a particular socially valued appearance, might she be able to get the type of front desk job in tourism that she desires.

Just as I find myself misinterpreted in the DR because of my skin color, light-skinned women like Michelle, who are Dominican-born and raised, do not conform to social expectations. Their bodies marked in various ways by difference, lead others to misidentify them as foreign. Physical transformation—the ability to move in and out of racial and gender categories—is a part of life for the Dominican women with whom I spoke. Daysi travels abroad to Europe where because of her nationality and her coloring she is hypersexualized. She is not simply viewed as "black" in that context because her mixed racial heritage would determine her as such. Rather she carries with her a Dominican national identity and a narrative of Dominican immigration that intersects her

⁵ In Santo Domingo, one can find a wide selection of skin "brighteners" (bleaches) positioned beside the products used for straightening hair on store shelves.

racial and gender identity. Unlike the experience of monoracial and non-ambiguously raced immigrants, variables based on context could allow her to “assimilate” into different European countries differently. Because immigration is so much about the movement of labor, racially ambiguous bodies have more options for such movement; they change shape and meaning within a global capitalist culture. At the same time, throughout her childhood in the DR, Daysi’s teachers recognized her as white and therefore gave her preferential treatment in front of her darker-skinned peers.

Decades ago, filmmaker and scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha wrote extensively about transnational identity in ways that remain invaluable to the exploration of Dominican women’s identities and the process of self-construction at this transnational cultural moment. In her 1988 essay, “Not You/Like You: Post-colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference,” she articulates the complex relationship between our subconscious constructions of essentialized identity (what I refer to in this study as “stereotypes”) and existing structures of power in the transnational world. Her work is significant to our understanding of the ways that Dominican women wrestle with essentializing ideologies:

Identity as understood in the context of a certain ideology of dominance has long been a notion that relies on the concept of an essential, authentic core that remains hidden to one's consciousness and that requires the elimination of all that is considered foreign or not true to the self, that is to say, non-I, other. In such a concept the other is almost unavoidably either opposed to the self or submitted to the self's dominance. It is always condemned to remain its shadow while attempting at being its equal. Identity, thus understood, supposes that a clear dividing line can be made between I and not-I, he and she; between depth and surface, or vertical and horizontal identity; between us here and them over there. The further one moves from the core the less likely one is thought to be capable of fulfilling one's role as the real self, the real Black, Indian or Asian, the real woman.

According to Trinh, to talk about identity *requires* then a process of essentializing the individual in order to make meaning, even though a closer look invariably reveals identities to be far more nuanced and complex. Dominican women in Santo Domingo

who are broadly exposed to cultures from outside of the DR, consequently move away from a presumed “core” identity and then struggle to be recognized as truly “Dominican.”

Trinh tells us, “The search for an identity is, therefore, usually a search for that lost, pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic self, often situated within a process of elimination of all that is considered other, superfluous, fake, corrupted, or Westernized.”⁶ However, is impossible to separate Dominican women’s identities in Santo Domingo today from that which is consider “Western,” because of a popular desire among Dominicans to assimilate into Dominican culture so much of what comes from abroad. In reality, a renewed quest for that which is “authentic” in Dominican culture begins each time a tourist touches down on the island. On the other hand, it is worth recognizing that what is “fake,” in terms of race, gender and culture, is often actively engaged by Dominican women in order to meet the desired expectations of tourists to the Caribbean, for the purpose of access, privilege and survival in this particular context. These interviews have revealed some of the ways Dominican women come into an understanding of themselves amidst transnational currents that would prefer Dominican women’s identities to be simply defined.⁷

How Dominican women in Santo Domingo present themselves, and how they are viewed by others, is determined through a constant engagement with a transnational culture of images, as discussed in Chapter 2 and further explored in Chapter 4. Visual discourse about race, class, gender and sexuality in the DR relies on an assumed understanding of diverse signifiers. For example, as Inez brings up, Dominican little girls’ imitation of adult women’s dress is understood as sexually provocative and read as sexually promiscuous. Media producers sway public opinion but take no responsibility for their influence on social behaviors, Inez points out. Instead, in the tradition of American individualism and the neoliberal policies of the present moment, they put all responsibility on the individual. Even Inez and Albania seem to suggest that mothers are to blame for dressing their little girls this way because it as dangerous behavior in that it presumably signifies little girls’ sexual availability to men. Of course, it is also classed

⁶Trinh.

⁷ See Krista A. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). Hazel Carby on the Caribbean?

behavior in that middle and upper class woman have different cultural expectations for what little girls should wear, which may reflect what they are themselves wearing as related to their own social options. These visually-determined “logics” about race and gender, often informed by ideological machines of propaganda such as the highly visual political campaigns, reinforce a patriarchal structure that benefits a select few. Education about these structures of power and greater awareness about one’s own relationship to dominant social expectations does not necessarily change personal preference. Nor does it alter the reality of an economy in which women and men may be of greater value as objects of sexual desire than as producers of ideas or contributors to a larger society.

Transformations in information technology have brought greater access to transnational media and a “twenty-four-seven” contact with worlds beyond the DR. Everything from heavy metal music to Goth aesthetics is available via the internet. Access to diverse knowledge is available to this next generation of Dominicans even when unavailable within the country. Nevertheless, traditional discourses around national identity are still so pervasive that, for the Dominican women I interviewed, the social identity for Dominican women is constitutes a kind of “common sense”: a reservoir of knowledge that young women can readily draw from as they envisage the “Dominican woman” trope and her associated stereotypes. The women I interviewed illuminate both the realities and the contradictions of their lives, sharing experiences that soon became a part of my own “common sense” as I heard variations on the same theme from many different interviewees.

Under neoliberalism, difference and individualism is newly valued in DR where conformity previously ruled. Some of the women I interviewed pointed to the concept of “*Consumismo*” in the DR, which refers to the excessive consumption and selfishness that exists in Dominican culture today and is associated with a desire for things from outside. True to ever-adapting Dominican vocabulary, the term is a play on words that reads both as the term “consumerism,” and as the selfishness that a product-oriented lifestyle tends to signify; spoken differently, the word conveys the phrase “*con su mismo*” which is to say, “with yourself.” Simultaneously, the word critiques increasing levels of consumption while it points out the shift from a collectivist culture to one that is more individualistic.

The following chapter explores the significance of the Dominican woman's body as a racially ambiguous transnational product that responds to a culture of neoliberalism that includes excessive consumerism, individualism, and a desire for the ethnic Other. I use a black cultural studies lens to read how Dominican women's bodies are valued on racial and economic terms via transnational visual discourse. With the photographs and performances of Hollywood actress Zoe Saldña, I consider the ways her racial ambiguity as a Dominican woman is employed for a global market and what this means in relationship to representations of blackness and Latinidad in popular media.

Chapter 3: Brown Looks: Zoe Saldaña as Ethnically Ambiguous Dominican Sex Object

The body in embodied cultural memory is specific, pivotal, and subject to change.
Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*

When I go to the D.R., the press in Santo Domingo always asks, “¿*Qué te consideras, dominicana o americana?* [What do you consider yourself, Dominican or American?]” I don’t understand it, and it’s the same people asking the same question. So I say, time and time again, “*Yo soy una mujer negra* [I am a black woman]”
“*Oh, no, tú eres trigueña* [Oh no, you are ‘wheaten-colored’]”
I’m like, “No! Let’s get it straight, *yo soy una mujer negra* [I am a black woman].”
Zoe Saldaña, as quoted widely across the Internet

Yo Soy Una Mujer Negra

Hollywood actress Zoe Saldaña has become part of a new global visual discourse about race and gender. In the following chapter, I read representations of Saldaña’s body as a text that invites us to engage numerous theoretical questions regarding representations of Afro-Latinas in popular media, and more specifically Dominican women. I examine Saldaña’s representations of race, gender and nationality in advertisements, films, websites, music videos, newspaper articles, as well as the award shows and red carpet appearances that young Dominican women in Santo Domingo are witness to with great regularity. Saldaña is an excellent subject of study because her celebrity means that her image is reproduced and widely circulated as part of a political economy. With her starring role in the blockbuster *Avatar* (2009) and four other films out in 2010—as well as advertising contracts with Avon and Calvin Klein—Saldaña’s star has fast been on the rise. As Angharad N. Valdivia writes, in her essay on “The Gendered Face of Latinidad,” “it is Latinas who are stereo typically amenable in the marketplace to the production of a commodified ethnic sexuality.”¹ As a text, she informs us about dominant cultural

¹ Valdivia.

stereotypes, social constructions of race and gender, and how these ideologies travel.² I use Saldaña to explore the ways that young Dominican women, such as those like those I have interviewed for this larger study, are perceived as commodities across a transnational culture between the US and the DR.

Previously performing in mostly low budget or independent films and low-brow comedies—she has increasingly turned up in summer action films.³ In her debut film, *Center Stage* (2000), Saldaña plays ballet dancer Eva Rodriguez and her identity is ambiguously “New York Latina.” Like Coco in the 1980s arts school film *Fame*, her performance is a nod to the presence of Afro-Latinos in New York, yet little is ever revealed about the specifics of her ethnic background. She fits well into Mary C. Beltrán’s expert reading of the “Latin Wave” of ethnically ambiguous stars in Hollywood as of late.⁴ However, Saldaña’s Afro-Latinidad talks back to other representations of Latinas in mainstream films, frequently performed by actresses of Puerto Rican descent who are not identified with blackness (e.g. actress Rosie Perez of the 80s and singer/actress Jennifer Lopez in the 1990s). Saldaña is Puerto Rican too, but her father was Dominican and she spent years growing up in the DR. Thus, the self-identified “Jersey girl,” is claimed fiercely by Dominican fans when she touches down in Santo Domingo. Many of these fans expect her to embrace the “*trigueñita* [wheaten-colored]” Dominican identity that her class status implies.⁵

In Hollywood films, advertising, and magazine articles, Saldaña regularly portrays an African American woman and has been identified by most US audiences as such. She has held roles in many popular “Black films” (categorized in this way for their predominantly African American cast and target audience). In 2002’s *Drumline*, she is the love interest for African American actor Nick Cannon and the two play college students at a fictional HBCU. In this context, Saldaña’s blackness is never contested; yet

² I am referring to Saldaña as “text” in the way that Richard Dyer has articulated, considering the dynamic life that a star’s image takes on and the relationship between an on and off-screen identity. See Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald. *Stars* (New York: BFI Publishing, 1998).

³ See Beltrán’s “*Más Macha: The New Latina Action Hero*” for an example of this with other Latina stars.

⁴ Beltrán, “Mixed Race in Latinowood: Latino Stardom and Ethnic Ambiguity in the Era of Dark Angels” in *Mixed Race Hollywood*, eds. Mary C. Beltrán and Camilla Fojas, (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 156.

⁵ “Trigueñita” is a color term used in the DR to mean only slightly brown, translating as “a little bit wheat-colored”.

in the last few years she has become increasingly outspoken about her Dominican identity although her film roles do not necessarily reflect this.⁶ To my knowledge, Saldaña is never referred to in popular media as “mixed race,” or asked to represent this category of identity.⁷ Nevertheless, because of the work that her malleable racial identity does in popular media and visual culture, I theorize her as such in the following chapter. The term “mixed race,” refers to a popular identity in the US that rose to prominence in the 1990s. It is framed by a body of literature that typically anthologizes the stories of mixed race individuals’ unique experiences of race and racial ambiguity.⁸ It also reflects a new process of racial identity formation in which people of color in the US who are not fully identifiable by one racial category alone can claim *all* of their heritages; often changing the script from one of marginalization for one’s difference to one of feeling special.⁹

Critical mixed race theory is vital for examining how Saldaña performs her racial identity as a globally recognized figure. By employing the term “mixed race,” which I chose to use here in lieu of “multiracial,” I do not intend to reify racial categories. Rather, I aim to demonstrate the ways that reading for mixed race can help us to better understand Dominican women’s identities and experiences. I do not see any value in applying US racial categories to the socio-cultural history of the DR. Nevertheless, this frame of analysis allows me to highlight some of what is most interesting in the case of Saldaña: she is at the head of a transnational stream of popular culture spanning two countries whose ideas about race have been historically divergent. Today, the US and the DR increasingly influence one another—and similarly fetishize mixed race bodies.

⁶ She plays Anamaria a brown-skinned pirate with no past (or future) in the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* film in 2003. In 2012 she plays the title character on a mission to kill, in the film *Colombiana*. She plays Dolores Vega in the film *The Terminal* in 2004 and that same year a Latina character on *Law and Order SVU*, which is set in New York City.

⁷ As a US-American, this is a new category with which she could be read. As a Latin American, she might be read through the language of *mestizaje* or as *mulata*. None of these identities is used, however (and the term *mulatta/o* in the US is offensive), she instead manages to switch from identity to identity for the big screen.

⁸ The emergence of “mixed” race as a viable identity term has been traced by some back to the West coast and the San Francisco Bay Area of the 1970s, where it first referenced mixed African American/European Americans. See Fundeburg, 31; See also Zack and Root.

⁹ Kimberley McClain DaCosta. *Making Multiracials: State, Family and Market in the Redrawing of the Color Line*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2007); Danzy Senna “The Mulatto Millennium” in *Mixed Race Studies: A Reader*. Ed. Jane Ihekwanigwe. (New York: Rutledge, 2004). 205-208; Williams, Kim M. *Mark One or More: Civil Rights in Multiracial America*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Jared Sexton. *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

Emerging from mass culture at this social moment, her ambiguous racial identity appeals to broad audiences and serves late capitalism particularly well. She has become an every woman for racially and culturally diverse viewers worldwide.¹⁰ Saldaña's image forces viewers to question consciously or unconsciously the presumed divisions between Latina and black. By "image" I refer to both the photographic and also the digitized moving image, which seem to freeze in time meaningful actions, people and places. With these images, the details of race—in a snapshot, advertising spread, amateur YouTube video, or uploaded film—are viewed repeatedly and constantly confirmed. Additionally, I point to the constructed self with the use of the term "image," and the compilation of symbols that assert identities and make racial meaning.¹¹ Saldaña's image occurs within existing visual and written discourse around the representation of mixed race bodies, Blackness and Dominican-ness (or *dominicanidad*). This discourse moves across cultural borders made highly permeable through globalization. Like many a mixed race body before her, Saldaña serves as a visualizable bridge between the two cultures which she spans, the US and the Dominican Republic.¹² Each culture projects onto her body its own race and gender ideologies.

As I will demonstrate, Saldaña's racially ambiguous body allows her to 1) serve as a bridge between two cultures; 2) perform a racial versatility as critical to narrative twists in film; 3) be marketed as a commodity that appeals to diverse audiences; 4) represent the type of popular mainstream "Brownness" that makes her more exotic and appealing as a sex object; and 5) represent a sort of exceptional, even supernatural Otherness. In analyzing Saldaña's facility for representing multiple racial identities at once—both on and off screen—I consider how structures of power tied to race, gender and sexuality inform transcultural ideologies about the value of Dominican women's bodies.

As the US comes to terms with a changing vision of itself as an increasingly racially-mixed society, Saldaña offers us one more safe and consumable "brown" body.

¹⁰ Beltrán, 158.

¹¹Yadira Perez, "Whiteness in Motion: Creation of a Whiter Dominican Nation," Introduction to Dissertation (2009).

¹² See the themes in *This Bridge Called My Back*, which precedes a contemporary US social identification with "mixed race."

In fact, she marks a trend well under way during what Danzy Senna has referred to as the “mulatto millennium.”¹³ It highlights the increasing fetishization of mixed race bodies, something Beltrán also identifies in her research on Latina actresses such as Jennifer Alba and Rosario Dawson, who just precede Saldaña’s rise to stardom. Beltrán writes, “Perhaps most important when it comes to the predominance of individuals of full or partial Latina/o descent among the new wave of multicultural figures in U.S. popular culture, some (though certainly not all) Latina/os possess an appearance similar to that of more clearly biracial or multiracial individuals in a U.S. racial context.”¹⁴ That is to say that the increased interest in the bodies of Latinas coincides with a rise in mixed race fetishization or vice versa. Not unrelated, during this first decade of the 21st century, notable representations of “Dominican Yorks” emerged within US popular culture and popular consciousness, as with the Pulitzer prize-winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) and the independent films *Raising Victor Vargas* (2002) and *Don’t Let Me Drown* (2009).¹⁵ In each of these narratives about life in diaspora, adolescent and adult Dominican women’s hypersexualized bodies are a major preoccupation for the men in these stories—and a key to their masculinity.¹⁶ Notably, as objects of sexual aggression and violence, the ability of these poor and working class girls and women to survive is part of what defines them as Dominican.

As bell hooks writes, “mass culture is the location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement of difference.”¹⁷ Saldaña meets the criteria for a pleasurable indulgence in difference as evident in obvious and nuanced ways in the advertising she has done and in her film roles. The heterosexual femininity Saldaña portrays on and off screen is highly popular as

¹³ Danzy Senna, “The Mulatto Millennium” in *Mixed Race Studies: A Reader*. Ed. Jane Ifekwunigwe (New York: Routledge, 2004), 205-208.

¹⁴ Beltrán, 158.

¹⁵ The documentary *Mad Hot Ballroom* (2005) was also well received and widely viewed. This is significant considering the small size of Dominican Republic relative to many other nations on the globe without US cultural representation—few films on West Indian youth at this same moment, for example.

¹⁶ The Otherness that the characters in these narratives signify as brown bodies in urban contexts is different from blackness and seems to celebrate an “ethnic” twist that is portrayed as sexy.

¹⁷ bell hooks, “Eating the Other” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), 22

a product.¹⁸ Just as capitalism has historically informed our beliefs about black bodies, it also shapes how we read and understand transnational, racially mixed women's bodies at this contemporary moment.¹⁹ If being Dominican means being *not* black (since according to Dominicans Haitians are black and African Americans are black) how does Saldaña successfully embrace blackness in the US yet identify herself as Dominican in the DR? When she loudly names herself "Latin,"²⁰ must she not then turn and defend her blackness because the two categories are viewed transnationally as mutually exclusive?²¹ How she is understood racially very much depends upon which film she is starring in, whom her viewers are, where they are located geographically, and where *she* is geographically positioned. Saldaña manages to be *both* black and Latina in what has long been an either/or world. In this way, she fits the many tropes of mixed race.²²

Typical of the Dominican women in Santo Domingo around which I have constructed this project, Saldaña has been educated and influenced by a transnational culture that draws on a diversity of sources to make up who she is, what she is about and how she defines herself. She is, like so many of us, what Mark Anthony Neal refers to as a "Cultural mulatto."²³ Born in New Jersey, during her early years she grew up in Queens.²⁴ Then, when she was just 10 years old, she and her sisters were sent by their young mother to attend boarding school in the DR. She lived there until age 17, before heading back to New York where she would study ballet and theater.

As Inez, one of my interviewees, defined for me quite clearly the difference between Dominicans on the island and Dominicans in diaspora: "Zoe Saldaña and Michelle Rodriguez, I don't consider *dominicanas*. They are products of the immigration

¹⁸ She does play a lesbian college student a vignette in the independent film *After Sex* (2007), but her uncertain exploration of her sexuality unsurprisingly seems to reflect a heterosexual male fantasy.

¹⁹ hooks, 31.

²⁰ On late-night with Jimmy Kimmel Saldaña refers to herself as being "Latin":

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XeSd9pzAMdE&feature=player_embedded

²¹ "Is She Even Black?" Clutch Magazine Online MONDAY SEP 6, 2010 – BY GENEVA S. THOMAS, accessed Sept 12, 2010; <http://clutchmagonline.com/lifeculture/feature/is-she-even-black/>

²² See Zack, Naomi ed. *American Mixed Race: The Culture of Microdiversity*. (Landham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995); also Jill Olumide, *Raiding the Gene Pool: The Social Construction of Mixed Race* (London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press).

²³ Mark Anthony Neal. *Soul Babies : Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 111.

²⁴ Nina Malkin, "From A to Zoe," *Essence Magazine*, April 2012, 114.

of people that, yes, are Dominicans, give birth, have children outside [of the country], that unfortunately are not Dominican because it may be that they speak Spanish and eat “*mangu con salami Induveca*” like Junot Díaz, Dominicans don’t do this. Why? Because of their education, their formation, their idiosyncrasy, their way of thinking, is already of the country where they were born and grew up.” Indeed it is this idiosyncrasy that I am often looking for in trying to write about Dominican identity. Superficial representations of Saldaña hardly reflect that.

Although the vast majority of Dominicans are of African descent, most do not identify themselves as black.²⁵ Over centuries, Dominican politicians and historians—often one and the same—have constructed a Dominican national identity that disavows a black identity. This is despite the fact that Dominican bodies are predominantly of African descent and thus come in every shade of brown. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon to hear brown-skinned Dominicans make prejudicial comments against “blacks,” positioning themselves outside of this much-maligned racial category. “*Negro*,” is the term used commonly to refer to Haitians in the DR. As one Dominican 27 year old in Santo Domingo explained, “Yes, we are of African descent, but we don’t see that as black.”²⁶

Many attribute a purported Dominican rejection of blackness to Dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, who violently ruled the country from 1930-1961. Among many other brutalities, he is known for ordering the 1937 murder of thousands of Haitians—and many dark-skinned Dominicans—living along the border of the two countries. During an era in which the US exported its own eugenicist scientific theories abroad and Europe was enduring the Nazi extermination of Jews, Trujillo indoctrinated Dominicans with a racial ideology through which they would see themselves as superior to and separate from Haitians living in the same island.²⁷ This particular racial project also involved

²⁵ Stephen Gregory. *The Devil Behind the Mirror: Globalization and Politics in the Dominican Republic*. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007); Candelario; Kimberly Eison Simmons. *Reconstructing Racial Identity and the African Past in the Dominican Republic*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009); See also Silvio Torres-Saillant’s “The Tribulations of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Racial Identity.”

²⁶ Interviewee #24, 12/11/2010, 24:16.

²⁷ Independence day celebrated each year is recognizing the separation from Haitian rule, rather than from Spanish colonial rule.

asserting Dominican claims to an indigenous ancestry, even though (as most educated Dominicans today are well aware) most indigenous people on Hispaniola were decimated by the Spanish soon after Columbus landed on the island.²⁸ The reality is that the racial lines drawn between Haitians and Dominicans on the small island of Hispaniola has relied on an ideological shoring up, instated through violence and frequently achieved through the circulation of myths and visual images that profess a marked visual difference between the two groups. Dominican nationalism has produced a border violently drawn on Haitian bodies and violently maintained, even as the construction and “modernization” of the Dominican city has relied heavily on Haitian labor. Spanish language also sets Dominicans apart from Haitians—and from African Americans.²⁹

Made in the DR

For hundreds of years, black and mixed race bodies have been used to sell products throughout the Americas, such as pancake syrup, rice, and bars of soap, and continue to do so.³⁰ Although in the US, they have become either less common, or less overt, racist representations of blackness in marketed goods in DR today, remain commonplace. One can buy a ceramic sponge holder shaped like a black “mammy” figure in gift shops in the tourist zone. It is also still common for Dominican parents to scare their children into submission with stories about Haitians coming to eat them in the night if they misbehave. Black bodies, whether referred to as cute and endearing, grotesquely distorted, or dangerous, are often dehumanized by Dominicans in ways that make them susceptible to gross abuses.³¹ There remains a cultural investment in recognizable difference that reduces black bodies to consumable goods.

When we read for “mixed race”—and in particular, racial ambiguity—we can see it employed all around us in popular media today. Thanks to online fan clubs and the

²⁸ Roberto Cassá, *Historia social y económica de la república dominicana* (Santo Domingo: Editora Alfa y Omega), 2003.

²⁹ Mary C. Waters, *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1999; Danticat writes about the pronunciation of Perijil as determining the division between Haitian and Dominican in her novel about the 1937 massacre, “Farming of the Bones”.

³⁰ Slave in a Box; Ethnic notions

³¹The Black figures in the forest the Cuban-made 2005 film *Vina Cuba* reflect this. Likewise, Dominican children were told to behave or they would be taken away (or eaten) by the Haitians and so they developed early fears of the Other.

racialized fantasies of mainstream filmmakers, beliefs about blackness, *Latinidad*, mixed race bodies, and Otherness, circulate the internet through taglines, sound bites, quotations, headlines, in videos and enduring still images. Much of this discourse today is attached to Saldaña's name and likeness. Images of Saldaña, in newspapers and on backlit bus stop advertisements can be seen all over Santo Domingo in 2010 and they determine her color as *not* black.

Saldaña conveys an aesthetic that global audiences are willing to embrace in terms of representations of blackness—a palatable, non-threatening blackness that generally conforms to a white mainstream beauty aesthetic (i.e. small and thin, with straight hair and what Dominicans identify as “European” features). Saldaña can be read as a more socially desirable “Brown”—an identity that I argue here has greater cache in transnational media today. As Ginetta Candelario finds in her own photo elicitation study of the aesthetic preferences of Dominican women at one New York salon, the most popular images of women were those that were racially mixed in appearance and neither white nor black. Women in headshots from the hairstyle magazines who looked “Hispanic” with straight hair and lighter skin than African Americans were selected to be the most attractive. And as Candelario demonstrates, while beliefs about physical appearance were very much tied to gender, “Hispanic looks for men, as for women, were those that indicated a degree of ‘mixture.’”³² This aesthetic of racial mixture has such great appeal that Saldaña's current on-screen value is estimated at \$132.3 million.³³

Like any other celebrity, Saldaña is marked by (and marketed with) the salient values of class, color, nationality, ethnicity, gender performance, and sexuality—these many details in varied combination allow her to cross racial boundaries. Yet Saldaña's unique *difference* seems to make her more appealing to the broad audiences inundated with her image. Saldaña's difference matters to the politics of neoliberalism and its hierarchies. It is what makes her more attractive in a global market, and she is able to rise to the top, while contradicting the idea that others of her color could not. “Neoliberal politics must be *understood in relation to* coexisting, conflicting, shifting relations of

³² Ginetta E. B. Candelario. *Black Behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 244.

³³ Latina Magazine online 10/13/10 <http://www.latina.com/entertainment/celebrity/zoe-saldana-worth-1323-million-box-office>

power along multiple lenses of difference and hierarchy” (emphasis in the original), Lisa Duggan argues.³⁴ A neoliberal free market system, in which deregulation and privatization are the goal, advocates self-determination and embraces difference such as that of Saldaña. Neoliberalism thus ignores systemic racism, and effectively masks rampant social inequality and the privileges afforded those who are the right color—but not darker. It also excuses governments from the responsibility of addressing identity-based social divisions. These social divisions exist in part because particular bodies are calculated as goods.³⁵

“No, here she would not be African American,” laughs Lilith when I tell her about my research on Saldaña, “For us, those are the blacks...from Harlem.”³⁶ In Saldaña’s case, her celebrity status serves to lighten her relatively dark body, changing her racial and gendered meaning and significance in the context of the DR.³⁷ Lilith, describes Saldaña for me as being typically referred to in the DR as “*una india lava’ita*.”

“We say, ‘no, he’s an *indio lava’ito*’, she’s an *india lava’ita*, as if they were washed and are clean... as if the others were more or less dirty,” Lilith explains, showing with the language how Saldaña’s class status has whitened her. However, Lilith also defines the term as having smooth and unmarked skin, along with “*cabello, que se yo, más crespo*” [hair, I dunno, more kinky/coily].

“It is basically,” she scoffs, “like saying ‘*un indio blanco* [a white *indio*],” a concept that doesn’t make too much sense because of the contradictions of it, if the two racial categories are separate, yet references the stickiness of racial categories and how people use them. Lilith tells me, Saldaña is “not black, not white...” but rather she is “the common color of us [Dominicans].” As for these physical differences, Lilith is very clear, they are all *en la mente* [all in the head]: “We use the physical a lot to categorize the people...” she confirms, distancing herself from these Dominican cultural practices by imitating in falsetto voice some of the types of judgments made about color.

Furthermore, according to Lilith, Saldaña had meant little to Dominicans until very

³⁴ Lisa Duggan, 70.

³⁵ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics”.

³⁶ Interview, 9/14/2010

³⁷ Hunter, 114.

recently, when she got famous with *Avatar*. Because so often Dominicans have an unflagging pride for their culture and want to be represented by and claim Dominican celebrity—even if they have done none of the work to make that person what they are, Lilith tells me.

At five feet, seven inches tall, Saldaña is not of supermodel stature. Exposing her arms, and with a flattering neckline on her shimmery designer dress, she looks delicate, even a little wilted from the heat inside the *Teatro Nacional de Santo Domingo* when she walks on stage to accept her 2010 International Cassandra Award for best “*Artista Estacado en la Extranjero*” [Artist Based Abroad]. Also known as the “Dominican Oscars,” the televised Cassandra Awards celebrate all types of Dominican media celebrities, from internationally recognized musical groups like *Aventura* to local journalists. Saldaña beat out the nation’s beloved Juan Luis Guerra for this particular award (perhaps not because she is more popular than the Grammy-winning Guerra but because he was not in attendance). It is with Guerra’s “*La Llave de Mi Corazon*” (2007) that Saldaña proves herself to be “authentically Dominican,” by dancing Meringue as the love interest for this iconic artist’s music video. When she accepts her Cassandra, it is with smiles and a high-pitched Dominican Spanish mixed with English—a Spanglish commonly spoken and understood by the upper class Dominicans in attendance.³⁸ Such regular appearances in the DR and her constant mention in the Dominican periodicals throughout 2010 were significant enough to place Saldaña as a local celebrity. She could be found in photos in Dominican papers representing Avon, dressed in pink, with donations for Haitian earthquake victims in hand. In that instance, Saldaña is a source of national pride for Dominicans whose good will position themselves as a more benevolent society in relation to Haitians suffering across the border.³⁹ Saldaña’s philanthropy separates her by class and culture from the poverty of Haitian blackness and in representing her fellow Dominicans, she does so for them as well.⁴⁰ Yet, at the same cultural moment she appears

³⁸ Though there were a few complaints online after the event about her use of English as inappropriate.

³⁹ Dominicans were indeed the first international responders, though their aid work goes mostly unremarked upon globally.

⁴⁰ Black bodies in contrast are policed.

in provocative photos from US magazines. Her interview for *Glamour* in which she talks about her sexual appetite is translated for Dominican papers online and in print.⁴¹

Saldaña has only recently been referred to in popular media as Afro-Latina. Her relative lightness in color, delicate figure, and long flowing hair render her different from the more persistent stereotypes of black womanhood that tend to make black women's femininity unimaginable. In addition, Saldaña's ballerina figure is decidedly feminine; we see her on cover after cover looking coy, vibrant, and sexy. For *Elle*, *Latina*, *Essence*, *Women's Health*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and more, she portrays an identity in which she is often "passing," traversing borders—not between blackness and whiteness, as we are familiar with in the US, but between different types of Brownness. As Elaine Ginsberg writes, "[P]assing is about identities: their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties. Passing is also about the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing. Finally, passing is about specularity: the visible and the invisible, the seen and unseen."⁴² We can view Saldaña as black and we can view her as Latina but it is much harder to see her as both simultaneously—though we finally begin to when in a September 2011 cover for *Ebony* she is described as "Black, Latina, Fierce..."⁴³

Saldaña's rise to stardom is not about a newfound acceptance of black people by broad audiences. She is granted access only as a non-threatening female whose gender identity and sexual desirability serve a white male gaze/conquest narrative. Saldaña's current celebrity may be understood as the "false compliment" of racism rather than an example of racial progress.⁴⁴ She is desired primarily for the versatile meanings attributed to her racialized body that makes her something to be consumed and possessed. Her racial ambiguity and her transnational identity make her uniquely Other in ways that

⁴¹ <http://www.terra.com.co/mujer/articulo/html/mur4107-zoe-saldana-confiesa-abiertamente-que-no-puede-vivir-sin-sexo.htm>

⁴² Elaine. K. Ginsberg "Introduction: The Politics of Passing" from *Passing and the Fictions of identity*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 2.

⁴³ Cover, "There's Something about Zoë: Black, Latina, Fierce...Fall in Love with Hollywood's Freshest Star," *Ebony Magazine*, September 2011.

⁴⁴ Shohat, Ella and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994).

serve well neoliberal multiculturalism in which she is asked to assert her difference—she can do so in many different ways. As I show in what follows, Saldaña teaches us about how Dominican women’s bodies—black and Latina women’s bodies—are readily commodified for consumption in their transmission across the real and ideological borders between the US and the DR.⁴⁵

Virgin/Whore

In the context of the DR, “Dominican” as a cultural and national identity serves to displace Saldaña’s blackness. It disassociates her from the blackness of the characters she portrays in many of the Hollywood films in which she has had a starring role. In her only Dominican film thus far, *La maldición del padre Cardona* [The Curse of Father Cardona] (2005), Saldaña plays the frisky brown-skinned daughter of a white land-owning Dominican family. Her character, Flor, is chided by her parents for her gallivanting, but not otherwise treated differently than her siblings despite her darker color.⁴⁶ Yet Flor’s hypersexuality in this comedy—as she aggressively pursues the young white priest who has just arrived in town—is tied to cultural beliefs about women and color that are perpetuated across the Americas: white women are pure and delicate while black women are sexual and available.⁴⁷ This combination of purity/respectability and sexual prowess, the “virgin-whore” dichotomy is exceedingly significant in constructions of womanhood in Latin America and the Caribbean.

A history of colonialism, Catholicism and slavery in the Americas informs the dominant discourse about race, color, sex and sexuality, and has developed along with a rapidly changing present. Investments in the virgin/whore dichotomy play out in daily lives. Darker Dominican women are viewed as hypersexual and thus sexually attractive, as well as better dancers (and surely a long list of other things); myths about the special powers of Haitian women’s vaginas, for example are well-known and entrenched in Dominican culture. Contrapuntal scenes of rescue (the changing of a flat tire, the helping of an elderly woman across the street, the worship of one’s mother) and the sexual objectification of women (e.g. cat-calling, sexual violence and men’s relentless pursuit of

⁴⁵ David Harvey. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2007), 116.

⁴⁶ Apparently her identity and class privilege in the small village is established through whiteness of her parents.

⁴⁷ Margaret L. Hunter, *Race, Gender and the Politics of Skin Tone* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

younger and younger women) are an integral part of Dominican society. The bodies of women of color in the Caribbean are perceived as always already accessible to Dominican and European men while also in need of their protection. White European older men in the context of the DR are seen enjoying the company of brown and black Dominican and Haitian girls and women throughout the country. As visual cues about these women's bodies and their value are embedded in the Caribbean landscape, such images reinforce a narrative about the sexuality and accessibility of Dominican women.⁴⁸ Like blackness and Latinidad, virgin and whore are contradictory because the two are seen as mutually exclusive, even though they are tied together as mutually constitutive. Part of Saldaña's appeal is that she captures these many contradictory traits and they seem to become more desirable in combination.

Dressed in a pearly blue gown, with a narrow waist, Saldaña is displayed in Avon perfume ads throughout the DR as a near likeness of the Barbie's Princess Erika.⁴⁹ The visual cues that construct her image reinforce a dominant narrative about what femininity should look like—apparently as close to Barbie as possible—and how Dominican women might aim to achieve that in order to be valued. The notion of what is “feminine” in the Dominican Republic, as in the US, is tied to color and light-skinned bodies are identified as such; dark skin is seen as less feminine.⁵⁰ In the backlit Avon perfume advertisement along Santo Domingo streets at dusk, Saldaña looks child-like and almost emaciated. She contrasts the perfume ads of Jennifer Lopez in which Lopez dances Salsa as a full-bodied, “fiery Latina”.⁵¹ While Saldaña's image hangs over dirty streets, she appears like a “delicate flower,” her big head and a thin body in a shiny gown. The way the camera is angled down on her from above to capture her in a light blue princess dress, alters our perception of her. As the print ad for the perfume reads, “The pretty, intelligent and

⁴⁸ Alexander; Brennan; Valdivia.

⁴⁹ See Grewal for the transnational exploits of Barbie in *Transnational America*

⁵⁰ Brennan; This contrasts a white masculinity presented by Rita Indiana and Michelle Rodriguez. Dark-skinned Xiomara Fortuna should also be considered here.

⁵¹ Beltrán, 12.

talented rising Dominican actress is the perfect selection for the newest fragrance from Avon, which personifies the beauty and the elegance of a woman.”⁵²

On the red carpet at the 2010 Critics Choice Awards, Saldaña wears a white dress with a thick black ribbon around her narrow waist. She is in heels so steep that it seems as if she is standing *en pointe* in ballet toe shoes. In the endless photos available online, Saldaña is wearing fine, expensive dresses (or underwear) with plunging necklines and skirts short enough to show off her slender legs and high heels; she expertly performs femininity for popular consumption. Not surprisingly, all over the internet are comments by bloggers, gossip columnists and fans about how sexy she is; they run alongside and stream below photos of her in bikinis and lingerie, placing her on men’s “sexiest” and “top 10” or “top 100” lists. According to the actress, however, though she may look at ease “dolled-up” in this way, it is a performance for the camera. “Even though I don’t feel feminine, for some reason I still enjoy making films in which I am the only woman and I am the sexy one” she has said.⁵³ Her long black hair, big round eyes and thin body often make her doll-like in photographs—not unlike the multiethnic Bratz dolls that have been a cultural phenomenon among girls of color in just the last decade. While Saldaña looks similar in appearance to the actress Rosario Dawson (who is of Irish-Native American Cuban-Puerto Rican descent), she appears notably darker in color—though one long winter in New York can turn a mixed race person several shades lighter.⁵⁴ Saldaña has joked about how her own mother has confused her with actress Thandie Newton, seen on billboards for the movie *Crash* (2004). Newton, who is mixed race of black Zimbabwean and white British descent, is similarly brown in color, extremely thin, and feminine.

Images of Saldaña’s body, contrast the iconic workhorse-esque bodies of Dominican mothers who are viewed, like the “Mammy” caricature in African American history, as tireless laborers. The dominant image of the *luchadora*, or fighter, is memorably captured by one interviewee, a college student who described the typical Dominican woman as being “like Oprah.” Saldaña does not represent a big and tough

⁵² *Hoy*, May 10, 2010. <http://www.hoy.com.do/vivir/2010/5/10/325179/print>. Accessed 10/23/10

⁵³ <http://www.lavozlibre.com/noticias/ampliar/60127/zoe-saldana-una-maleducada-sexy>

⁵⁴ Beltrán argues that Dawson is darkened by her association with urban settings and the films in which she stars.

woman who struggles to overcome adversity. She makes it clear that she hardly labors in the home as most Dominican women do, has not given birth to children, and rarely looks sturdy enough to do such things.⁵⁵ A 2012 Latin American edition of *Women's Health* tries to remedy this by including with Saldaña's cover story "her" recipe for *estofado de frijoles rojos* [baked red beans].⁵⁶ The gesture points to a desire to see her as more domestic and references her Latina identity through food.⁵⁷ It is only quite recently that she has been depicted in films as a woman who could even fight back against a man's physical advances.⁵⁸ Saldaña's sex appeal is also markedly different from that of Dominican actress Michelle Rodriguez whose on and off- screen persona is tomboyish, masculine and aggressive in contrast. While Rodriguez looks uncomfortable in dresses, Saldaña is almost never photographed in pants. As one of the women I interviewed put it, "I consider the prototype [of a Dominican woman] to be between Zoe Saldaña and [she points to Michelle Rodriguez]... *La rudeza de Michelle y la belleza y la fisica de Zoe* [The coarseness of Michelle and the beauty and body type of Zoe]."

Customizable Commodity: Electronic Racial Ambiguity

In October of 2010, a black and white photograph of Zoe Saldaña, clad a black lacy bra and matching underwear, appears on a billboard along Hollywood's Sunset Strip.⁵⁹ The image, an advertisement for Calvin Klein's underwear line "Envy", has Saldaña looking seductively at the camera. "Calvin Klein" is writ large across her breasts. The billboard directs viewers to the website www.nothingtohide.com, with promises of seeing "Zoe uncovered" there. "It's very exciting for me to be associated with such an iconic, globally

⁵⁵ Increasingly, with the addition of Cataleya in the film *Columbiana* she is seen as more of a force to be reckoned with. But interviews make her out to be focused on fashion and much more of a princess.

⁵⁶ Robert Moritz, "Figura de acción: Como la actriz Zoë Saldana logró ese cuerpo tan sexy," *Women's Health* (Latinoamérica), February 2012, 14-17.

⁵⁷ However, the author confuses the effort by referring to the bean dish with a name foreign to the DR. The term "frijoles" is not used in the DR for beans, but rather the term "habichuelas."

⁵⁸ In the film *Death at a Funeral*, Owen Wilson's character throws himself on her and she barely wrestles away perched on high heels, explaining herself afterward to her fiancé who witness the event through the window and is upset with her about the incident. Yet in *The Losers*, the men are both titlited and fearful of her power. This is further accentuated in 2011's *Colombiana*.

⁵⁹ Zimbio.com. "Zoe Saldana on the Sunset Strip" (a series of 13 photographs of the billboard). <http://www.zimbio.com/pictures/qIHkKd4dmCw/Zoe+Saldana+Sunset+Strip/f621iio44tm/Zoe+Saldana> viewed 11/7/10.

recognized brand like Calvin Klein Underwear,” says Saldaña at a Germany press conference about the contract she had landed.⁶⁰ “CK” launched Saldaña’s on his Envy underwear campaign on the heels of Cuban American actress Eva Mendes. Along with the underwear line, Mendes once promoted Calvin Klein’s perfume, “Obsession” with a TV advertisement that was banned in the US for its nudity. With her body greased for the camera, Mendes modeled garter belts in her Calvin Klein ads. As one viewer described her, she looked like a “Latina Cindy Crawford.”⁶¹ Saldaña looks quite different, yet in black and white she is reduced to a color tone that does not necessarily denote blackness; her straightened hair falls similarly around her face. For all we know, she might be the same brown as Mendes. Less pin-up worthy than her predecessor because of her lack of curves, Saldaña pulls off a more wholesome sex object and her body is not oiled up for photographs.

Visiting the Calvin Klein underwear website—which is, like the billboard photos, set entirely in black and white—you find yourself in intimate “conversation” with Saldaña. There she is rolling around in her underwear, all over your computer screen. Just as Nakamura writes of J.Lo in her 1999 video “If You Had My Love,” Saldaña’s role in the online ads of Calvin Klein provide “multiple points of entry to the star, multiple ways of seeing and surveilling that are framed as exactly that, exploiting the interface as a visual culture that purveys an ideal and mutable female body of color, perpetually and restlessly shifting “just in time” to meet fickle audience preferences.”⁶² The slogan on CK’s opening webpage reads: “What you uncover is up to you.” Audiences can readily consume her difference in a virtual space where the focus is very much on individual pleasure. Calvin Klein has produced a series of short videos in which Saldaña speaks about love, intimacies about her childhood, and her body, while modeling different bras and panties. A strip of photographs of Saldaña runs vertically down the left hand side of the webpage. If, with your cursor, you scroll across each one, her image floats and bounces slightly, at the whim of your manipulation. In the second photo in the series,

⁶⁰ Carter, Geia. *Geaux Geia*. “Zoe Saldaña’s Sexy New Role: Calvin Klein Underwear Model.” July 8, 2010. <http://www.geauxgeia.com/zoe-saldana%E2%80%99s-sexy-new-role-calvin-klein-underwear-model/> visited 11/7/10.

⁶¹ Comment 2 on <http://stylenews.peoplestylewatch.com/2009/06/17/first-look-eva-mendess-steamy-calvin-klein-ads/> visited 11/7/10.

⁶² Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) 27.

white backlighting narrows her slender waist, and her long and narrow arms along the sides of her body make her resemble a plastic Barbie doll. With the all-white backdrop your sole focus as viewer is on Saldaña, the details of her body, and presumably the product she is modeling. It is, however, hard to imagine that this interactive website draws heterosexual women shopping for underwear. The videos are titled “zoe uncovers,” “zoe reveals,” and “zoe shares.” Each one takes up the entire browser window when you click on it. The footage of Saldaña is so up close it leaves her with her limbs mostly cut off the edges of the screen. She has her knees pulled up towards her body, filling the window with sharp angles and the length of her neck is highlighted. Often centered are her midsection and her breasts, which just manage to fill the bra she is wearing. Her eyes are encircled with a dark smoky makeup. At times, she is lying on her side with her head resting on a pillow; other times crawling toward you on all fours; or pensive with her fingertips at her mouth; or casually twirling her hair...like a child. Her movements are in rapid succession, as if she is squirming under your gaze. On the screen, she speaks directly to you, the viewer, responding to the scroll and click of your mouse. She tells you, with her hands up along her neck, “I’m a really good crier. You know what’s even better?” Then, looking straight at the camera (and presumably her male audience): “When a guy cries. It makes me melt.” And when she “reveals” that she learned how to ride a dirt bike at age nine, that her dad taught her, she is seemingly reduced to girlhood. Here the dichotomy of virgin/whore is played up for the presumed fantasies of her individualized (white?) male viewer.

The tenor of these short films, beyond pillow talk, is that of a phone-sex conversation moving toward a soft porn video.⁶³ “I have nothing to hide” she tells to you, “what do you want do know?” as if in a game of truth or dare. At the end of each of the short videos, Saldaña slides the bra straps off her shoulders ready to cast off the undergarment just as she turns away from the camera. The image goes blurry before she is exposed and “Calvin Klein” is stamped across the freeze frame. A picture of the bra that she was wearing in that particular short comes up at the center of the screen for immediate purchase. You can click on a button to replay this film, or go on to the next. A

⁶³ It made one of the undergraduates I shared the video with during a paper presentation uncomfortable to watch with the group.

shot of Saldaña fills the frame behind this smaller window, her mouth agape, her arm resting along her thigh. The viewer's imagination adds color and meaning to the body that we see depicted here in only black and white. Do we read her as Latina? As Afro-Latina? As black? Calling on the viewer to define her, as if she can only be defined in relation to another, Saldaña says as the virtual interaction comes to a close: "The more I share with you, the more I feel like me." The neoliberal effect—in which she is as customizable as a luxury automobile—lingers. As does the unspoken question of "what are you?" making it a quintessential mixed race moment. We are left to imagine that her racial ambiguity means that she herself does not know who she is--her true identity dependent on how we read her.⁶⁴ The more she tells us stories about herself, about her childhood and her desires, the more she can become who she truly is. In the fantasy, she requires the viewer to listen and observe in order for her to become her true self.

Sepia-toned? On the Cover

When Saldaña appeared on the cover of *Latina Magazine*, a contributor for a website that tracks fashion magazines effectively erased Saldaña's blackness and her Dominican-ness, stating: "American actress, Zoe Saldana[sic] graces the cover page of Latina Magazine for the month of June 2009. Zoe reminds us why Latin girls are so highly revered. Even when she looks fierce as a pirate, the idea of getting roughed up by her doesn't sound half bad."⁶⁵ Saldaña's story, headlined at the bottom right hand corner of the cover, is entitled "120 Reasons to love being Latina." Yet, by April of 2010 she graces the cover of *Essence Magazine* (which has historically targeted black Americans), wearing blue jeans and a gold lame tank top. Addressing the topics of "sex, love and power," her cover story refers to her as a "Hollywood screen gem" and asks questions of her with topics that go from "A to Zoe." The pictures accompanying the second page of the interview are a series of three boxes along the bottom of the page, with headshots of Saldaña in each one: first with her hands over her eyes, then over her ears, then over her mouth. It takes the shape of the familiar "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" trope, which is typically portrayed by monkeys. This series of photographs also echoes the line-

⁶⁴ As Nakamura suggests of new media, there is a "blurred line between producers and consumers," 18.

⁶⁵ Online at <http://www.magxone.com/>

up portraits used to scrutinize genetic indicators of race, or of pathology. What is it about this black woman's body that it inspires this particular sequence of images from photographer Yu Tsai? In the context of *Essence*, Saldaña is identifiably black in a way that fits into the aesthetic of the magazine today: It is overflowing with images of slender black women with light-colored skin and flowing hair, from its Macy's ad to headshots from hair care products being promoted therein.⁶⁶

Saldaña is similarly embedded in this "Brown aesthetic" in the April 2010 issue of Oprah's *O Magazine*.⁶⁷ Although at first glance the magazine appears to target middle class black audiences, Oprah's followers have long been known to consist of mainly of white middle class housewives. A short article beside a headshot of Saldaña joins a plethora of similar visuals. A full-page advertisement for Disney's "first black princess" Tiana, from *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) is just a few pages before a Revlon lipstick ad that employs the face of mixed race actress Halle Berry. In the same issue, a Cover Girl "Clean Makeup" ad features the brown-skinned Dominican TV and film actress Dania Ramirez.⁶⁸ In the advertisement, she is surrounded by dark-skinned children, a toddler clutched in her lap. The children's color—and hair in braids on the little girls close by—contrasts Ramirez's own. The children's bodies (including two little boys without shirts) are at the edges of the frame blurred and cut off. Ramirez, one might imagine, is off doing a service project in the DR or Haiti, where a pale pink building blurs into the background as well. Each of these images of young females in the magazine shares similar ideologies about consumable black women's bodies: in order to sell a product, black women must look delicate, "clean," and light-skinned. Generally a black woman *is* lighter-skinned if she is Creole from Louisiana, as with Tiana; if her mother is white, as with Halle; or if she is Dominican and more likely of mixed racial heritage, like both Dania and Zoe. Saldaña's embodiment of *Brownness* reflects a larger

⁶⁶ Malkin, "From A to Zoe," 110-15.

⁶⁷ Mamie Healey, "Books That Made a Difference to...Zoë Saldana: A wondrous loser and a hope-inducing convict are among the rebellious characters who bring joy to a star of *Death at a Funeral* and *Avatar*," April 2010, 131.

⁶⁸ She has a minor film career, playing in *XMen* and in several Music videos, including Wisin & Yandel's "Dime Que Te Pasa" (2008)

cultural shift in representations of non-white beauty and situates her in this popular category.

Representations of “Brown” bodies hardly do the kind of political work that Paul Gilroy once attributed to images of African Americans on record album art of the ‘70s and ‘80s. In that instance, he writes, “The black body, publicly displayed by the performer, becomes a privileged ‘racial’ sign. It makes explicit the hidden links between blacks and helps to ground an oppositional aesthetic constituted around our phenotypical difference from ‘white’ ideas of beauty and a concept of the body in motion which is the residue of our African cultures.”⁶⁹ Transnational brown bodies in 2010 signify the exceptional. Having literally integrated a white beauty aesthetic, they sit outside of blackness and present a beauty that looks far more like a sepia-toned whiteness. We see this type of racial versatility that Saldaña assumes at play for many other popular light-skinned black female celebrities, from Halle Berry to Rihanna to the now lightened images of Beyoncé.⁷⁰ The US version of the “mulatta” figure on the album covers and music videos features mixed race solo pop artists such as Mariah Carey, Alicia Keys, and Jordin Sparks. However, these women are no longer faced with the “tragedy” of not fitting in. Today, mixed race women embody a coveted gendered multiculturalism. This is visually notable in both Carey’s album covers and that of Alicia Keys.⁷¹ Close up headshots of the women with wavy hair framing their faces, particularly those in black and white illuminate the racial ambiguity of singers.

Notably, in *O Magazine*, Saldaña does not define herself as black. Rather, as she puts it, “When you grow up Latina, there are certain writers you just automatically know: it’s part of your genetic composition. Gabriel García Márquez, Pablo Neruda, and Federico García Lorca—I have a passion for these authors because they’re part of my culture. They’re a part of being Latina.”⁷² Remarkable is the way that an association of

⁶⁹ Paul Gilroy. *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (New York and London: Serpents Tail, 1993), 146.

⁷⁰ Beyoncé magazine images in blackface serve to lighten her and delineate between her identity and other blacks, just as Irish and other European immigrants to the US became whitened on the backs of African Americans by performing blackface. See also <http://madamenoire.com/137638/does-beyonces-loreal-campaign-offend-you/>, retrieved 3/3/12 ; Rihanna in 2012 performed at the Grammys as a blonde, reminiscent of early Madonna.

⁷¹ *As I Am*, Keyes third album, was released in 2007; Carey’s fifth album, *Day Dream*, was released in 1995.

⁷² *O Magazine*, April 2010, 12.

race and science emerges again with Saldaña's mention of a "genetic composition" that makes her Latina. It reinforces the false idea that race is hardwired into who people are, a biological fact, even as she mentions aspects of her cultural background that make her Latina. She does not, however, point to a culture and biology that make her *Afro-Latina*. To illustrate her point, she names famous Latin American male authors who are not of African descent, and the Spanish Lorca, rather than Dominican or Caribbean writers. Like the photographs in *Essence* that evoke images of the mimicry of primates, this type of discourse reflects how difficult it is to remove ourselves from dominant narratives of race; black bodies are overwhelmingly viewed as alien and worthy specimens for scientific observation.⁷³

Color, Exceptional Difference and AfroLatinidad in Galaxies Far, Far Away

Color matters. And, as Margaret L. Hunter writes, "Controlling images of women and men reflect power differences among racial/gender groups and often invoke skin color in the process."⁷⁴ Accordingly, billboards and posters with Saldaña's image have populated the urban landscape in many large cities over the last several years, inform viewers about the meaning of her racialized body in nuanced ways—even when Saldaña's image is in black and white, we read it looking for race, as we do with most mixed race bodies today.⁷⁵

"Colorblindness" in the US, which seems to have become a political stance, is not only the supposed inability to recognize racial difference or how it functions in society, but the willful resistance to acknowledging racial difference. The assumption is that if it is not acknowledged it does not exist but as Beverly Daniel Tatum judiciously explains, "the system of advantage is perpetuated when we do not acknowledge its existence."⁷⁶ In the Caribbean, color difference marks broad social structures and is constantly remarked upon and reinforced as a part of daily life. North Americans are in no way immune to these same hierarchies of color, yet our engagement with difference is not the same. In

⁷³ The story of Henrietta Lacks is one more example of this, as Pricilla Wald discusses in her 2012 ASA presidential speech.

⁷⁴ Hunter, 35.

⁷⁵ See *Mavin* magazine: Olumide.

⁷⁶ Tatum Daniel, Beverly. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*. Revised Edition. (Basic Books, 2003), 9.

the late 1980s Trinh Minh-ha critiqued the rise of multiculturalism, writing that the new rules for women of color in the US were now as follows: “we no longer wish to erase your difference, We demand, on the contrary, that you remember and assert it.” Saldaña must assert her difference, because it sells so well. The more US and transnational media is saturated with her image and her story—just try doing a Google image search with her name—the more she is recognized as not black, but different: Dominican. Her “exceptional difference” is measured both on screen and off screen. There is a place for her because she is the right color and the right difference at the right time.

Contemporary manifestations of lightness in color as benevolent and darkness in color as abject continue to resonate with broad audiences even if they are unable to name it. Existing US color hierarchies are clearly evidenced in the 2009 hit film *Precious*. The film tells the story of one black girl’s overcoming a tragic life in urban poverty and director Lee Daniels cast all light-skinned black actors to play characters that offer uplift in this teenager’s dark world. The fallen protagonist, meanwhile, is exceptionally dark in color (and overweight), matched only by her sexually abusive father in the film, who is portrayed as a horrific monster.⁷⁷ A keen example of the privileging of mixed race bodies in the US, Mariah Carey, Lenny Kravitz and Paula Patton (all of whom have one white parent) play black characters who save Precious from herself and her dysfunctional family life.⁷⁸

In Saldaña’s 2008 cover story for *Mujer Única*, the popular Latina magazine, she stands with one arm lifted up above her, her head resting in the crook of her elbow as she leans against a decorative wall piece.⁷⁹ She is in what looks like a nightclub, with a bar in the distance behind her. Along the side of the page, the title names her blackness, stating “The new black beauty,” while also somewhat likening her to a thoroughbred horse. The byline follows, “Come to life on the big screen, the first black women’s role that changed the stereotypes on an intergalactic voyage with a multiracial passport.”⁸⁰ In one sentence

⁷⁷ Reviews of the film *Precious*.

⁷⁸ The actress who plays Precious is Gabourey “Gabby” Sidibe, daughter of an African American mother and Senegalese father. She did not come to the film role with previous film acting experience and presumably her size and color helped her to fit the role as the filmmaker imagined it.

⁷⁹ *Mujer Única*, October 2008.

⁸⁰ *Mujer Única*, October 30, 2008, 34.” *Encarnará en la gran pantalla al primer personaje de mujer negra que cambió los estereotipos en un viaje intergaláctico con pasaporte multirracial.*”

Saldaña is identified as being black, multiracial, and clearly foreign. The extraterrestrial roles that Saldaña is known for, in *Star Trek* and *Avatar*, seem to cultivate a cult following and corroborate a sense that she is even slightly a supernatural in her difference.⁸¹ Saldaña was chosen to reprise the role of Lieutenant Uhura in the new *Star Trek*, a role first played by African American actress Nichelle Nichol, in an era in which it was almost impossible to find positive representations of black women on television. Saldaña's indeterminate racial identity emerges in the roles that she plays when her beauty and sex appeal are identified as otherworldly. Take for example her August 2010 cover story in *GQ* entitled: "Loving the Alien Zoe Saldaña: How the Blockbuster Star of *Star Trek* and *Avatar* Put Sex into Space." The "out of this world" characters she is now known for have brought her a science fiction fan following and confirm a sense that her difference is even slightly supernatural.⁸² Her ability to racially signify in whatever ways individuals within diverse audiences want her to signify seems to make her Other in a way that suggests she that she has special powers—it certainly draws audiences to the box office.

The Zoetrope: Spinning Mixed Race Identities into Transnational Plot Twists

The summer blockbuster movie *The Losers* was one of the top 20 grossing films at the box office for three weeks in 2010, alongside Saldaña's other films, *Avatar* and *Death at a Funeral*. In *The Losers*, Saldaña plays the lone female lead in a story about a group of US special unit CIA operatives sent to seek and destroy an enemy hidden in the Bolivian jungle. It turns out that they are the target of a sophisticated plan by the evil psychopath Max, who is seeking world domination. Based on the comic book series *Vertigo*, the Warner Bros. film conveys an edgy visual aesthetic through its unique camera shots, scene breaks and credits.⁸³ True to the comic book genre, it relies on a "good guys versus bad guys" dichotomy—even when we are not ever quite sure who the bad guys *are*. Saldaña's character, Aisha, appears after our heroes have been betrayed by the CIA and their planned attack turned rescue mission is sabotaged. Aisha is a woman

⁸¹ Beltrán, 154.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=25878>

without a past—a blank slate—the CIA operatives can turn up nothing about her. This “woman without a past,” is a common trope for racially ambiguous characters.⁸⁴

Apparently, Aisha exists in the story to seduce the leader of a group of operatives, so that they will help her with her own suicide mission, to kill Max. Max is the evildoer who must be stopped because he plans to get his hands on a secret, high-tech 21st century weapon of mass destruction to start a world war. Identities in this film are invariably essentialized to serve the storyline and the protagonists are reduced to different racialized stock characters: black, white, Arab, Latino—the Latino male character having almost no lines at all. Saldaña’s own Dominicanness is entirely erased in the film, down to the spelling of her name in the credits, in which the tilde over the ‘n’ is removed and the umlaut is placed over the ‘e’ in “Zoë.”⁸⁵

As Aisha, Saldaña’s repeatedly transforms her identity throughout the film: she starts out speaking English with a native Spanish-speaker’s accent, seemingly an Afro-Latina woman in the context of Bolivia. Surrounded by Bolivian women in the films first scenes, and then with images cockfighting, we are introduced to her with a men’s hat perched atop her head. In this landscape the hat as accessory seems to symbolize the Bolivian *chola*, or indigenous woman. Next, after violently assaulting Clay, the hypermasculine white male soon to become her love interest, Aisha confesses to being an undercover agent. Throughout the film, she shifts back and forth from good to evil, as she and the group of operatives move across the globe (Dubai, Nogales, San Juan, Miami, Mumbai, LA...). Scene by scene, Aisha’s racially ambiguous body moves back and forth across racial, ethnic and geographic borders with ease. We imagine her as each of the identities she appears to be at different moments. Viewing Saldaña as a black actress, one might be convinced that the name “Aisha” signifies an African American character in the film—especially the first time she reveals her “true identity” and switches into her Jersey accent. However (spoiler alert), we ultimately discover that Aisha is the daughter of

⁸⁴ We see it again in her performance as Cataleya in *Colombiana* (2011), in which her Blackness is never remarked upon and she keeps her past secret. It also overlays with stereotypes about mixed race-identified transracial adoptees.

⁸⁵ Her name has been written with and without the tilde over the letter ‘n’ all over the internet; the later takes away the Spanish pronunciation and the Latina association. The umlaut seems to add a different type of exoticism, the appearance of a European identity. In the Dominican paper *Hoy*, I have seen an accent grave placed over the ‘e’ to perhaps claim her as even *more* Latina.

Fadhil, the “ruthless Arab villain,” killed by Clay in the opening scenes. Thus, her ethnic-sounding name, like her ambiguously racialized body, does double duty in that it can represent an Arab or a black Muslim identity.

Though she is a force to be reckoned with at the beginning of the story, it seems miraculous that Aisha stays alive for the entirety of the film. Typically, in mainstream movies, black characters perish, so we come to expect it. The darkest-skinned character in this film, Roque (played by black British actor Idris Elba) turns villainous and is predictably slain. It may be precisely because Saldaña is not “that kind of black person” that she stays alive and survives the film. Or perhaps it is because her body plays an important role in the narrative as a sex object. She is alternately scantily clad, or decked out in tight-fitting clothing, toting large weapons and asserting a type of “hotness” that movie producers capitalize on. Her sex appeal is both punch line and source of tension in scene after scene. Along with holding this power of her sexuality over each of the male characters in the film, she seems to be one step ahead of them all and smarter than the group combined. She is never, like so many white women in Hollywood films, a character in need of rescue. Her ambiguous identity, however, is so unsettling for the male characters that at several moments in the film our “heroes” order her killed. She is a security risk—never clearly with them or against them—though ultimately she saves their lives.

Mixed Race as Canvas, Evoking Conquest

Being named the 2010 Max Mara “Face of the Future” may be an appropriate accolade for Saldaña, who is now well-known for her role as a Na’vi on the planet Pandora in director James Cameron’s 2009 blockbuster *Avatar*. The irony is that the enormously popular futuristic fantasy tells a very old story, not a new one. Through sophisticated special effects, *Avatar* retells a familiar narrative of colonialism: the American origin myth. Essentially, it is a Pocahontas story for the 21st century. In this version, Saldaña plays Neytiri, the sexually-attractive female native Other who offers Scully, the film’s white male protagonist, a glimpse into the world of Na’va on the planet of Pandora.⁸⁶ Human Scully’s mission is to infiltrate the native society of Pandora while disguised as

⁸⁶ The intercultural exchange is much like encountering the Ewok village in *Star Wars* so many decades ago.

one of their species. He is assigned this task by greedy white men who are determined to get their hands on the valuable mineral, “unobtainium” that is buried below the surface of Pandora. Yet, Scully falls in love with Neytiri and comes to realize the true value of the land, its people and culture. Ultimately, he leads a heroic military effort to defend the planned destruction of life on the planet of Pandora. *Avatar* is also a war movie, in its climax, and portrays women throughout—from the pioneering scientist to the skilled helicopter pilot—as hopelessly emotional beings, whose sentimentality about life on the planet of Pandora gets them killed. In contrast, “real men” in the film are driven to rape and pillage in order to get their hands on that which is of greatest value—by any means necessary.

When a couple hundred Dominican youth gather for a free screening of *Avatar* at the *Teatro Nacional de Eduardo Brito* one Thursday morning in November of 2010, it has been a year since the film’s release. *Fundación Global Democracia y Desarrollo*, known locally as FUNGLODE, hosts the film screening as part of their annual international film festival.⁸⁷ Private school students from five or six different high schools around the city file into the theater, dressed in uniforms, some in blazers or button down shirts. Groups arrive thirty, forty-five minutes, an hour after the event is scheduled to begin. A show of hands requested by the program director reveals that 85-90% of the students in attendance have already seen *Avatar*. It is quite likely they have seen it more than once, perhaps in English with Spanish subtitles, or in 3-D at one of numerous movie theaters in Santo Domingo, many of which are inside luxury malls where ticket prices are nearly equivalent to those in the US. They may have watched the film illegally on MegaUpload or bought a bootleg copy on DVD from any film vendor throughout the country. Perhaps, as I did, they brought home a low-quality dubbed version to watch on their laptop, only to discover that when characters spoke in the fictional language of Na’vi the subtitles appeared in German. The version of *Avatar* screened by FUNGLODE on this day is expertly dubbed in Castilian Spanish and the voices match each of the different characters in the film, right down to the throaty voice of Trudy the helicopter pilot, played by Michelle Rodriguez.

⁸⁷ Ethnographic notes on screening of *Avatar* 11/18/10.

After the screening, there is a question and answer session with two of the film's producers: Glen Derry, the virtual production supervisor, and Candace Alger, the motion capture producer. The two speak to the audience in English while a young Dominican woman translates their words into Spanish.⁸⁸ They reiterate that the main message of the film is one of environmentalism and then present a PowerPoint with embedded videos about how the digital animation in the film was produced. The students learn that the actors performed their roles in black suits onto which graphic designers could later map images—in the same ways that video games are produced. Filming only provided crude images of the action, yet a digital design team was able to produce sophisticated details and create the characters for the film. Saldaña thus quite literally served in this role as a canvas onto which a race and identity was projected.

A blonde-haired Dominican teen walks up to the microphone in the aisle to comment, showing off her English skills, "I think this is an excellent film and it is what made me want to be a filmmaker." After many more praises for the film, an adult in the audience finally asks the producers just how much the film cost to make. There is an audible gasp in the room when the response to this question is translated for the audience: "\$300 million dollars." Students then ask other astute questions, such as "How much were the actors paid?" and "Why did they choose these actors?" Derry responds that "Zoe" in a screen test was excellent, that her face is expressive of emotion and "Jim [Cameron] fell in love with her." An added bonus, he says, is the fact that she was once a dancer and so she knows how to move fluidly.

As they answer questions for the audience, the white American film producers pronounce Saldaña's last name without the ñ. It is then re-pronounced by the Dominican translator and audience members with the ñ in place once again. It is as if her ethnic identity is optional and something that can be dropped and taken up as needed, to make her more legible depending on context. Unlike other viewers, Dominicans are not confused about who Saldaña is or where she comes from. Rather, a Dominican audience challenges the assumptions of an interpolated white male viewer watching *Avatar* as they claim and identify themselves with Saldaña's *dominicanidad*, albeit in disguise. These high school students are quite familiar with conquest narratives as central to their own

⁸⁸ Cristina Zapata, a Dominican UN youth ambassador who herself has studied film at NYU.

history, having grown up on the island on which Columbus first landed in the Americas. Dominican students are required to read the novel *Enriquillo* in high school and assimilate the celebrated story of the famed Taíno warrior into how they see themselves as Dominicans.⁸⁹ A Dominican national identity, in which indigeneity is reclaimed, makes somewhat perverse the Dominican viewer's alignment with the "great white hope" while watching this film celebrating the conquest narrative. Yet Dominican youth embrace *Avatar* as passionately as North Americans, and viewers worldwide, while proudly celebrating the visibility of a fellow Dominican in this central role.

Avatar reproduces a particular conquest narrative that continues to "haunt our present."⁹⁰ In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor exposes the ways that this "scenario" as she calls it, is told and retold so effectively as to make invisible the viewpoints of the native/conquered people, while privileging the viewpoint of the conqueror.⁹¹ The romantic storyline as integral to the narrative of rescue by the white savior does just this. Furthermore, its power lies in how familiar a story it is, one we have seen in Hollywood films repeatedly.⁹² Although Cameron's contemporary twist on the conquest narrative provides a timely environmentalist takeaway, little is progressive about how alien bodies in the narrative are racialized for the purpose of exotification.

Saldaña says of her character Neytiri, "She's someone I would love to be when I grow up...She's so simple: the Na'vi are so simple. It was an absolute delight to give in to the fantasy that life could be so perfect."⁹³ Her comments evince no recognition that this trope in which people of color are depicted as closer to nature is about more readily objectifying and dominating the Other.⁹⁴ Neytiri is essentially a "woodland creature" on

⁸⁹ Manuel de Jesus Galván. *Enriquillo* (1879).

⁹⁰ A measure of the film's success and its transnational reach is its worldwide box office revenue, which by January of 2010 had already surpassed Cameron's own epic blockbuster, *Titanic* (1997).

⁹¹ Taylor, 29; she refers to this elision of the history of a people as "percepticide."

⁹² An excellent mash up titled "A.V.A.T.A.R. (Anglos Valiantly Aiding Tragic Awe-inspiring Races)" offers a fast-paced and profound reading of several contemporary films that share the same narrative of the white savior. They each include the sexualization of ethnic difference display the underlying desires portrayed in popular film in which a white hero or heroine rescues a person or people of color..

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWSiztP2Rp0&feature=player_embedded

⁹³ *Essence Magazine*, 114.

⁹⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 69.

the supposedly inhospitable planet of Pandora. When we first meet her, she is creeping through the forest with a bow and arrow. Through digital manipulation, the actress is nearly unrecognizable as the character she plays. One must stare at her face to find her lips and eyes familiar. Nevertheless, her movements and stature are recognizably Saldaña, as her blue body moves through the surreal landscape. We are given a digitized visual fantasy.⁹⁵ Long brown braids dangle past her breasts, barely covering them. The beads and feathers tied to the ends, further flag her as “ethnically” different. Although she is blue in color, her accent signifies a familiar Otherness for viewers and she quickly becomes a trustworthy “native informant.” Extraterrestrial though she may be, she is successfully eroticized in the film as both sexually attractive to viewers yet different enough to be worthy of rigorous study by human scientists in the film. As Shohat and Stam articulate, *Avatar* is not unlike so many other Hollywood films in that, “Exoticism solipsizes its object for the exoticists’ pleasure, using the colonized ‘other’ as an erotic fiction in order to reenchant the world.”⁹⁶

Apparently, Saldaña met Cameron’s criteria for the inspiration of the character Neytiri in that she provided what *Avatar* concept designer Jordu Schell refers to as “the beauty of a kind of ethnic face.”⁹⁷ His job was to design the creature into which technology would transform Saldaña, through the use of a sort of “digital makeup.”⁹⁸ When writer Lauren Davis interviews Schell for an article in the graphic design web magazine, *io9.com*, she cuts to the chase and he tells her in no uncertain terms what inspired the look of the Na’vi and Saldaña’s Neytiri:

LD: What about the sex appeal aspect of it? Was the sexiness something James Cameron emphasized with you?

JS: *Well, he wanted them to be very beautiful. And I do believe that, at some point, he said something to the effect of...the audience has to want to fuck her. I mean, Jim is very plain in his language. So, I went, "All right?" So I made something that, I don't know if I really particularly wanted to*

⁹⁵ This is much in line with the gaming culture, a world in which the *Avatar* fan base has exploded.

⁹⁶ Shohat and Stam, 21.

⁹⁷ Davis, Lauren. *Concept Art*. “Avatar Concept Designer Reveals the Secrets of the Na’Vi” on *io9.com* Accessed 11/2/10 <http://io9.com/5354315/avatar-concept-designer-reveals-the-secrets-of-the-navi>

⁹⁸ Rachel Abramowitz, *Los Angeles Times*. “Avatar’ stirs an animated actors debate in Hollywood” <http://herocomplex.latimes.com/2010/02/18/avatar-stirs-an-animated-debate-in-hollywood/>

fuck it, but it was certainly a beautiful alien. He definitely, he wanted it — because he really prefers women that are kind of athletic, and buff and stuff like that, so I, you know, designed something with big hands and feet, a big presence that felt really big and strong.

LD: So it was designed for his personal preferences in terms of sexiness?

JS: *It certainly wasn't mine [...] But I sculpted this big, tall, buff, kind of tough-looking, kick-ass woman.*⁹⁹

“Fucking is the Other,” bell hooks writes. “Displacing the notion of Otherness from race, ethnicity, skin color, the body emerges as a site of contestation where sexuality is the metaphoric Other that threatens to take over, consume, transform *via* the experience of pleasure. Desired and sought after sexual pleasure alters the consenting subject, deconstructing notions of will, control, coercive domination.”¹⁰⁰ Sexuality makes Saldaña palatably foreign in this instance and our journey to another world requires sex as part of the experience of Otherness, even if what is sexually appealing happens to be just more of the same. A desire for the consumption of and the celebration of a black and Latina actress does not make the discourse, ideology and individual beliefs about racially mixed black women any less racist. Rather, as Phyllis Rose expertly points out, the rise of exoticism occurs at moments of excess wealth: “Racism is like a poor kid who grew up needing someone to hurt. Exoticism grew up rich, and a little bored. The racist is hedged around by dangers, the exoticist by used-up toys.”¹⁰¹ Layered beneath the blue of Saldaña’s digital make up, racial stereotypes about her sexual accessibility remain. She cannot escape her Dominican identity, laden with stereotypes from within as much as from outside of Dominican culture that relegate her to a hypersexualized racialized body.

En Fín: “The Face of the Future”

Mixed race bodies have always existed, and have been understood as such, while negotiating monoracial contexts.¹⁰² Mixed race identities are embraced for different

⁹⁹ Davis.

¹⁰⁰ hooks, 22.

¹⁰¹ Qtd. in Shohat and Stam, 33.

¹⁰² See Pedro Alonso O’Crouley. *A Description of the Kingdom of New Spain*, from 1774. Reprinted in 1972.

purposes at different moments in the history of the Americas.¹⁰³ Equally, celebrity production, and within that the commodification of difference, has been a global good throughout the history of cinema.¹⁰⁴ Saldaña's body is writ with the discourse of a racial imaginary, a history of the Americas in which she is not black, but "*mulata*" and her color resonates with a historical meaning not just within each of the national contexts that she claims, but today as a global phenomenon.

Representations of Dominican women that span the DR and the US in flows of popular culture portray the limiting ways that Dominican women are perceived and imagined. Each of the Dominican women I write about is inextricable from larger racial and gendered projects under neoliberalism. These projects determine what is at stake for each subject and whether one's body is in fact a body that matters within global systems of capital. Racial meaning that is "*en la mente*" as Lilith says, or truly in our mind's eye, has life on film and a second life in digitally animated films of the present. Women of African descent like Saldaña, who identify with *Latinidad*, provide an "exotic" alternative to blackness and prove to be ideologically malleable, accessible, desirable and consumable for broad audiences. Saldaña's transnational identity illuminates the blurred edges of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality and color. It also reveals the ways that she and so many other Dominican women fulfill a popular fantasy about Caribbean women's bodies as exotic.¹⁰⁵

As Nestor Canclini reminds us, "Studies about hybridization are usually limited to *describing* cross-cultural mixing. We have barely begun to advance, as part of its socio-cultural reconstruction, toward giving *explanatory* power to the concept: studying processes of hybridization by locating these in structural relations of causality—and giving the concept *hermeneutical* capacity: making useful for interpreting relations of meaning that are reconstructed through mixing."¹⁰⁶ Throughout this project, beyond a description of cross-cultural mixing, I have addressed theoretically the significance of racial ambiguity and cultural hybridization and the influence of transnational identity on

¹⁰³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999).

¹⁰⁴ See for example Dominican actress Maria Montez, "The Queen of Technicolor" who portrays a diversity of ethnicized characters, including the famous Arab Scheherazade, and is beholden to her own Spanish accent.

¹⁰⁵ Shohat and Stam, 33.

¹⁰⁶ Canclini, xix.

Dominican women. As I have also shown, the identities of mixed race women of African descent are constructed inextricably from gendered narratives of the sexually provocative consumable good. They cannot be understood outside of an existing Caribbean sex tourism economy that already marks the young Dominican female's body as accessible, nor can they be read outside of persistent beliefs about blackness that make brown women's bodies more desirable within existing hierarchies of color in the Americas. These hierarchies are based on value systems that are determined by ideologies of capitalism.

Today, globalization (and the reaches of the internet) has altered how, where and when goods cross borders for consumption. Technology has also changed the ways that celebrity is produced, reproduced and circulated as a good of worldwide value. Just as Saldaña's character in *The Losers* bounces across the planet, and as Lt. Uhura traverses galaxies, Saldaña herself makes regular trips back and forth between the US and the island of Hispaniola, where what she represents and to whom shifts as quickly as the language she is speaking. As I have shown in this chapter, her performance of race is as malleable as her performance of femininity, while her delicate body sets her apart from stereotypes of the Dominican woman as a *luchadora*, or the similar strong black female stereotype of the US. If we were to patently accept the dividing lines of race that would have us separate Latina from black, from Arab...from Na'vi, the diversity of characters that Saldaña has brought us on the big screen would have to be understood as wholly disparate identities. Her mixed race body is what allows her to perform these magical transformations for both our visual eyes and our narrative eyes.

Saldaña is heralded as offering a little ethnic flavor through her *Latinidad*, while remaining non-threatening, feminine, ever-accessible to white men—and ever-changing. Her positioning as a customizable good is only confirmed by her September 2011 interview in *Ebony Magazine*. Here again her name loses the ñ and transforms into “Zoë Saldana” for the historically black publication. She talks with great satisfaction about taking on new and different forms, embracing her racial ambiguity as if it is all a performance (one for which she is well paid). She reminds us, “I’ve played a Na’vi, and I’ve played an African-American, and I’m African-Latino,” concluding, “Artists, we have to be chameleons. If the shoe fits, by all means put it on.” Of course, for Saldaña the

“shoe,” is costly. While it can always be taken off again later, at this cultural moment Saldaña is the right fit, the right fashion, and in high demand.

Chapter 4: The Uses of Audre Lorde: Transnational Black Lesbian Feminist Activism in Santo Domingo

I see protest as a genuine means of encouraging someone to feel the inconsistencies, the horror of the lives we are living. Social protest is saying that we do not have to live this way.
Audre Lorde, *Black Women Writers at Work*

Because performances always participate in social systems, they elucidate power relations.
Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*

“I’m not very tolerant of the privileges of Dominican whites,” Yaneris informs me, “they do not truly understand what racism is.” We meet for the first time at an Audre Lorde reading and workshop in Santo Domingo that she was part of planning. When a friend forwarded me a blog posting about the event, I jumped at the chance to attend. I was curious about the mobilization of Dominican women around Lorde’s black feminist lesbian writings and how such writings are taken up in the specific racial and cultural context of the DR. I had been in the Dominican Republic only a few months and was unfamiliar with the gay and lesbian networks existing there. The Lorde reading was organized by *Tres Gatas*, a feminist activist group based in the capital that has become well-known across queer activist networks throughout Latin America.¹ *Las Gatas* educate, advocate and agitate for the recognition of black lesbian identities within a Dominican society that generally erases their existence on multiple levels. They identify themselves as “*Un colectivo diverso de reconstrucción de expresividades lésbico-feministas*,” or what translates roughly as “a diverse collective whose aim is to reconstruct lesbian-feminist expressions.”² Made up of a small group of Dominican women in their 20s and 30s, the members are of varying shades of color—some more likely to identify themselves as Afro-Latina than others.

¹ I use the term “queer” acknowledging the body of work in queer studies yet in the Dominican Republic, the term is foreign while “*Gay*” and “*lesbiana*” are used regularly.

² The group’s name references the Dominican expression, “*Nada más que tres gatos* [Little more than three cats],” that is used to describe an underrepresentation of people.

In the following chapter, I examine three different examples of consciousness-raising political actions that members of *Tres Gatas* coordinated during 2010 and early 2011: the aforementioned Audre Lorde reading; a so-called *besatón* [“kissathon”], well-covered by Dominican mainstream press; and a public hair-cutting, which received the most controversial response. I examine the ways that the women in *Tres Gatas* gain access to US black feminist scholarship and connect their political actions to these writings, which hold resonance for them in their lives as “*tercermundistas*” (“third world women”³) of African descent. My conversations with Yaneris, Jeannette, and Arcy, three core members of *Tres Gatas*, reveal insights into how they, as Dominican women, understand their own identities in relation to transnational ideologies of feminism and blackness.⁴ The women of color feminist theory they have stumbled across and sought out via the internet allows them to imagine themselves in racial terms that come from outside of Dominican society, understanding experiences of identity in terms of existing structures of power worldwide. The writings that the members of *Tres Gatas* encounter empower them to coordinate feminist actions in Santo Domingo that challenge homophobia, transphobia, sexism and racism as interconnected oppressions. Their own stories, and the consciousness-raising political actions they coordinate, convey some of the possibilities they encounter and the various challenges they face in forming transnational intersectional identities in Santo Domingo today.

The Uses of Audre Lorde

The first time I interview Yaneris, a founding member of *Tres Gatas*, it is at her house on a sunny weekday afternoon. An artist and graphic designer, she is working from home that day. Yaneris is dark in color, thin. She wears her hair in dreadlocks (known as “*trensas rastafari*”) that fall down past her shoulders. Yaneris and one other member of *Tres Gatas* are the only two Dominican women I have ever seen on the streets of Santo Domingo who wear their hair this way; both are striking. Months into our friendship,

³ Although this term is outmoded in academia, because it is the language used by the women of *This Bridge Called My Back* in the 1980s and adopted by the feminist activist movement in Latin America, I reference it here.

⁴ The interviews, which took place in late 2010 and early 2011, were recorded on a digital audio device. I translated all interviews myself, and, when necessary, I received translation assistance from the speaker herself or another member of *Tres Gatas*.

Yaneris has begun to share with me more about who she is, increasingly comfortable answering my questions about her experiences of race, gender and identity.

When I ask Yaneris about her earlier exposure to feminism, she says she had previously viewed it as *una vaina élite* [something elitist], bourgeoisie, and only for academics. Her perception is founded in a reality of 20th century Dominican feminism that, as historian April J. Mayes describes, was monopolized by the concerns of affluent white women on a national scale. Upper class Dominican feminists were able to advance their cause by aligning themselves with the political concerns of dictator Rafael Trujillo and his agenda for the nation.⁵ Their aims involved “civilizing” non-white Dominican citizens by obtaining increased access to education for women and greater social influence including the right to vote. The feminism that they touted, on a national and international scale was invested in a Dominican national identity that was “Latin” and not by any means black. Women of color in the DR whose activism fell outside of this accepted feminist movement were silenced, sometimes violently, by Trujillo.⁶ Feminism, as a movement in the Dominican Republic, has faced ongoing challenges not unlike those of first and second wave feminism in the US: those women most privileged in white supremacist society maintain the greatest power and influence, while black women contribute significant yet unacknowledged labor to the cause. No matter that in Dominican society the majority of women are brown-skinned.

Latin American feminist theory has been inadequate in addressing the intersections of blackness and sexuality as is pertinent to the experiences of Dominican women.⁷ Dominican women’s experiences of gender include intersections of racial prejudice based on color, hair texture and other physical attributes perceived as signifiers of blackness. Additionally, their experiences of gender are shaped by their mixedness and racial ambiguity—consequently juxtaposed to blackness. Latinidad, particularly in the DR, has been constructed in opposition to and through the exclusion of blackness.⁸ Hierarchies of color and prejudices against aspects of a Dominican woman’s appearance

⁵ April J. Mayes, “Why Dominican Feminism Moved to the Right: Class, Colour and Women’s Activism in the Dominican Republic, 1880s–1940s” *Gender & History*, Vol.20 No.2 August 2008, pp. 349–371.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Curiel, 2009. “Decolonizando El Feminismo.”

⁸ Candelario, 2007; Hoffnung-Garskof, 2006; Simmons, 2009; Torres-Saillant et al., 2004.

can have a significant impact on her social access, yet these prejudices are not referred to as ‘racism’ and are therefore perceived as neither structural nor damaging. US black feminist theory has set the standard for interrogating intersections of race and gender, recognizing the position of black women as multiply-oppressed because of their social identities.⁹ Thus, it holds particular resonance for Dominican women who, though they have not traditionally self-identified as black, share experiences of racism, sexism and color prejudice in common with black women of the US.

“My first experience was a dilemma filling out a form at the YMCA in the US,” Yaneris told me, describing her own challenges as an Afro-Latina in identifying herself within the social boundaries that invariably defined her as Other. We were sitting in her living room in Santo Domingo one evening. “To be black or Latina? It’s like, ‘okay,’ I am not fucking Latina,” she laughed, “but I am not black either, eh? What am I? I put Latina because geographically...it’s a geographic identity.” Yaneris agreed to participate in my research project only about six months into our friendship, hesitant to open up to yet another *gringa* researcher like myself who had come to Santo Domingo to write about race and the lives of Others. My own privilege initially distanced us, and yet I soon discovered that we shared a black feminist politics that would bring us together on many issues. At the time, I did not imagine that we also shared in common an experience of straddling multiple racial categories. That moment of being forced to choose between two presumably disparate racial categories and racial identities that Yaneris described was quite familiar to me. During our conversation, I shared with her how my own experiences with this type of racial “dilemma” as she called it, inspired my scholarly pursuits. The “what are you?” question inevitably lays the foundation for each narrative of US mixed race experience and accordingly the multiracial movement that has occurred in the US since the 1990s.¹⁰ Members of this movement mobilized against the federal government because they felt that being forced to choose an identity was damaging to the self-esteem of the individual.¹¹

⁹ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review* 43.6 (1991): 1241–1299. Web. 5 May 2012; Hull et al.

¹⁰ Root.

¹¹ DaCosta; Williams.

Dominican racial logic frequently contradicts what US scholars think they know about how race works.¹² As much as 80% of Dominicans are of African descent, yet most do not identify themselves as “black.”¹³ Whiteness in the DR—as is the case in much of Latin America’s racially-mixed societies—is heavily tied to class and to an extent, “money whitens.” Race and color in the Dominican Republic do not follow a US “racial logic” in which “one drop of black blood” makes you black.

“I have a book of Dominican races,” Yaneris told me, “there are like, twenty-eight, and a census of slaves, from *zambo* to I don’t know what...*E’ loco*,” she said, “It’s crazy.” In the DR, racial categories are unique and rather complicated for those who did not grow up around the nuanced color hierarchies that are part and parcel of Dominican society. Moreover, because race is a social construction the way Dominicans understand their own racial identities is ever changing. As in the US, violence by individuals and by the state reinforces socially constructed racial boundaries in the DR. Presently, US ideologies about racial identity are transmitted via electronic media, music, videos and images accessible online within a shared transnational popular culture. These images increasingly influence what Dominicans believe about race, particularly in the capital city of Santo Domingo where a greater number of people are exposed to transnational media and marketing that capitalizes on this.

Yaneris has reevaluated her racial identity in numerous situations throughout her life, negotiating the line between blackness and *Latinidad* that Dominicans embody.¹⁴ “I can make a list of the things that people say are ugly and that which they say are pretty,” Yaneris said, explaining that blackness is always on the former list, never the latter. “It’s like many people say we are a mix, we are pretty, we are Taínos [native people of Hispaniola]...but it is mostly to say that we are not black, you know?” For generations now, Dominicans have been taught that they are “*indio*” in color, romanticizing their

¹² African American historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has been extremely vocal about his feelings that Dominicans do not recognize they are black.

¹³ Ginetta E. B. Candelario, *Black Behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof. *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York After 1950*. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007); Kimberly Eison Simmons. *Reconstructing Racial Identity and the African Past in the Dominican Republic*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009); Silvio Torres-Saillant, “The Tribulations of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Racial Identity” in *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Race and National Identity in the Americas. (May, 1998), 126-146.

¹⁴ Simmons; Candelario.

indigenous past while rejecting their African heritage, regardless of the fact that the vast majority of Taínos were killed by Spaniards in the early years of conquest. While indigenous identity is viewed as noble, blackness—signifying Haitianness—is highly denigrated and ever suspect.

“*Negra Latina*...this is something new,” Yaneris told me. The terminology is foreign in that the two racial identities might seem to cancel each other out: a black Latina? It is “new” at a social moment in which the considerable presence of people of African descent has just begun gaining greater recognition.¹⁵ As a black Dominican woman, Yaneris has often felt unrecognized. She says her racial identity has led her to self-censure. She keeps to herself her observations in light of the daily racism she experiences, feeling no right to speak them. Her objections and concerns, along with those of other dark-skinned women in the DR, are generally dismissed. In our interview she explained, “I can identify as Latin American but it is much easier [to identify] as black.” Every day on the street people shout at her to get her attention, calling her by color: “*Negra* [black], how are you?” As a dark-skinned Dominican woman, she faces discrimination at the intersections of blackness and queerness. People are aware of her difference and do not hesitate to comment on it. Sometimes they use the term “*morena*” instead, which suggests blackness though more politely. “It’s ambiguous,” Yaneris said about the term. Indeed, there is a lot of power in this ambiguity, for it means never deciding and always having the option to choose. On the other hand, as Dulce Reyes Bonilla reminds us regarding the experience of dark-skinned Dominican women like her, “Day by day there is a struggle to fit in to places in which one belongs, which creates a feeling of not belonging anywhere. Every day decisions have to be made about what aspect of one’s identity would dominate at which moment.”¹⁶ The language of ambiguity reflects the unspoken contradictions around race and identity (and so much else) that Dominicans negotiate daily. People seldom speak out against the sexism and homophobia that leads to hate and violence in the DR, since these and many other contradictory elements of Dominican life conform to values of the Catholic Church and are accepted

¹⁵ The 2007 Miami Herald multimedia series on ‘Afro-Latin Americans’ is just one example of a recent wave of discourse on blackness in Latino communities transnationally. URL (accessed 5 May 2012): <http://www.miamiherald.com/multimedia/news/afrolatin/>.

¹⁶ Reyes Bonilla, 379.

aspects of Dominican culture.¹⁷ The voices of the minority are silenced by keeping them an open secret.

For example, when Arcy returned from the 12th annual *Encuentro Feminista Latino America y del Caribe* (a regional feminist conference) with her short wavy hair braided with extensions, the look effectively altered how other Dominicans read her in racial terms.

“So...what?” responded her sister, who she describes as slightly darker in color than her own coppery tone, “Now you’re black?”

“Yeah,” she laughed, recounting the interaction and its absurdity, “*now*, I’m black.”

There has been no popular movement around black identity in the Dominican Republic, but rather a slow seeping in of ideologies of black consciousness from outside the country, in particular, from return migrants from the US since the 1980s and various marginalized identity movements since the 1990s.¹⁸ A so-called “black experience” is difficult to pin down for racially-mixed Dominicans. Phenotypic heterogeneity can mean that each person in a family has a unique experience of color prejudice or color preference within the existing hierarchy of color in the DR.¹⁹

Referring to a light-skinned peer who publicly identifies herself as black, Yaneris proclaims, “It isn’t enough that she says it a thousand times. She was born with the privilege of whiteness...you cannot renounce this privilege.” As she laments at the opening of this essay, most Dominicans have not developed a racial critique through which they might recognize color hierarchies within the country as systemically oppressive. Prejudice based on color (whether positive or negative) occurs within families, in the workplace, and on the street in the DR, so overtly that North Americans often find it alarming. Dark-skinned women may be publicly referred to as “*morena*” (brown) rather than “*negra*” (black) in a gesture of inclusion or to avoid insult, yet they face tremendous discrimination because of their color and their sex—and experience it daily. Dominican women in Santo Domingo navigate misogynistic, heterosexist and

¹⁷ Espinosa Miñoso, 367.

¹⁸ Simmons, *Reconstructing Racial Identity*, 71.

¹⁹ See Erika Martinez’s writings including her forthcoming short story “The Day I Lost Melissa,” for example.

machista social structures that put at risk their physical safety.²⁰ Most Dominicans benefit from a level of social privilege due to discriminatory social practices that position Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent as “Other” in Dominican society. Prejudice against Haitians is tied to Dominican nationalism and cultivates a sense of moral and cultural superiority that dates back centuries; it emerges in various contexts in Santo Domingo in the form of discrimination and violence. Among Leftist activist circles there are many who vigilantly call it out for what it is.

For *Tres Gatas*, constructing an identity-based movement within a historically conservative yet highly transcultural society has required drawing on a diversity of feminist scholarship, including feminist theorist from the US and Europe in addition to Latin America. Jeannette, as one of *Tres Gatas*’ founders, informs me that the group spent three years “cooking up the idea to have a “*trabajo de reflexión*” between lesbians that was as much about visibility as anything, not so much the politics of sexual diversity...but working from a feminist perspective.” Copies of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) were available to them in Spanish by 1989, translated as *Esta Puente, Mi Espalda: Voces De Mujeres Tercermundistas En Los Estados Unidos* [This Bridge, My Back: Voices of Third World Women in the United States]²¹ and widely circulated among feminists in Latin America—just as editors and contributors to the book had hoped. As the text demonstrates, women of color feminists of the 1970s and 80s in the US were well aware of the complexities of building sisterhoods across multiple oppressions and varying degrees of privilege. Such coalitions in the developing world existed as Moraga might have imagined, with similar challenges and priorities in terms of community building, conflict resolution and collaboration for survival. The movement that she and Gloria Anzaldúa articulate with their legendary anthology is “about physical and psychic struggle. It is about intimacy, a desire for life

²⁰ There is a high rate of femicides in the country, as women are often treated as property by their male partners and murdered for attempting to exit the relationship.

²¹ The word bridge in Spanish is a masculine noun but for the publication of this feminist text it was changed to feminine by the use of the feminine pronoun “*Esta*” instead of the masculine “*Este*.”

between all of us, not settling for less than freedom even in the most private aspects of our lives. A total vision.”²²

What these self-proclaimed “third world women in the United States” articulate within *This Bridge* about whiteness and how racism works, along with sexism, remain equally important to members of *Tres Gatas*. Lorde’s essay in the anthology, for example, demonstrates her unflinching critique of white supremacy within the feminist movement in the US, and is invaluable to Dominican feminists, who have been by and large excluded from feminist activism in the DR because they are not white. For instance, until encountering Lorde, Yaneris did not think feminist writings had anything to do with her. She tells me Ochy Curiel introduced her Jules Falquet’s *De La Cama a la Calle: Perspectivas Teóricas Lesbico-Feministas* in a youth workshop with the non-governmental organization, *Collectiva Mujer y Salud*. “I read [Falquet’s work] and I had her bibliography, I was like, wow, I want this..., I want this..., I want this...and I looked for them on the internet, like, who is this?...but I hadn’t heard of them. I first resented that I had never heard of them. It was like, they didn’t tell me about these...*coño*, you didn’t tell me about this...because they aren’t Latin American?”²³

US black feminists’ critiques of heteropatriarchy published in the 1970s and 80s, speak to ongoing racialized gender dynamics within contemporary Santo Domingo in which dark-skinned women are perceived as sexually available and expendable bodies under capitalism. The anger from which Lorde writes rings true among darker-skinned Dominican women like Yaneris, who daily face comment and discrimination within the Dominican color hierarchy. It also resonates with light-skinned Dominican women who position themselves as allies, bearing witness this discrimination. The exasperation I hear from women in Santo Domingo about the rampant denial around the damaging effects of color prejudice is echoed in Lorde’s work. She writes in her essay for *This Bridge*, “I had decided never again to speak to white women about racism. I felt it was wasted energy because of destructive guilt and defensiveness, and because whatever I had to say might better be said by white women to one another at far less emotional cost to the speaker,

²² Cherríe Moraga, “Preface” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1984), xix.

²³ Falquet’s book is available in Spanish in its entirety online. The texts she cites as a white French feminist theorist reflect her recognition of a black feminist movement inclusive of the experiences of women of color.

and probably with a better hearing.”²⁴ Dominant discourse about racism in the DR alleges that because the majority of Dominicans are racially mixed, there can be no “racism,” hence there is no need to respond to social divisions shaped by color. This belief, like so many about race, is often argued by assertion alone. Even as color prejudice is an integral part of Dominican daily life, racism is understood as something from *afuera* (outside). Unsurprisingly, there is no social movement in which Dominican women with privilege in Santo Domingo—typically those who are lighter in color—examine their own racial prejudices.

The ways that Lorde speaks directly to experiences of racial discrimination has resonated widely with diverse audiences of black women. Her attention to the pain of color prejudice is reflective of not only a New York City-based perspective on the degradation of blackness, but a cultural perception of the significance of blackness that was rooted in a Caribbean racial logic. Born of a light-skinned West Indian mother, Lorde was raised imbibing a Caribbean color hierarchy, asking herself throughout her childhood and adolescence if black indeed meant “bad” since that is what she came to understand by the responses of others to her color, particularly those to whom she was intimately tied.²⁵ Members of *Tres Gatas* met over the course of years to discuss and deconstruct some of the emotional costs of not conforming to Dominican social expectations of gender, sexuality and physical appearance; the daily toll is high.

In her essay, “‘*Primera Puta que Pájara*’: Sexuality and Dominicanness,” Dulce Reyes Bonilla refers to the experience of coming into consciousness about the oppressiveness of Dominican racial structures as a sort of “racial liberation” that is linked to her rejection of the dominant heteropatriarchy of the DR. She writes,

This racial liberation has also insulated me from the desire for social approval as a lesbian. The fact that my “negritude” already precludes total social acceptance in Dominican society makes the rejection for being sexually different much easier. In other words, the certainty that one will not belong at all relieves the stress created by an additional level of difference.²⁶

²⁴ Lorde, 70-71.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁶ Reyes Bonilla, 371.

In writing about her queer transnational Afro-Latina identity as an immigrant in the US, Reyes Bonilla describes how she must daily choose her most salient identities because others do not see it as possible for her to be all of her many complex identities at once, namely Dominican, lesbian, black, activist, and immigrant.²⁷ This possibility of being all of one's complex self at once is something for which Lorde long fought. In the DR, such identities are further complicated when one's experiences of prejudice are invalidated by assertion, a society in which even the darkest Dominican will claim European ancestry, and mention it first in order to obfuscate their own blackness. Reyes Bonilla, writes "I owe in part my lesbian identity to the gods Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde, who wrote for me even without knowing it."²⁸

Although a diversity of feminist writings may have become accessible to select Dominican women in the DR over the last couple decades, new modes of circulation have meant greater access for those women with limited resources. As it is, books are a luxury item and the cost of shipping used books from outside is prohibitive. Little feminist literature is available in hard copy in the DR and limited scholarship being produced for publication there.²⁹ Yet working class and middle class Dominican women in Santo Domingo have access to the internet via home computers, internet centers and via cell phones, such as Blackberries, and now smart phones. With programs such as Google Translate or the Chrome browser, they can transform whole pages of text from English into Spanish. In the previous decades, when feminist writings in print were shared woman to woman, they were physically carried across borders, often photocopied and circulated in the form of chapbooks throughout Latin America.

Publishing practices limit what writings about gay and lesbian life in the DR are currently available to readers on and off the island. Occasionally, essays by queer Dominican writers can be found in edited volumes, written in English by Dominican women in diaspora.³⁰ Because of the scarcity of this print media, LGBT audiences in Santo Domingo access a greater diversity of writing on queer sexualities through the

²⁷ Ibid., 379.

²⁸ Jiménez Polanco.

²⁹ Dominican scholar Ochy Curiel's essay *La Crítica Postcolonial desde las Prácticas Políticas e Feminismo Antirracista* reached me via email in the form of a Microsoft Word document. It is widely available on the internet.

³⁰ Reyes Bonilla; Lara.

internet. Expansive virtual communities of gay and lesbian Dominicans now connect by way of listservs, blogs (such as Wordpress), Facebook groups, and other social networks. In these spaces, they can share their own writings or that of others, finding validation and acceptance.³¹ Through online social networks, even the most isolated queer Dominicans participate in the radical act of acknowledging their own existence in a society that has historically campaigned for their eradication.³²

Today, essays in Spanish translations through Puerto Rican and Cuban presses can be found online, posted in the form of PDFs on blogs, or circulated via email. Additionally, the internet has made it possible for Jeannette to enroll in academic courses on gender online—something that would not have been possible before, she tells me. NGOs in the DR that work with and for women often have their own libraries of feminist scholarship, but as Jeannette points out, this is not “democratic” in that the materials are only available to a select few. Thus, her own access to feminist literature came extremely late, when she was working at human rights foundations in Santo Domingo. The feminist activists groups in which she participated focused on production—workshops, information, activities—and did not make space for or value the theory she would encounter later: “For some reason we have learned that this has nothing to do with activism, that this is not activism.” She tells me, “It is possible to work for 10 years in feminist activism in the DR without ever picking up a copy of Simone de Beauvoir” and therefore know little about the roots of this activism.

“Why is that?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she says reflexively, before educating me on the real issues at hand: “I think information is power, on the one hand, and the influence of capitalism is very strong. The idea is to produce, produce and produce...but without thinking or reflecting on what we are doing or saying.”

Jeannette says she identified with Lorde’s writing in part because she recognized the power it could have for Dominican women with whom she was intimately connected. She found “Uses of the Erotic” on the internet over a decade ago, she tells me, “No one feminist had talked to me about this woman. And indeed that is an anger that I carry with

³¹ One popular network of Dominican lesbians online, which was founded in 2009, now has nearly 1000 members.

³² Jiménez Polanco.

me. As if feminism is white, without recognition of the achievements that there are in this country, because in this country there are black women, black feminists, but we don't think about it from that perspective...What I've seen, is that there are very few relationships between feminist activism and black feminists. It was by accident that I found the essay by Audre Lorde." Her racial critique of the structures of power at play within the movement is impassioned, one with which she struggles greatly as a Dominican feminist.

US black feminists and members of Combahee Women's Collective issued some of the earliest self-declared women of color feminist writings about experiences of intersectional identity and intersecting oppressions: racism, classism, sexism and homophobia. Its members, such as Lorde, Barbara Smith, and Cheryl Clarke, speak to many of the experiences of Dominican women in ways that Dominican feminists have not.³³ The scholarship is hungrily taken up by women in the DR trying to navigate structural oppression—with limited resources.³⁴ In Lorde's "The Uses of the Erotic," she warns against the binding traditions of white male patriarchy and through the wisdom of her own transnational identity, she calls for action that leads us to social change that truly has no borders. She writes, "Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama."³⁵

Not unlike the work done by black lesbian feminists in the US decades before, Afro-Latina feminist activists in the DR mobilize culture "as a means of formulating a political alternative to heteropatriarchal and nationalist constructions of non-heteronormative difference as deviance".³⁶ Currently, few published Dominican women writers and scholars make claims on a black identity and address the issue of race through

³³ According to Yaneris, women in the South of the DR are "crazy for Lorde," as her work is passed within feminist networks in that region.

³⁴ In *Economies of Desire*, Amalia Cabezas considers some of the obstacles faced by poor Dominican women who have found viable work in the sex industry in the DR working as escorts, companions and sex workers for tourists, in order to support their families. Often, they do so in order to escape the violence of hypermasculinity in their most intimate relationships yet find themselves policed by the state and or victims of state violence from its many male actors.

³⁵ Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic" *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* by Audre Lorde (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 59.

³⁶ Ferguson, 111.

this lens in their work.³⁷ Fewer still “come out” as lesbians in their writing while residing in the DR. Gradually, the existence of Afro-Latina lesbians in the popular imaginary makes their public presence possible.³⁸ The anthology *Divagaciones Bajo La Luna* (2006) is a rare project that specifically showcases the writings of Dominican lesbians.³⁹ Many of the book’s contributors live outside of the DR, where they experience greater freedom to identify themselves at a distance from the repressive cultural expectations with which they identify their homeland.⁴⁰ Female Dominican writers are frequently relegated to self-publication to get their work out and, initially at least, limited to informal circulation within intimate communities.⁴¹

Circulated via Facebook, email and on the group’s blog, the flyer for the *Tres Gatas* Audre Lorde event introduces her as a “US-born warrior, poet, lesbian activist, with roots in the Caribbean.” It includes in Spanish the following excerpt from Lorde’s poem “Who said it would be simple.”⁴² Her reference to color— rather than “race”— frames the language of intersecting oppressions and a quest for liberation that resonates: “But I who am bound by my mirror/as well as my bed/see causes in colour[sic]/as well as sex/and sit here wondering/which me will survive/all these liberations.” The reading takes place at a popular bohemian bar in the city’s colonial zone. After an introduction to the work of Lorde, there will be an open mic for participants to share their own writing. Performer and educator Isabel Spencer, another member of *Tres Gatas*, reads from Lorde’s essay, standing in front of colonial era pillars and walls lined with Spanish tiles. We sit on heavy wooden chairs in a central patio. In a circle under the open sky, each of us is asked to share something about what the erotic means to us. Few of the twelve or so women present are familiar with Lorde’s writing or the lessons that her work has to impart: “[W]e have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information,” writes Lorde, “confusing it with its

³⁷ Baez; Reyes Bonilla.

³⁸ Santo Domingo has numerous gay and lesbian clubs and a vibrant queer nightlife, yet annual the gay pride caravan that takes place during the day continues to face overt resistance from the state.

³⁹ The project was made possible in part with funding from Astraea Foundation, based in New York City; Astraea has also funded *Tres Gatas*’ work.

⁴⁰ Jiménez Polanco; Lara; Reyes Bonilla.

⁴¹ Baez; Indiana Hernandez; Báez has also used her blog and Facebook to promote sales of her book in the DR.

⁴² However, the poem is misidentified on the event flyer as another of her poems that is also listed on the site.

opposite, the pornographic.” Indeed, some attendees confuse her erotic with a more sexual definition of the term. They take advantage of the woman-centered space and our conversation on this topic to flirt openly, asserting a lesbian identity that is highly informed by Dominican *machismo*.

Consciousness-raising, or what members of *Tres Gatas* refer to as “*reflexión*,” has been one of their primary goals, even if only just within their small group as they stay involved with activism in different ways. “The people who make up *Tres Gatas* today,” explains Jeanette, “began to work together in feminist activism within the youth movement, in the movement for sexual and reproductive rights and in all of these spaces of articulation that exist in the country.” *Tres Gatas* is not focused on doing work on LGBT rights, Jeanette tells me, because other groups are doing that work. Often there is no space for competing interests and collaboration can be extremely difficult and tiresome. Rather, the group is dedicated to visibility, dialogue, and self-growth. Jeanette says, “We are at this moment trying to express ourselves in a country where self-expression is a terrible thing. I don’t think at this moment we have any pretention about substantial changes.”

Gathering lesbian feminists as a group to talk about aspects of their racial and gendered experiences was a first step. Discussions around theory are not unlike book groups in which each one takes a turn leading the discussion. Yet, like the retreats they coordinate for themselves, there is a great deal of self-reflection and personal revelation. Jeanette’s sense is that many activist groups preceding *Tres Gatas* have not been successful because participants came together with very different politics and struggled to build coalitions.⁴³ Differing political views have meant differing political agendas and, as I have witnessed, conflicting priorities. I ask whether they had a model for the type of activist group that *Tres Gatas* became. What previous examples existed? “Right here in the country in the 80s, 80s to the beginning of the 90s, there were more than five lesbian groups. I dunno, *la ciguay*, *la chancleta*, *la estufa*, the whatever, there were militant lesbian feminist groups....It was a feminism that was in contact with the literature of this activism and feminism of the United States of the 1980s, with the production, let's say,

⁴³ Another interviewee I spoke with lamented her 14 years of activism with little progress organizing around issues of social justice because of conflict at the level of discussion and coordination.

academic intellectual production of women of Latin America, and on top of all this the *encuentro feminista* got underway in the 80s...”

This wave of the feminist movement in the DR emerged after increasing numbers of Dominican women left the country to study, and, as Jeannette puts it, for “romantic encounters.” Increased opportunities for migration meant access to new ideologies and feminist materials that would then circulate back to the island along with new ideas about race and gender. As Dominican author Chiqui Vicioso writes about her own departure from the Dominican Republic, “I would have been the classic *fracasada* (failure) in my country because I know that I would not have found happiness in marriage and having children. I would have been frustrated, unhappy in a marriage, or divorced several times over because I would not have understood that within me was a woman who needed to express her own truths, articulate her own words. That, in Santo Domingo, would have been impossible.”⁴⁴ The possibility for education and out-migration has also meant the departure of a great many women who might have otherwise fought to change the society. Jeannette says wistfully of the feminists that have come before her, “the good people, the people who have perspective, a vision, always end up leaving.” She herself has relocated to Bogotá, Colombia.

Ultimately, says Jeanette, *Tres Gatas* has been able to bring together a group of women who share a common vision of feminism. As my conversation with Yaneris highlights, even those who believed feminism held nothing for them. “You know what the first feminist I ever saw said to me?” says Yaneris, capturing her alienation from the feminists she encountered. “Why do you straighten your hair if you seem to be such an intelligent woman?”

“And I was like, ‘Okay, you are going to teach me how to live with kinky hair? You’re white’ ... it’s like, ‘don’t fuck with me.’” This kept her away from feminism for three years, she tells me; she wanted nothing to do with feminists. But now her impression has changed. “I tell you, Jeannette was the first friendly feminist that I knew. And obviously she was of the more recent generation than the other, that generation had other things going on.” Jeannette was willing to sit down and have the difficult

⁴⁴ Sherezada “Chiqui” Vicioso, “Discovering Myself: Un Testimonio” in *The Afro-Latin@ Reader*, eds. Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 264.

conversations. Yaneris otherwise identified the activism taking place in Latin America as led by Leftists/Marxists who she did not feel were inviting of her, or critiquing identity within their politics. For Yaneris, a black identity captures far more about her experience in the world than an identity that is solely Dominican, and consequently Latina. Claiming blackness allows her to connect her experience to other Afro-Latinas and have experiences of difference acknowledged.

Jeannette's identity as a Dominican woman is unique from her peers. She is from Santiago, not the capital. She tells me a little bit about herself not long after we meet, when I interview her for my project as we hike along the spectacular southern coast of the DR, at *Bahia de las Aguilas*. She is extremely small in stature and fair in color—what Dominicans refer to as *blanquita*, or “Dominican white,” suggesting that somewhere her lineage she has non-European ancestors. Her long hair is wavy, and she has a charming gap between her two front teeth.

“A woman like me is not considered black here,” she tells me. “If it would have occurred to me to say that I am black, and sometimes say so, the reaction of the people is almost like I am ridiculous, because of the color of my skin. People don't understand this process of racialization.” Jeannette has this perspective because of her own research and reflection on the topic of race and racism in the Caribbean through her studies on gender. “Of course, in this same process, which has been mainly academic, I encountered my own history of racialization...if it hadn't been for academia it's very likely I would not have possibilities to reflect on the theme *más allá* [more broadly].”

The New York City-based Astraea Foundation for Social Justice, which supports the efforts of lesbian communities around the world, saw the potential in *Tres Gatas* and provided them with a two-year renewable grant. With this funding they were able to print for its members what they refer to as “the bible,” a spiral-bound collection of feminist scholarship chosen by *Tres Gatas* members. The compilation includes works by Dominican scholar Ochy Curiel, alongside Spanish translations of Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva. US-based first wave feminist writings address colonialism but not necessarily issues of race and identity among Latinas, or language with which to discuss Dominican identity in terms of blackness. An essay by Yuderkys Espinosa explores the politics of identity of the 1990s; Asunción Portolés' work about post-colonial feminism, and a

critique of eurocentrism in western feminism is also included. Jesus Chucho García's essay on blackness and ethnicity among people of African descent in the Americas, places Dominican identities in a diaspora which in the history of Dominican national identity has been actively elided.

Academic scholarship that can be accessed by transnational audiences via the internet contributes to the production of spaces of intellectual discussion in which new ideologies can take shape, and new cultural productions emerge. They must, because Dominican women must create for themselves alternative spaces in which they can claim all aspects of themselves and live their lives in Santo Domingo. New perspectives on racialized experience become crucial for Dominican women to make sense of the innumerable ways they are affected by hierarchies of color in Dominican society. Familiar Dominican mantras such as "we're not racist, we can't be racist (like people in the US) because we are all different colors and we love everyone in our multicolored families" are no consolation to dark-skinned Dominicans locked out of work opportunities and targeted as Other within one's own society. *Las Gatas* combat social injustice calling it out for what it is, as they combat the psychological impact of being told that these prejudices are "no big deal," that they do not exist, or that such daily micro-aggressions are all in their heads. Jeannette explains to me that it is in *Tres Gatas* where she has had the space to talk with the other women in the group about their lives, in particular, black Dominican women who experience racial prejudice that she did not. "They have given me a lot of insight into this theme. They helped me a lot in this reflection about their own life stories that are not mine, because I have not had happen to me what has happened to them. On the level of this story of race I am a privileged one." Curious about how far the privilege she claims extends, I ask her, "Are you middle class?"

"No, my family is poor, *campesina*. But I always had a lot of educational access because in my family there are many teachers, people who went to school. And this is an important value and continues to be important. And racial privilege."

El Besatón

Organized to demand the rights of all people to publicly express their love for one another, the *Besatón* takes place on the last Saturday in June of 2010. It is scheduled to coincide with LGBT Pride events occurring that day worldwide. Although met with a sudden and torrential downpour, the weather does not much deter participants or the press from showing up. Photos of the event later posted on Facebook offer evidence of smiling and wet attendees lined up under a row of umbrellas. The rain subsides quickly and participants are able to make the walk from the entrance to *Calle el Conde* (a popular shopping area in the colonial zone) to the *Plaza de Colón*, beside the *Cathedral of Santa María la Menor*. The protest has been coordinated in response to an incident in which the Dominican director of migration sought to deport a heterosexual Haitian couple for publicly displaying affection. A photographer for the local paper *El Nacional* published a picture of the two kissing in on the street. Although married, and legally living in the DR, their actions were marked objectionable by the state apparatus, as Haitians made visible and caught expressing their sexual autonomy. The image of the two reveals very little of the objectionable kiss. Because they work selling phone cards in the street, they are clothed head to toe, wearing red smocks that read “Claro” and (courtesy of another cell phone company) bright orange caps with long backs that protect their necks from the harsh sun. The image circulated widely and quickly online. For many, it was one more embarrassing example of Dominican anti-Haitian sentiment.⁴⁵

Besatón organizers, including *Tres Gatas* and representatives from several other activist groups, quickly linked the institutional violence against Haitian immigrants in the DR to the ongoing criminalization of gays and lesbians by the state. In particular, they connect it to the recent police crackdown on *Parque Duarte*, a public space in the colonial zone where gays and lesbians gather en masse to organize and socialize late into the night.⁴⁶ In an email that *Tres Gatas* sent out about the *Besatón*, they call on members of the community to attend by framing the issues at hand within in a discourse of human rights. Pointing specifically to the new constitution (revised in 2010), they position the

⁴⁵ From the archives of the blog http://estepaisdemierda.blogspot.com/2010_05_01_archive.html

⁴⁶ Political pressure from conservative pundit Freddy Beras-Goica increase police presence for about a year. After Beras-Goicos death in late 2010, the pressure slowly lifted and the crowds in the park have returned (though not, most people agree, the way it was before).

struggle in the DR as linked to movements taking place across all of Latin America against militaristic and dictatorial cultures of repression.⁴⁷

Yaneri designed a vivid poster to draw attention to the *Besatón* and increase attendance. Rather than printed and posted, it was circulated digitally via Facebook and on the *Tres Gatas* blog. She explains about the design, “In our culture we are very oral and visual. It’s like, seriously, you can write whatever you want below, but what says it all—in general, right?—to get your message across it is better to create artwork.” The poster reads, “For freedom of expression and the right to pleasure” and she has illustrated it with the abstract silhouettes of two women, kissing. They are both the same stenciled headshots of a Dominican woman with curlers in her hair; one in green and the other contrasting in pink, they are turned to face each other. The poster also reads in bold “NOTICIA DEL SIGLO 21: A BESAR NO ES INMORAL [News of the 21st century: kissing is not immoral],” along with, “Showing affection is not a crime, it is a human right of all people, Heterosexuals, Gays, Lesbians or Trans.” Yaneri has used the familiar symbol from factory-produced bathroom signs—a chubby stick figure in white—to line the bottom left-hand corner of the flyer. The symbols engage with a contemporary visual currency that is transnationally recognizable: men/women, ladies/gentlemen. Yet, this time they are at play: two male symbols hold hands, two female hold hands, then a man and a woman hold hands. Finally, the now popular symbol for unisex or transfriendly bathrooms is there in repetition: stick figures with a half skirt half pants holding hands. We distributed a photocopied explanation of the motivation behind the *Besatón* to the people we passed as we paraded down *Calle el Conde* after the rain. Little public kissing took place but the overarching message of the event was simple, “*Todo los derechos para todas las personas!*” or “equal rights for everyone!”

Cutting Our Hair

Carolina is dressed for dramatic effect, in a white jacket with a surgical mask over her mouth and latex gloves. She stands behind Arcy on a low wall in front of a statue of Juan Pablo Duarte, one of the country’s forefathers, prepared to cut hair. “Within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” writes bell hooks in her essay, “Straightening Our

⁴⁷ From an email sent days before the event; received again via Yaneri on March 29th, 2011 for archive.

Hair,” “the social and political context in which the custom of black folks straightening our hair emerges, it represents an imitation of the dominant white group’s appearance and often indicates internalized racism, self-hatred, and/or low self esteem.” The 1988 essay was published in 2005 in Spanish translation for the Cuban journal *Criterios*.⁴⁸ Arcy emailed a copy of the essay to her networks with an invitation to join her at *Parque Duarte* (“*el Parque*”) where she would have her hair cut publically. Most Dominicans refer to Arcy as “*rubia*” (the same term used to refer to blonde-haired people) because of her lightness in color, combined with the texture of her light-brown curly hair. She tells me that night that only last year did she start to recognize herself as a black woman. As hooks states in the essay that spoke so strongly to Arcy, “Without organized struggles like the ones that happened in the 1960s and early 1970s, individual black women must struggle alone to acquire the critical consciousness that would enable us to examine issues of race and beauty, our personal choices, from a political standpoint.” Arcy’s action is equally about coming into consciousness as she talks back to the DR’s patriarchal power structure and oppressions faced by Dominican women expected to conform to a gender category.

It is 10pm on a Thursday night in *el Parque* when Carolina finally starts cutting off Arcy’s hair, one handful at a time. Arcy speaks loudly about the significance of her act. “*No tengo miedo*,” she shouts, again and again, “I am not afraid. I am cutting my hair to show that I am not afraid.” A signboard beside her says the same. Women and men are drawn to the spectacle. She stands in front of the small crowd wearing a black T-shirt that has an Angela Davis image on it. “*Estoy jarta!*” she yells to her audience, explaining that she is fed up with the social pressure to have long, straight, flowing hair. She is sick of the social obligation to visit the salon once a week in order to present herself as a Dominican woman. “I am not white,” she shouts in Spanish, “I don’t want to be white. Here no one has straight hair, here everyone is *mestizo* [mixed].” She has placed poster board with markers along the sidewalk in front of her so that bystanders may become participants and write comments in response—and people do. Dominican photographer Lorena Espinosa is present, documenting the occasion. Images of Arcy’s haircut will

⁴⁸ *Criterios* publishes in PDF numerous scholarly articles in translation from English.

reach audiences throughout the Americas, via Facebook and on YouTube.⁴⁹ As she goes on, she talks back against the ongoing violence against women in the DR, connecting a freedom from the social pressures of gender performance (including the use of skin bleaches, hair relaxers and language that obscures the reality of Dominican women's African roots) to Dominican women's need to reclaim greater control over their own lives.

In the next moment, however, as if choreographed, a middle-aged fair-skinned Dominican man begins to talk back to Arcy in protest. The crowd chants over him, following Arcy's lead, "*Mi cuerpo es mio! Mi cuerpo es mio!* [My body is mine!]" Then, quite unexpectedly, the man's girlfriend approaches and shouts something in support of his assertions. They want Arcy to look behind her at the statue of Duarte, telling her that it is disrespectful for her to do such a thing right there in front of this important patriarch. When she does not heed this warning, the woman tosses her drink in Arcy's face and swiftly walks away. Stunned, Arcy continues her chant with a smile on her face. Afterward, Yaneris remarks on the profound example of fear that this woman's actions reflect. Both Arcy and Yaneris read the situation on racial terms: she was a dark-skinned Dominican woman acting in defense of her white male partner. "The worst part of the system is that women reproduce the violence," Arcy says. Dominican writer Chiqui Vicioso has articulated similar struggles as a Dominican woman, "That's the most painful part. You come back to your country with a sense of intimate relationship and find that, for the most part, the principal *machistas* are the women themselves."⁵⁰

"Embodied performance..." writes Diana Taylor in *The Archive and the Repertoire*, "makes visible an entire spectrum of attitudes and values. The multicodeedness of these practices transmits as many layers of meaning as there are spectators, participants, and witnesses."⁵¹ Arcy's political action was successful in drawing attention to the issue of self-hatred and impossible beauty standards in the DR, inspiring others to see that rejection of these beauty standards is possible. The immediate effect of her haircutting at *el Parque* seemed almost cathartic. A few other young women

⁴⁹ I take a video of the event on a small handheld camera. With Arcy's permission we post it online, listing it as "*Caminando Hacia el 25 de noviembre*" per her request. A viewer in Chile thanks her.

⁵⁰ Sherezada "Chiqui" Vicioso, "Discovering Myself," 265.

⁵¹ Taylor, 49.

came up to get a trim. Arcy and Carolina fell into a powerful discussion about self-love, about being able to look at one's self in the mirror as black women. Carolina, a Dominican American who moved to Santo Domingo the year before after graduating from college, recently cut off all of her straightened hair.⁵² She and other young women report constant harassment for wearing their hair natural, even as it is quickly becoming in fashion. Carolina says she struggled to recognize herself with this new hairstyle after having spent so much of her life processing her hair to make it straight, something to which Arcy can relate. Arcy recounts how every day as a child her father told her to make her fine, wavy hair look "good"—meaning straight—before heading out the door. These were social expectations that she eventually came to reject.

I interview Arcy on a different night at *el Parque*. We sit turned facing each other on a metal park bench and, like those around us in the darkness, share a beer. The din of other conversations and occasional howl of a motorbike zipping by fills the space between us. She educates me on existing stereotypes about Dominican women, the weight of which she carries with her. She has little difficulty describing the same social construction I have by then heard from many of the women I have interviewed in Santo Domingo:

The Dominican woman I grew up imagining I would become? It was a woman that goes to the salon once a week, has her hair straightened with chemicals, a woman with a lot of ass, a woman that cooks well...I don't know if socially I am a woman....Why? Because I don't do all that women do. I don't want to marry...I have not yet decided to have a child and I am almost thirty. I am not submissive, I'm not much of a cook. I'm not a prude, or a Catholic. I just want to be happy, or at least try to be. And have all the freedom to be, but in my own way....What I don't like about the model imposed on me is that it is imposed on me and there is no other way. That the only women presented to me were women like this. It's sad when you only have one way to grow up.

"It's sad." She emphasizes, this time in English. Arcy and the other members of *Tres Gatas* dare to have a different vision for how things might be in Dominican society. "I don't care if I have a vagina... Don't set expectations on me because that's not what I decided, that's not my life it's yours. I'm just a human and I expect everyone to treat me

⁵² She has gone on to coordinate a natural hair blog for Afro-Latinas and gotten excellent response, www.missrizos.com.

like one. I just want to have the freedom to do whatever I decide to,” she tells me, switching in and out of English. “I don’t know if I still have people in my life that expect me to be like that but I decided a couple of years ago that I’m not, that has never been my path. And I’m not gonna start now. ‘Cause I am happy being just a human, not a woman. I don’t wanna be a Dominican woman. I just wanna be a person that lives here.”

Arcy told me she did not read feminist scholarship on a regular basis because she found it difficult to read in English. ‘I read things that affect me, protests that are groups of young people, groups of women,’ she said. Fluent in spoken English, Arcy taught herself the language by watching endless hours of American television. We switched back and forth from English to Spanish as we discussed gender identity and the politics of LGBT activism in the DR. She brought up the popular Showtime lesbian drama, “The L Word” as a queer transnational point of reference (one that I feel quite ambivalent about); she had seen every episode on cable television in the DR. I asked where she accessed other information about queer issues and whether she got material via Facebook. “Yes, right now. Before it was more email, when there was very important information, people sent it by email and you went there to read messages, but...it is faster, more efficient if you read a note [on Facebook] or you see a line on Facebook...you know, if you care or not, you click and have instant access to the information.”⁵³ On Facebook, conversations take place more openly (and are often illustrated), while email conversations circulate somewhat less openly.

Conclusion

The day to day work of *Tres Gatas*, the initiation of dialogues that require its members to articulate the complexities of their identities and their political values and the organizing of subversive actions for visibility carry on Lorde’s legacy as they bring women of color into consciousness about their own power. Women of color feminist theory and black feminist theory in particular challenge *Tres Gatas* to articulate the interconnectedness in their oppression and that of other women of color worldwide. Technologies that Lorde never could have imagined build momentum for feminist activism in Latin America,

⁵³ The larger lesbian “community,” Jeanette had told me, has its own failed attempts at organizing to look back on. As in any political movement, there are many egos with which to contend.

making possible greater online organizing, sharing of resources and sustained transnational community building. As Jeannette told me, “There are other groups in Latin America a lot like ours. This has been a relief.” As with any such collective, conflicts between members and changes in participation are a part of *Tres Gatas*’ past and its present. The challenge remains in finding those that want to sit and have the conversations, read the academic texts, and share their own stories—not to mention those who want to introduce others to the materials. Each member of *Tres Gatas* that I spoke with expressed a desire to stop talking and start *doing* activism. Such consciousness raising work is then by design a temporary formation with participants moving on over the years. It is by necessity as transnational as its members, as past participants stay involved even after leaving the country and new members are brought in from outside the Dominican Republic. Just as we have learned from *This Bridge*, Lorde, and now *Tres Gatas*, there is great power in feminist coalition and reflection taking place across the globe.

The internet has provided a space in which Dominican lesbians can build community and leave their mark. Transnational social networking platforms allow Dominican lesbians to post pictures of themselves, and their friends and families, essentially digitizing themselves into existence. When each has felt she was the only one, they are empowered by seeing other Dominican lesbians and chatting online within all-lesbian communities of hundreds of women. Along with social networking and information sharing, the internet facilitates the type of cultural production that feeds identity-based social movements like the one *Tres Gatas* embraced.

My investigation into the work of *Tres Gatas* has led me to ask the types of questions about identity and values through which we have built friendships. Each made it clear that they have been as deliberate about what they shared with me as a *gringa* researcher, as I have been with them about transparency in my work.⁵⁴ What they tell me about who they are, and what I share with them in reciprocation, builds a transnational black feminist connection between us. As a methodological approach, it confirms something I once learned from Lorde’s writings about the importance of feminist

⁵⁴ I invited them to read the essay I have producing about them, before publication, and give me feedback on the choices I have made in representing them for an academic audience.

collaboration across cultural difference. She reminds us that we can and must use “human difference as a springboard for creative change within our lives.”⁵⁵ The literature that feminist scholars and feminist activists now share in common, via new mediums of access, makes possible connection across shared theoretical language. As Yaneris put it, when she responded via Facebook to my thanks for our interview, “It’s good to talk with people about topics that always remain with us. Either we notice them or we don’t, we name them or we don’t. The process has been great, I really like being able to speak openly about how complicated I think it all is.” We build collaborations across the divide of privilege—here defined by nation, class, color, insider and outsider knowledge and much more. Moreover, the ability to reach across divides and make a movement out of what little resources are available has forever been a strength of women of color feminists. In the context of the Dominican Republic, women finding ways to extend their reach transnationally is one more example of this. “At this moment, what is clear is that our work in whatever we do with lesbians is a revolutionary act,” says Jeannette. “*No para nosotros, si no para nosotras* [not for us (male) but for us (female)].”

⁵⁵ Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* by Audre Lorde (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 115-116.

Conclusion

Estamos fea pa' la foto



Figure 1 – Harold Priego comic making light of the oppression of women in the DR

Violence Against Dominican Women

On November 26, 2011, a day after the annual International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, *El Diario Libre* of Santo Domingo published Harold Priego's comic in his regular spot in the daily paper. The well-known artist and author of the *Boque Chivo* series, Priego's social commentary in the form of a daily comic strip has been read by Dominicans now for decades. His biting humor, and pointed social critique have made him very popular. He uses reoccurring characters that play into the stereotypes of Dominicans, and different people within the world of the DR. His base of characters include Yuleidy, a curvaceous Mega Diva that the protagonist Boquechivo is always after. The punch lines of his jokes are also often racist and as misogynistic.

The cartoon, entitled "¡DIOS MIO!...", garnered commentary from some but surprised few with its audacity. It immediately circulated as a digital image on Facebook as it was, after publication digitally archived with Priego's other work on his website. The cartoon shows a woman with her hair and face covered in a white shroud; she is

looking behind her as if aware of danger. Apparently, the woman represents a universal Arab woman located in a distant world, who is oppressed because of her gender. Along a wall behind her, are different headlines posted about state violence against women occurring in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. The topic of rape, and the physical punishment of women, is the focus, particularly under Sharia law. The first sign on the upper left hand corner of the wall reads, “A 13 year old child in Saudi Arabia is condemned to 90 lashes for bringing a cell phone to school.” It suggests to the Dominican reader that not only are young women in these far away nations facing violent punishment, but they are being denied the right to use technologies such as the cell phone. Above the woman’s head, a thought bubble reads, “What I wouldn’t give to be *dominicana*...!”

Priego treatment of the subject of violence against women, demonstrates the male privilege that enjoys. Women activists in the DR rightly took offense at the work, as it dismisses the very real violence committed against women in the DR every day and suggests that in fact it is in these foreign places that such sexism is extreme. The comic is an excellent example of the way in which essentialized Arab identities and Muslim cultures can be mobilized by others in order to humanize their own culture of aggression, against women and also gays and lesbians. It is as if, in light of the oppression of women that occurs in the various countries (conflated as one and held at a distance) our own society is extremely civilized. In this case, Priego’s widely read cartoon negates the very real violence that Dominican women experience, particularly because of the ways that in which their bodies are racialized and commodified, as Latina and as black.

The conversations I have shared with young women throughout this project, and their status in a rapidly changing Dominican society, are not separate from this real violence enacted on Dominican women and children daily. A friend in Santo Domingo spouts off gang rape stories of young girls whom she knows as if they are a normal part of life. The sexual predators are often a band of *tigueres*, she says, aggressive males who move in packs on the street at night, above and beyond the law. Girls and women learn lessons at a very young age about not being safe in their own bodies. The daily papers weekly feature stories about men who have killed their wives, daughters or girlfriends. The reasons for the crime are often explained rationalized by men for male audiences as,

“she cheated on me,” “she tried to leave me,” or “she didn’t have my food ready for me when I came home.”¹ Patriarchal systems kill women at alarming rates; increasingly global activist websites gather statistics that reflect this reality. Violence against women rooted in patriarchy comes in many different forms and women, not only men, have investments in maintaining it. Mothers force their young daughters to give birth to babies born of rape and sexual coercion, or keep silent about rampant sexual abuse. The state, as in the DR, may make abortion illegal, criminalizing girl children who want to choose what happens to their bodies, and blaming mothers and daughters for the high rates of teen pregnancy. Underlying the many other issues I have addressed with this study, patriarchal oppression and the privileges of masculinity shape the lives of those born into bodies as the female sex.

With a focus on visual culture, racial ambiguity, transnationalism and neoliberalism, this dissertation has explored the ways that Dominican women’s bodies have particular value as goods. A neoliberal state structure that dominates the media is invested in perceptions of Dominican women as essentialized consumable goods for the tourist industry in the DR. Writes Hill Collins, “Viewing the world through a both/and conceptual lens of the simultaneity of race, class, and gender oppression and of the need for a humanist vision of community creates new possibilities for an empowering Afrocentric feminist analysis. Many black feminist intellectuals have long thought about the world in this way because this is the way we experience the world.”² For those without a subject position that would make this vantage point inescapable, one must be diligent in reading the world from the perspective of those most oppressed within it. It is indeed, as Hill Collins shows, as a powerful tool of analysis.

What I formally learned about race in my late teens and early twenties allowed me to articulate my experiences as a black woman and as a racially mixed woman of African descent. This no doubt offered an important point of connection and dialogue between myself and my Dominican interviewees. By documenting my experiences of and knowledge of contemporary Santo Domingo for academic audiences, I aim to challenge

¹ http://www.diariolibre.com/destacada/2012/03/21/i328561_femicidios-machismo-violencia-de-genero.html

² Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 221-222.

structures of power with stories that they had gladly silenced, and seemed to have erased, and new perspectives on what it means to be *dominicana*.

Ethnography has been critical to my visual culture studies project because as a transnational feminist scholar I recognize that Dominican women's perspectives are essential to my analysis of their contemporary lives and experiences in Santo Domingo and the ways that women both publically and privately produce their own identities. I have not looked to the cultural memory of Dominican women, suggesting their difference and distance from global culture, but rather what matters to young people—memories do not matter so much as the real and the now. For example, what is “cool” is important to think about changing transnational societies under neoliberalism in which young people desire to be on the cutting edge.

The transnational identities of the women I write about already have them feeling dislodged from place as they are relegated to a life contained by the physical boundaries of the small island nation of the DR. As Deborah Thomas and Kamari Maxine Clarke write regarding what becomes almost a cognitive dissonance:

In order to understand the diverse ways people participate in producing new forms of practice—and thus, new forms of meaning—within the contemporary context of globalization, social theory must render more clearly how culture becomes dislodged from place, even as the ideological politics of state governance continue to reference territorial terrain (regions, villages, nations) as the basis for particular ancestral and, therefore, originary orders.³

Over time, I have come to understand racial meaning differently within the DR. Throughout my research, I, too, am dislodged from place. My own identity becomes ambiguous in the context of the DR. “But you *seem* Latina,” a Dominican friend's relatives pressed over Thanksgiving dinner in Santo Domingo. I feel as though I am making a confession when I tell them of my African and Eastern European heritage—a familiar mix to the island of Hispaniola. I can only imagine that when people say this to me—and they do so regularly enough—that they are doing me a favor by negating my blackness and including me with them in that security of *Latinidad*.

³ Deborah A. Thomas and Kamari Maxine Clarke, *Globalization and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

Small Acts

Like so many dissertations before it, this project has been about birthing pieces of myself, in particular, investigating parallels in my experience to that of other racially mixed black women in diaspora. My identity has refined the lens through which I view this study. My story is imbedded in the story that I have written here about racial ambiguity and transnational Dominican women's identities. My understandings of Dominican culture are informed by my ability to move through Dominican society in the ways that I do: sometimes without comment, other times as decidedly different, and frequently aligned in ideology with a recognizable subculture. It is unlikely that I would have been able to access the spaces I accessed, ask the questions that I asked or build the relationships I built had my social identity been different. Each time I leave the DR, I take advantage of a privilege the privilege of leaving. I assured myself that I do not "fit" here, the restrictions of this place are not my own, this is not my culture. However, for a good number of young women I met along the way, throughout their short lives, they have felt the same. This study is about considering the choices that women of mixed racial heritage make in naming themselves. What have detailed here are some of the ways that the decisions that they make about who they are and how they see themselves are informed by a larger global culture. That they do not want to be left behind, but in fact, they are being held back.

With this dissertation, I have generated a picture of life in Santo Domingo from 2010 and into 2012. Including the public university in my evaluation of the cultural impact of neoliberal development and the social impact of new technologies and the internet in order to provide a context for Dominican women's identities. I look at the ways Dominican women discuss and negotiate the cultural expectations placed upon them within the DR and abroad, their own relationships to existing stereotypes of the Dominican female, and the experiences of racial ambiguity that shape their worldviews. I account for the ways qualities of Dominican women bodies position them as a consumable good. "Mixed race" and racially ambiguous bodies effectively serve a neoliberal global agenda in which diversity and multiculturalism are prized, yet society remains striated by class and by color. Numerous factors inform the how Dominican women's bodies are valued under neoliberalism. Furthermore, the construction

transnational identities through new technologies and the internet has been central to this project even as it does not always first come to the fore. Most consistent has been my reading of visual culture to understand the meanings behind some of the many cultural ideologies the women I spoke with were constantly navigating. As Gina Ulysse has written, wrapping up the study with a nice neat conclusion would go against what I have made an effort to portray here.⁴ It would be a false framing of an ever-dynamic culture; a painting of a moment rather than a YouTube video of an era.

Porque Sí/Because Yes

What is the power of our narrative? What is the impact of this work—creating archive, creating memory, leaving a mark? With this project on the lives of contemporary Dominican women, I have taken on this dilemma directly.⁵ Is it critical to locate the commonalities between African diasporic women to make transnational connections? The Dominican women I have gotten to know embrace a world of transnational popular media in forming their identities, but as my research reveals their concerns are far beyond the superficial. They are women struggle to free themselves and others from structural oppressions they face because of their gender and their color. Many of these structures today continue to be reinforced by US foreign policy, the role of the Catholic Church in the DR, and the tourism-based economies of neoliberal development.

In a gesture toward an open ending to this visual culture studies project, I would like to leave the reader with an anecdote—a joke that I find to be a fierce reminder of the struggle among those who have been colonized and re-colonized, to have the space to name themselves.⁶ It connects overarching questions I have attempted to address about what it means to write about the lives and identities of others, what presumptions do I make as a scholar, and how do I respond to other people telling me who and what I am.

⁴ Gina A. Ulysse, *Downtown Ladies: Informal Commercial Importers, a Haitian Anthropologist and Self-Making in Jamaica*. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁵ This approach to critiquing and rejecting the mutually constitutive can also be seen in more recent scholarship such as Jasbir Puar's important work *Terrorist Assemblages* in which she shows us how the homonormative in the US contributes to the construct of the sexually perverse and racialized Arab Other.

⁶ Closing with a joke also reflects the values of anecdotes to this type of research and how much they illustrate complex culture meanings and sentiments.

As humor often does, the joke captures so much about the place from which it emerges—including the need to maintain a real sense of humor about things:

“You know what that island’s called?” the taxi driver asked me. I was on a trip out of the city, to a favorite beach town of mine, the Belgian owner of the guesthouse where I was staying sent a local taxi down the hill to pick up me and my friends. As the young man drove us back up the hill (in his well-maintained minivan), he chatted with me. Then he pointed out at the view towards the main beach, directing my attention to a flat, stony landmass just off the beach; I had never noticed it before.

“No,” I say, “What’s it called?”

“*Isla Cabrón* [asshole],” he says to me.

—“You know why it’s called that?”

“No,” I say, wondering where he is going with this.

He grins and delivers his punch line, deadpan: “Because when Christopher Columbus sailed by here he pointed to it and said, ‘This shall be called “*Isla Cabrón*.””

Appendix

Rachel Afi Quinn

Images of the four Dominican women celebrities that I will be discussing with my interviewees. The same images are used in the survey I will send them.



Figure 2 – Print out with celebrity images for initiating interview discussions



Figure 3 – Mural in the Pedro Mir Library, UASD Campus (Photo credit Rachel Afi Quinn)



Figure 4 – Anti-Privatization Mural UASD Campus with Mercedes Garcia



Figure 5 – Anti-Privatization Mural UASD (Photo Credit Rachel Afi Quinn)



Figure 6 – Blaming the Mother



Figure 7 – Besatón Flyer designed by Yaneris Gonzalez Gomez

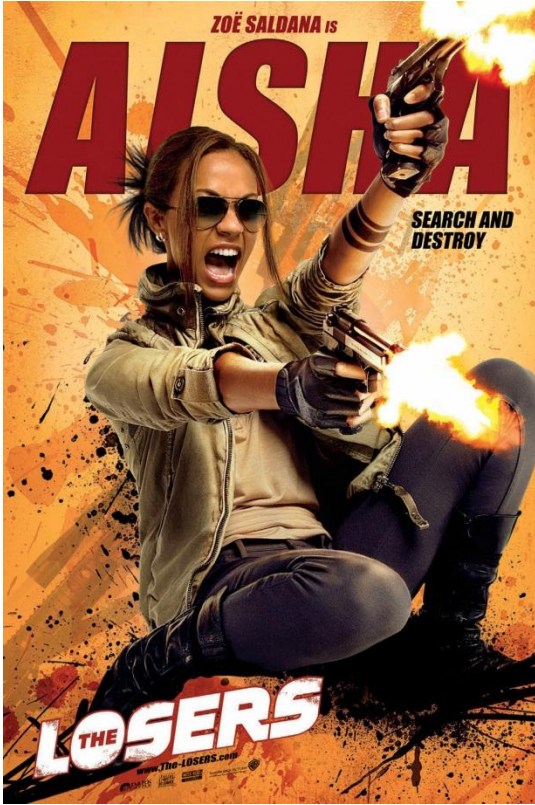


Figure 8 – Saldaña as tough Latina/Other



Figure 9 – Saldaña as delicate and feminine in perfume advertisement



Figure 10 – Michelle Ricardo's "cool" aesthetic



Figure 11 – Dania Ramirez advertisement in O magazine

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