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### Quisqueya on the Hudson: The Transnational Identity of Dominicans in Washington Heights

Jorge Duany

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**Quisqueya on the Hudson:  
The Transnational Identity of  
Dominicans in Washington Heights**  
2nd Edition

Jorge Duany



**DOMINICAN**  
STUDIES INSTITUTE

*Research Monograph*



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The Transnational Identity of  
Dominicans in Washington Heights**  
2nd Edition

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**CU  
NY** **DOMINICAN**  
STUDIES INSTITUTE  
*Research Monograph*

## **CUNY Dominican Studies Institute Dominican Research Monograph Series**

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## Foreword

Originally published by the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute (CUNY DSI) in 1994, Jorge Duany's ethnographic study entitled *Quisqueya on the Hudson: The Transnational Identity of Dominicans in Washington Heights* has been a seminal text in the study of the Dominican community in the United States. Duany documented distinctive characteristics of the Dominican community in the United States by closely examining the experiences of Dominicans on a single square block in the celebrated Dominican neighborhood of Washington Heights. The profound attachment that Dominicans in New York have toward their ancestral homeland is aptly emphasized by Duany. According to the author, the immense pride associated with Dominicanidad is expressed by Dominicans in the diaspora in a variety of ways, such as popular culture, national symbols, language and food. This study by Jorge Duany was CUNY DSI's first publication and set a lofty standard for the quality of work that would be published by CUNY DSI. We at the Institute would like to thank Jorge both for updating his wonderful text in this second edition and for his incisive and prescient analysis of the Dominican community in Washington Heights.

Abrazos,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Hernández', written in a cursive style.

Dr. Ramona Hernández  
Director, CUNY Dominican Studies Institute  
Professor of Sociology, The City College of New York

Dr. Jorge Duany is Professor of Anthropology and Chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. During the spring semester of 2007, he was the Bacardí Family Eminent Scholar in Latin American Studies at the University of Florida in Gainesville. He previously served as Director of the journal *Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, as Visiting Professor of Anthropology and American Studies at the University of Michigan, and as Assistant Director of the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Florida. He has also been a Research Fellow at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and at the Population Studies Center at the University of Pennsylvania. He earned his Ph.D. in Latin American Studies, with a concentration in anthropology, at the University of California, Berkeley. He also holds an M.A. in Social Sciences from the University of Chicago and a B.A. in Psychology from Columbia University. He has published extensively on Caribbean migration, ethnicity, race, nationalism, and transnationalism in academic journals and professional books in the Caribbean, North and South America, Europe, and Asia. His most recent book is titled *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States* (2002). He is the coauthor of *Puerto Ricans in Orlando and Central Florida* (2006), *Cubans in Puerto Rico: Ethnic Economy and Cultural Identity* (1997), and *El Barrio Gandul: Economía subterránea y migración indocumentada en Puerto Rico* (1995).

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## Preface to the Second Edition

When I published *Quisqueya on the Hudson* in 1994, transnationalism had not yet become a buzzword among migration scholars. Since then, a minor academic industry has emerged around transnational migration, with an increasing number of books, anthologies, journal issues, conferences, workshops, courses, and research centers devoted to its study. However, the field of transnational migration is plagued by persistent problems, especially the operational definition of the concept, the classification of various types of transnationalism, the explanation of its historical origins and consequences, the alleged novelty of contemporary transnationalism, and the future of transnationalism beyond the first generation of immigrants. In addition, scholars have engaged in a lively debate as to whether the Dominican Republic can be characterized as a prototype of transnational migration. Thanks to Dr. Ramona Hernández's kind invitation to reissue my monograph, I would like to take this opportunity to review some of the main issues in the recent study of transnationalism, particularly among Dominicans. I hope this will be a relevant intellectual exercise for those interested in the comparative analysis of the contemporary movements of people across national borders.

### What Is Transnationalism?

Throughout *Quisqueya on the Hudson*, I cited the pioneering work of Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton (1992). These authors formulated what is now considered the classic approach to transnational migration as “the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement,” including “multiple relations—familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political—that span borders” (p.1). Glick Schiller and her colleagues provided an extremely broad definition that encompassed the constant movement of people across borders as well as occasional practices such as sending gifts and packages by

Haitians and Filipinos to their relatives in the home countries. In contrast, Alejandro Portes, Luis Guarnizo, and Patricia Landolt (1999: 219) advocated restricting the meaning of transnationalism to “occupations and activities that require regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders for their implementation.” This definition applied particularly well to “transnational entrepreneurs” as an “alternative form of economic adaptation,” which required investments in capital, labor, and markets in more than one nation-state, as is the case with many Dominican businesses in New York City (see also Portes and Guarnizo 1991; Portes et al. 2002). However, Portes et al.’s approach would leave out many symbolic and material practices that tie together people in different countries, such as consuming American clothes and cars in the Dominican Republic, and consuming Dominican food and music in the United States.

I would therefore propose an intermediate stance toward transnationalism as the construction of dense social fields across national borders as a result of the circulation of people, ideas, practices, money, goods, and information. To quote Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller (2001: 1009), transnational networks “connect actors through direct and indirect relations across borders between those who move and those who stay behind.” This definition is close to what several scholars have dubbed transnationalism in their recent work, adopting a middle ground between nearly all-inclusive and extremely limited approaches (see Goldring 1996; Levitt and Nyberg-Sørensen 2004; Sørensen and Olwig 2002; Vertovec 2004). Furthermore, the definition would include many different types of linkages across various kinds of borders (not just state boundaries), including widely dispersed kinship networks and households.

In *Quisqueya on the Hudson*, I underscored how Dominicans in New York sustained strong cultural, family, and emotional bonds with the Dominican Republic. Most of my key informants felt more connected with their home communities than with the surrounding environment. Many of them did not actively participate in regular activities such as traveling to the Dominican Republic or belonging to Dominican voluntary associations in the United States. Yet they displayed a persistent attachment to

a Dominican identity, especially to the traditional food, music, language, and religion of the Dominican Republic. Rereading the interviews I conducted in 1993, I am still struck by how deeply Dominicans felt about their homeland, affectionately calling it *mi país* (“my country”), while remaining distant from the United States, which they usually described as *este país* (“this country”). The transnational identity of Dominicans in Washington Heights was split between “here” and “there” in ways that resonate strongly with other diasporic communities, such as Puerto Ricans (see Duany 2002; Flores 2000).

### **What Are the Basic Forms of Transnationalism?**

One way to solve the puzzle of defining transnationalism is to classify various kinds of the phenomenon. To begin, Luis Guarnizo and Michael Smith (1998) proposed a useful distinction between transnationalism “from above” and “from below.” Transnationalism from above refers to the actions initiated by powerful actors and institutions, such as transnational corporations, military bodies, the mass media, supranational political movements, and interstate entities. The latter would include large companies such as Microsoft, CNN, MTV, McDonald’s, and Disney, as well as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, or the Catholic and evangelical churches with a worldwide reach. In turn, transnationalism from below refers to the grassroots initiatives of ordinary people, small businesses, nongovernmental organizations, and nonprofit institutions, such as migrant workers and refugees, the ecological and indigenous movements, human rights groups, and hometown associations. It is unclear exactly where some “transnational” actors, such as drug traffickers and smugglers of undocumented migrants, would fit in this typology. In any case, most scholars have been primarily concerned with labor migration as a form of “transnationalism from below.”

Building on Smith and Guarnizo’s basic distinction, José Itzigsohn, Carlos Dore-Cabral, Esther Hernández Medina, and Obed Vázquez (1999) elaborated their own typology. For Itzigsohn

and his colleagues, transnational practices could be “narrow” or “broad,” depending on their degree of institutionalization and movement. On one hand, “narrow” transnationalism involved highly institutionalized activities and constant flows of people, such as membership in Dominican political parties in the United States. On the other hand, “broad” transnationalism involved a low level of institutionalization and sporadic physical movement between two countries, such as carrying bags full of merchandise on infrequent trips to the Dominican Republic (which some anthropologists have called “suitcase trading”). Unfortunately, this classification does not spell out the origins and consequences of each form of transnationalism, and therefore only serves as a convenient device to categorize transnational practices along a wide continuum of intensity and regularity.

More recently, Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) have identified three types of transnationalism from the viewpoint of migrant-sending states. First are “transnational nation-states” like the Dominican Republic or El Salvador, which have incorporated their long-distance members by extending them dual citizenship and voting rights. Second are “strategically selective states” like Haiti or Barbados, which recognize some but not all of the legal rights of their migrant citizens. Finally, “disinterested and denouncing states” such as Cuba or Slovakia exclude migrants from their definition of the homeland. Although not exhaustive (I would add transnational colonial states such as Puerto Rico, for example), this typology helps to identify different public policies toward dispersed populations by sending governments. It does not, however, address the powerful impact of host governments, especially the United States, on immigrant communities and their relations with the home country.

Looking back at *Quisqueya on the Hudson*, I realize that I was primarily interested in transnationalism “from below” and that most of the cultural practices I described among Dominicans in New York were of a “broad” type. At the time of my fieldwork in Washington Heights, the Dominican Republic had not yet become a full-fledged “transnational nation-state.” For instance, dual citizenship was approved in 1994 and Dominicans abroad

first voted in the 2004 Dominican presidential elections. Even though many residents of Washington Heights expressed a strong desire to return to the Dominican Republic, most only visited their country of origin once a year. Still, their daily lives were thoroughly transnationalized in the sense that they constantly shuttled between Dominican and American cultures, between Spanish and English, and between “here” and “there.” Cultural, physical, and geographic displacement still characterizes New York’s Dominican community, largely as a consequence of continuing migration.

### **How Did Transnationalism Emerge?**

Scholars have enumerated several causes for the rise of contemporary transnationalism, although they disagree as to their relative significance (Basch et al. 1994; Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Portes et al. 1999). Many authors have noted that the globalization of capitalism since World War II accelerated the worldwide expansion of financial and labor markets, particularly the search for cheap labor in developing countries, which in turn intensified the movement of people seeking employment. In addition, the technological revolution in mass transportation and electronic communications has greatly compressed time and space, especially through the development of jet airplanes, cellular phones, fax machines, videotapes, cable and satellite television, the Internet, and email. As a result, it has become much cheaper, less time-consuming, and more accessible to travel, trade, and communicate with other countries. According to several critics of globalization, the restructuring of the world economy has only reinforced existing inequalities among regions, countries, classes, races, and genders (Guarnizo and Smith 1998). To more optimistic analysts, the expansion of transnational social networks has multiplied cosmopolitan practices and values, and even created the possibility of a postnational citizenship. Certainly, the triumphant neoliberal discourse of globalization frequently celebrates borderless states and consumer markets, as well as the free flow of capital, if not labor, across formerly intractable borders.

These macrostructural forces form part of the historical backdrop for the transnational movement of people, practices, and identities detailed in *Quisqueya on the Hudson*. More specifically, I was interested in documenting the effects of recent public policies in the United States and other migrant-receiving countries on racial and ethnic exclusion. U.S. congressional debates since the mid-1980s have become increasingly polarized around immigration, language, and national security. The most recent (2006) public controversies have centered on the difficulties of “assimilating” millions of undocumented immigrants, mostly from Mexico, but also from other Latin American countries like the Dominican Republic. Hence, I would hold steadfastly on to my original proposition that ethnic prejudice and racial discrimination have slowed down the incorporation of Dominican immigrants into mainstream American culture. In part, transnational identities may be interpreted as forms of popular resistance to racialized social structures and cultural practices in the United States. The racialization of Dominican immigrants is not examined systematically in *Quisqueya on the Hudson*, but has been scrutinized in several other publications, including my own (Candelario, in press; Duany 1998, 2006; Howard 2001; Torres-Saillant 1998).

### **How New Is Transnationalism?**

Many of the first essays on contemporary transnational migration implied that it represented a radical break with the past. Several authors gathered in Glick Schiller et al.’s (1992) compilation suggested that transnationalism, not assimilation, was the most appropriate framework to understand the main cultural dilemmas of today’s immigrants. Indeed, transnationalism was often praised as a viable alternative to “assimilating” into mainstream American society. I suppose that position influenced my thinking at the time I wrote *Quisqueya on the Hudson*. Like other colleagues, I tended to privilege what was “new” in contemporary transnationalism rather than what was “old”—even though I made a few references to earlier stages of European and Caribbean immigration in the

United States. In any case, much of the first wave of transnational research underlined that contemporary migrants differed from previous migrants.

In hindsight, earlier ethnic groups often engaged in what are now called “transnational” practices (see Foner 2005; Glick Schiller 1999; Portes et al. 1999). For example, many European immigrants, especially Italians, returned to their countries of origin during the first half of the twentieth century. Immigrants also sent millions of dollars to their relatives back home. Many were able to preserve a strong sense of national identity, even beyond the first generation, as the cases of Irish and Polish Americans illustrate well. Some groups organized on a “transnational” basis, including political parties, economic enterprises, and cultural institutions that bridged home and host countries. Finally, Southern and Eastern European immigrants (notably Italians and Jews) were not considered fully “white” at the beginning of the twentieth century. In response, they often asserted their ancestral cultures and resisted “Americanization” as fiercely as some contemporary immigrants do.

Still, I would insist that contemporary transnationalism is not exactly the same phenomenon it was a hundred years ago (Foner 2005; Glick Schiller et al. 1994, 1995; Pedraza 2006; Portes et al. 1999). First, current transnationalism is more intense than in the past, insofar as migrants can now retain dense and immediate connections with their families, friends, and communities back home. Second, migrants participate more frequently in transnational activities than before, including calling home, sending money, and visiting their relatives. Third, some migrants engage actively in many different kinds of practices—economic, political, and cultural—in both their home and host countries. Fourth, migrants may become incorporated into their societies of settlement at the same time that they remain attached to their societies of origin, as exemplified by dual citizenship and voting abroad. Finally, the reduction in the amount of time and money required to maintain long-distance ties has made transnationalism more available to increasing numbers of people worldwide.

In a comparative light, *Quisqueya on the Hudson* bears a striking resemblance to the experience of earlier immigrants in

New York City, such as German Jews in Washington Heights or Puerto Ricans in Spanish Harlem (a point made by Juan Flores [2000], among others). Such groups attempted to carve out their own ethnic niches within the urban landscape, reproducing the cultural atmosphere of their homeland as much as possible. My ethnographic fieldwork documented that immigrants carried over many traditional practices from the Dominican Republic, such as speaking Spanish, praying to the Virgin of Altagracia, dancing the *merengue*, eating *mangú* (a plantain-based staple), or reading Dominican newspapers. Readers familiar with the history of Chinatowns throughout the United States or the Cuban enclave in Miami will rightfully ask themselves how New York's Dominican community differs from other concentrated ethnic neighborhoods. My response would be that few immigrant communities have developed such a large number and variety of transnational ties to their country of origin, and have maintained such strong ties over several decades, as Dominicans in New York. Unfortunately, a systematic comparison of Dominicans and other transnational groups past and present lies beyond the scope of this preface (but see DeSipio and Pantoja 2004; Duany 2005).

### **Why Does Transnationalism Matter?**

Scholars have pointed out many practical implications of contemporary transnationalism. As I have already hinted, many emphasize the challenge to the traditional model of “straight-line assimilation” that dominated immigration research during the first half of the twentieth century (Pedraza 2006; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). Glick Schiller and her colleagues (1992) claimed that transnationalism subverts many of the “bounded” concepts in the social sciences, including nation, ethnicity, race, class, and gender. Moreover, nation-states can no longer capture (if they ever could) people's multiple and overlapping identities (such as local, regional, racial, ethnic, translocal, or postnational allegiances). Methodologically, transnationalism calls for multi-sited ethnographies and other forms of fieldwork in the points

of origin and destination, as well as for comparative analysis of different immigrant groups, localities, and periods. Finally, scholars may themselves promote or hinder the interests of transnational actors—for example, when engaging in current public debates about immigration, multiculturalism, bilingualism, or remittances in the United States and Europe (Glick Schiller et al. 1995).

In 2001, I was invited to moderate a panel on “Transnational Civic Movements” at the conference of the community organization, “Dominicans 2000,” in New York City. One of the central questions posed in that meeting was how transnational organizations could contribute to empowering Dominicans settled in the United States. At the time, I could not answer in a satisfactory manner, because I was primarily concerned with transnationalism as a cultural phenomenon. I then suggested that the wider scope and resources of transnational organizations could strengthen local institutions and grassroots initiatives. This claim still needs further elaboration and documentation. But transnationalism clearly has concrete repercussions for the lived experiences of the people labeled as “transnational.” That is one of the key points of contention, as I discuss below, in recent debates about whether Dominicans are better considered “transnational” or “diasporic” subjects.

## **Will Transnationalism Survive the First Generation?**

Most studies of transnational migrants, my own included, have centered on the first generation—those who were born and raised in one country and moved to another as adults. In the Dominican case, this trend is largely due to the predominant role of recent immigrants from the Dominican Republic in establishing and organizing the community (see, for example, Hernández 2002; Hernández and Rivera-Batiz 2003; Torres-Saillant and Hernández 1998). In *Quisqueya on the Hudson*, I acknowledged some basic differences between the first and second generation, those born and raised in New York City. But I could not anticipate the intense discussions about the future of transnationalism that have characterized recent scholarship. The publication of two collective works (Portes

and Rumbaut 2001a; Levitt and Waters 2002) has contributed significantly to clarify the options of second-generation immigrants in the United States. One of the most powerful concepts to emerge out of this literature was coined by Portes and his colleagues as “segmented assimilation”: the proposition that impoverished and racialized immigrant groups, like Dominicans, could follow the path of African Americans and other ethnic minorities, rather than adopt mainstream values and customs. Although I briefly referred to this concept in *Quisqueya on the Hudson*, I could not foresee all of its implications. Nancy Foner (2005) has recently argued that the term “segmented assimilation” may exaggerate the negative outcomes of identifying with native blacks in the United States; and that some immigrant groups labeled as black, such as West Indians, may actually experience upward mobility, contrary to Portes’s pessimistic expectation.

Whether young Dominican Americans continue to preserve ties with their parents’ country is an empirical question that recent studies have sought to answer (see Bailey 2002; Itzigsohn 2006; López 2004; Pantoja 2005). In my reading of this literature, the prevalent tendency among second-generation immigrants is a decrease in most forms of transnational engagement (such as sending remittances), but not a complete rupture with the homeland (for instance, most continue to describe themselves on the basis of national origin). Many young Dominican Americans (if that is the term they prefer) retain much of their parents’ language, music, religion, and foodways, as documented in *Quisqueya on the Hudson*. Other studies have corroborated that second-generation Dominicans insist on their national origins to distinguish themselves from African Americans and to ally themselves with other Hispanics (Bailey 2002; Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral 2000). However, they have also increasingly embraced the consumer habits, speech patterns, dress, haircut, and fashion styles of African American and Hispanic teenagers in New York and other U.S. cities where they concentrate. It may be too early to characterize the second generation as entirely disconnected from Dominican culture and completely absorbed by American culture. Hybrid practices and identities may well be the rule rather than the exception.

## Are Dominicans Transnational or Diasporic?

Silvio Torres-Saillant (2000) published a scathing critique of the transnational paradigm as it has been applied to Dominican immigrants in New York City. Furthermore, Milagros Ricourt (2002) has questioned whether all sectors of the Dominican-American population can equally be dubbed “transnational.” More recently, Ana Aparicio (2006) has developed a systematic rebuttal of the transnational perspective in her interpretation of Dominican-American politics. Still, the model of Dominicans as the quintessential transnational community prevails in recent publications, which were foreshadowed in important ways by *Quisqueya on the Hudson* (Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral 2000; Itzigsohn et al. 1999; Levitt 2001, 2005; Sagás and Molina 2004; Sørensen 1996, 1997). Here I only have space to sketch the basic positions in dispute.

According to Torres-Saillant, transnationalism became “a fashionable mode of analysis that stresses the point that migration transforms social relations, producing new forms of identity that transcend traditional notions of physical and cultural space” (2000: 8). Torres-Saillant points out that “the apparent bidirectionality of life” (p. 7) among Dominican Americans has attracted a growing number of non-Dominican scholars. He identifies Luis Guarnizo, Peggy Levitt, Pamela Graham, José Itzigsohn, and Ninna Nyberg Sørensen as the leading cadre of transnationalists in studies of Dominican migration. (Torres-Saillant generously exempts my own monograph from bitter criticism.) As the author sees it, the transnational approach “exaggerate[s] the existential options that the global society affords regular Dominicans” (p. 21). Instead of transnationalism, Torres-Saillant proposes the idea of “diaspora” to interpret the contemporary experiences of Dominicans in the United States. He feels that this term—with its dual implication of uprooting and taking root in a new land—better reflects the situation of transplanted Dominicans in New York City and other places. In my mind, diasporic and transnational identities are not necessarily opposed to each other. Indeed, I often use the two terms interchangeably to refer to scattered peoples who remain connected

to their countries of origin, despite long distances and periods of time abroad.

In a similar vein, Ricourt (2002) doubts that all Dominicans in New York City practice transnationalism. She argues that several variables complicate the formation of ethnic communities, including gender, generation, and place of residence. Thus, the meaning of transnationalism varies between men and women, older and newer immigrants, and those who live in Washington Heights and other neighborhoods with smaller concentrations of Dominicans. She concludes that “transnationalism only tells a partial story” (p. 14) that underplays the experiences of immigrants actively engaged in community building and neighborhood politics. In particular, Ricourt stresses that Dominican social service agencies have greatly contributed to the “formation of a permanent community, with more roots in the host society, and more powerful politically” (p. 6). Although her point is well taken, it does not invalidate a transnational approach to Dominican migration and its persistent ties to the Dominican Republic.

For her part, Aparicio (2006) argues that Dominican organizations in New York City have shifted from a transnational to a local focus as a result of the rise of second-generation community leaders. The author rightly criticizes recent scholarship on transnationalism as well as on the second generation because it does not pay sufficient attention to political coalitions between Dominican Americans and other ethnic and racial minorities, especially Puerto Ricans and African Americans. However, I would urge rethinking the binary opposition between local and transnational politics among Dominican Americans. Following Graham (2001), I would argue that Dominican immigrants became incorporated into New York City politics at the same time that they were reincorporated into the Dominican Republic. Aparicio is right when she reacts against the excessive “deterritorialization” of transnational politics, but she exaggerates when she suggests that Dominican Americans are no longer interested in their homeland and have become fully incorporated as yet another racialized minority in the United States. In my mind, the most interesting

aspect of Dominican-American politics is precisely its dual focus on both host and sending societies.

Despite all the criticisms, the transnational paradigm has proven a useful and resilient approach to Dominican migration, as a recent compilation shows (Sagás and Molina 2004). In their introduction to this volume, Ernesto Sagás and Sintia Molina (2004: 5) state that “the Dominican Republic provides a textbook example of a transnational migration,” echoing similar claims by Guarnizo (1994) and Levitt (2001). Sagás and Molina further assert that “Dominicans have been successful in creating a transnational life” and perhaps overstate their case when they add, “Dominicans have created a borderless nation outside the national territory with which they do not feel disconnected” (p. 9). Transnationalists have tended to overlook how national identities are always “grounded” in specific territories, even though they may be different from their original places of origin. Nonetheless, the contributors to this volume profitably extend a transnational perspective to a wide range of issues, from politics and economics to literature and music. Altogether, their work shows that transnational communities have mushroomed among Dominicans in New York, San Juan, Providence, Madrid, and Miami. For example, overseas Dominicans now vote in Dominican presidential elections; send millions of dollars to their relatives back home; and nurture a vibrant and hybrid culture abroad, especially through creative literature and popular music. In my view, such practices do not contradict the rise of locally oriented organizations and allegiances in the communities of settlement. Instead, transnationalism may foster the simultaneous incorporation of Dominicans in their host societies as well as the enduring connection to their country of origin, as Levitt and Glick-Schiller (2004) argue persuasively.

## **Recapitulation and Conclusion**

Would I still write *Quisqueya on the Hudson* the same way I did a decade and a half ago, before the consolidation of the transnational paradigm in migration studies? Or would I rewrite the entire

monograph in light of recent developments in theory and research reviewed before? Although I might never agree completely with what I thought a few years ago, I believe the primary value of this essay remains its detailed ethnographic description and analysis of transnational practices among Dominicans in Washington Heights. I have resisted the temptation to revise the contents of the monograph, even though I recognize some ambiguities in the narrative, such as the pejorative term *Dominican-Yorks*, used by Dominicans in the Dominican Republic to imply that those who live abroad are somehow less Dominican than themselves. Even the expression “Dominican American” would require further investigation to determine who, when, and why prefers it to simply “Dominican.” I would also have liked to look more closely at second-generation Dominican immigrants in the United States and the perseverance of transnational identities over time. Finally, if I had enough resources, I would examine the racialization of Dominicans more closely than I did in my fieldwork in Washington Heights. All in all, however, I am satisfied with the text as it stands and hope this second edition will make it more widely available to scholars and students concerned with Dominican and other transnational communities.

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Original Text

**Quisqueya on the Hudson:  
The Transnational Identity of  
Dominicans in Washington Heights**

Jorge Duany



**DOMINICAN  
STUDIES INSTITUTE**

*Research Monograph*



## Abstract

Research on Dominican migrants has underestimated their cultural persistence, ethnic identity, interethnic relations, and language maintenance. Most scholars have focused on the migrants' origins, composition, and incorporation into the labor markets of the United States and Puerto Rico. This monograph concentrates on the creation of a transnational identity among Dominicans in New York City, based on fieldwork in Washington Heights, the largest Dominican settlement in the United States. The essay's objectives include describing the dominant cultural values and practices of Dominican immigrants, as well as analyzing their transnational identity. Fieldwork tested the basic proposition that Dominican immigrants define and express a vibrant identity through popular culture, especially through everyday language, music, religion, and foodways. The problem of transnational identity was approached from an ethnographic viewpoint, emphasizing the intensive study of a small geographic area through participant observation and personal interviews. The field site was a city block within Washington Heights, which represented the main characteristics of New York's Dominican population. The results documented the emergence of a transnational identity characterized by an ambivalent attachment to the host society and a persistent outlook toward the home society, as well as family networks that cut across territorial boundaries.

## Introduction

One of the key issues confronting the new global economy is the increase in population movements across state frontiers as a result of the regional integration of labor markets. Globalization entails a growing interpenetration among different peoples and cultures of the world, especially through migration (Appadurai 1990). With the growing ease of travel across national frontiers, circular and return migration is increasingly common. Access to air transportation and telecommunications has permitted a more frequent contact among migrants and their relatives and friends in the sending countries. The cultural penetration of the mass media has integrated even the most remote towns of the sending countries in an international information network. As a consequence, large contingents of workers shuttle incessantly between their national territories and the diaspora. In recent years, migrants have created many transnational communities, strategically positioned on the borders of two cultures.

Transnational communities are characterized by a constant flow of people in both directions, a dual sense of identity, ambivalent attachments to two nations, and a far-flung network of kinship and friendship ties across state frontiers. Many migrants do not choose between exclusive allegiance to the home community or the host country, but maintain close ties to both places. Transnational identities are not primarily based on territory as an organizing principle of social interaction but on the migrants' personal and cultural attachments to their home and host countries. Migrants participate simultaneously in two or more political systems that define their citizenship in different, perhaps contradictory, ways (see Sutton 1987; Glick Schiller *et al.* 1992; and Rose 1993 for recent essays on transnationalism and pluralism in the United States).

As Leo Chávez (1994) points out, living on the other side of a political border does not necessarily mean that people stop belonging to their communities of origin. Rather, transnational migrants develop divided loyalties, create imaginary communities in the receiving countries, and participate actively in both their host and home societies. This empirical observation contradicts

conventional sociological and anthropological theories predicting the imminent cultural assimilation of immigrants in the receiving countries. One reason for this discrepancy is that the process of identity formation differs notably between immigrant groups originating in Europe and other ethnic and racial groups, such as the “new immigrants” from Latin America and the Caribbean. For instance, ethnic prejudice and racial discrimination culturally encapsulates nonwhite minorities more extensively than the descendants of European immigrants in the United States. Social theorists are beginning to identify different forms of immigrant adaptation according to the group’s characteristics, mode of incorporation, and context of reception (Portes and Zhou 1993). It is increasingly clear that transnational migration does not imply the inevitable loss of one’s cultural identity.

Since the end of World War II, Caribbean people have moved massively to the advanced industrial nations of Western Europe and North America. Yet, much of this movement has been circular in nature and tentative in orientation to the host societies. In New York City and other leading settlements, Caribbean immigrants have not entirely shed their ethnic identities and have retained a large degree of their original cultures. As Elsa Chaney (1987:3) argues, “Caribbean life in New York City is the product of the continuous movements of people, cash, material goods, culture and lifestyles, and ideas to and from New York City.” The growing fluidity of international labor flows requires a substantial revision of traditional approaches to Caribbean migration. For one thing, transnational family networks now bind most Caribbean societies to diaspora communities in North America and Western Europe. Under such conditions, the geopolitical frontiers of the nation break down and symbolically extend across space.

Scholars have only begun to conceptualize migrants as part of transnational sociocultural systems. One of the features of the new global economy is precisely the deterritorialization of capital and labor flows. Transnational identities cross over territorial boundaries and national cultures (Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Appadurai 1991). Crossing-over has historically been a central experience for black immigrants in the United States and elsewhere, an experience

that continues to this day. Yet most black immigrants have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture, dominated by the values and practices of the descendants of European immigrants (Bryce-Laporte 1993). This phenomenon has led sociologists to posit a process of segmented assimilation for black and white immigrants (Portes and Zhou 1993).

Recent approaches to transnational communities reject the traditional image of immigration as a form of cultural stripping away and absorption into the melting pot of the host society (Rosaldo 1989). Rather, immigrants belong to multiple communities with fluid and hybrid identities, not necessarily grounded on territorial boundaries but on subjective affiliations. For example, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in the United States are now viewed as part of a new cultural borderlands that straddles North American and Latin American cultures and leads to the emergence of commuter nations. As Juan Flores and George Yúdice (1993:215) note, the “Latino experience in the U.S. has been a continual crossover, not only across geopolitical borders but across all kinds of cultural and political boundaries.” Flores and Yúdice further argue that the current mass migration of Hispanics<sup>1</sup> invites the remapping of American society that is all border, a site of mutually intruding cultures.

The present essay will contribute to the growing literature on transnationalism in several ways. First, it will provide empirical support to the claim that transnational migrants assimilate slowly into mainstream culture and continue to rely on their own cultural conceptions and practices. Second, the data will show that transnationalism creates hybrid forms of culture that cut across territorial boundaries and national identities. Third, the study will analyze how circular movements of people help to create transnational communities based on loyalties to more than one nation-state. Finally, the essay will identify several strategies of cultural resistance and accommodation among a recent group of transnational migrants who do not fit easily into the conventional

1 In this monograph, the term “Hispanic” will refer to immigrants and their descendants from Spanish America, including the Caribbean countries of Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. In this sense, Hispanic is interchangeable with “Latino” as it is currently used in the United States.

model of the U.S. melting pot because of their racial composition and cultural background.

The exodus from the Dominican Republic from the United States illustrates the cultural dilemmas of transnational migration.<sup>2</sup> On one hand, many Dominicans have made an effort to incorporate into the ethnic mosaic of American society over the last three decades; on the other hand, they have maintained important elements of their national culture, such as the Spanish language and Catholic religion. As recent immigrants from a nearby Caribbean country, most Dominicans have not yet become U.S. citizens. Many have returned home after a prolonged stay abroad; others commute regularly between the Dominican Republic and the United States. Most Dominican immigrants have settled in New York City, especially in Washington Heights, where they tend to live in ethnic neighborhoods that recreate the cultural atmosphere of their homeland. Many Dominicans in New York—or *Dominican-Yorks*, as their compatriots on the island call them—live suspended between two worlds, two islands, two flags, two languages, two nation-states (see *The New York Times* 1991a; Grasmuck and Pessar 1991). This essay will explore the migrants' sense of belonging to two countries at the same time—in this case, the Dominican Republic and the United States—as expressed in their popular culture.

## Literature Review

Despite extensive academic research on the Dominican exodus, the daily life of the Dominican community in New York City is not well understood. Little is known, for example, on the immigrants' survival strategies in an urban environment dominated by racial tensions and ethnic competition for scarce resources. Relations between Dominicans and other minorities such as African Americans and Puerto Ricans in the United States have not been studied

<sup>2</sup> For background information on the Dominican exodus, see Grasmuck and Pessar (1991), Georges (1990), and Duany (1990).

systematically.<sup>3</sup> Sociologists and anthropologists have been mostly concerned with the socioeconomic characteristics of Dominican migrants as lower-class workers. Until now, the research agenda for Dominican studies in the United States has concentrated on the migrants' incorporation into New York City's labor market (see Hernández 1989c for a review of this literature). The available evidence suggests that the Dominican diaspora is economically motivated but culturally deprived. Thus, Dominicans in New York are often portrayed as cultureless laborers interested solely in improving their material conditions of life and returning home after a brief stay. Despite the widespread appeal of *merengue* music and other forms of Dominican popular culture, most scholars have neglected the study of the migrants' identity.<sup>4</sup>

Researchers on Dominican migration have sidestepped the problems of resettling in a new society, adjusting to a foreign culture, and reconstructing the home culture. Cultural persistence, ethnic identity, interethnic relations, and language maintenance have largely been ignored, except for a few scholars who incorporate such issues tangentially into their theoretical or methodological frameworks (see, for instance, Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Georges 1990, 1988, 1984; Pessar 1987, 1985; Sassen-Koob 1979; Garrison and Weiss 1979; Hendricks 1974). Some of the latter researchers have discussed the cultural conceptions that immigrants develop in their new home, but few have analyzed systematically their beliefs and practices as part of a transnational sociocultural system. The existing bibliography on Dominican migration makes frequent references to household structure, gender ideology, kinship networks, voluntary associations, migration policy, and other socioeconomic variables, but pays scant attention to popular culture in everyday life. My own field research has glossed over the analysis of the

3 Most immigration research to date has focused on the relations between minority and majority groups in American society (Rose 1993). For recent data on Latino intergroup relations in New York, see the report by the Institute for Puerto Rican Policy (1992).

4 Ironically, New York City has recently become the commercial capital of the Dominican music industry. For a journalistic approach to the thriving musical culture of Dominican migrants, see McLain (1991). Elsewhere I have analyzed the symbolic role of *merengue* in defining the national identity of the Dominican Republic (Duany 1994).

transnational identity of Dominicans in Puerto Rico (Duany 1990,1991,1992).<sup>5</sup>

In synthesis, the scholarly literature leaves unanswered several fundamental questions about the Dominican community in New York City: How have the migrants reshaped their traditional values and practices in response to an alien environment? To what extent have they fashioned a transnational identity out of their national culture, their immigrant experience, and their public perception as a racial minority? How far have Dominicans travelled the path toward cultural and linguistic assimilation in the United States? And finally, how do Dominicans relate to other ethnic and racial groups in New York City, particularly African Americans and other Hispanics? Such questions suggest the need for further fieldwork with the largest Dominican settlement in the United States, Washington Heights.<sup>6</sup> This essay will examine the immigrants' cultural identity, resistance, and accommodation; future studies should address the interactions between Dominicans and other minorities.

A multiethnic neighborhood in upper Manhattan, Washington Heights currently houses about one third of all Dominicans living in New York City (Necos 1993). Dominican settlements have clustered on northwest Manhattan, from 110th Street into the 190s east of Broadway, with smaller concentrations in the South Bronx, the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and the Corona section of Queens. In the 1960s, Washington Heights became a heavily Spanish-speaking neighborhood with almost equal proportions of Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans (Domínguez 1973, 1978). During the 1970s, Dominican immigrants replaced many older residents of the neighborhood, especially Jews, Irish, Greeks, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans. The demographic

5 Nonetheless, the culture of other Caribbean migrants, especially Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Haitians, has been studied intensively, ranging from everyday language and popular music to folk religion and street festivals. For a sampling of such studies, see Sutton and Chaney (1987).

6 Domínguez (1973,1978), Hendricks (1974), Georges (1984,1988), and Mahler (1989) have conducted ethnographic research with the Dominican community in Washington Heights. However, these studies have focused on racial classification, social networks, voluntary associations, and the legalization process, not on ethnic identity, popular culture, and everyday life.

predominance of Dominicans continued further in the 1980s. Between 1983 and 1989, over 40,000 Dominicans settled in Washington Heights and the adjacent neighborhoods of Inwood and Hamilton Heights (New York City Department of City Planning 1992). Nonetheless, Washington Heights contains many African American residents and a growing number of Ecuadorans, Salvadorans, Colombians, Mexicans, and other Latin Americans.

Today, Washington Heights is largely a Dominican enclave within the inner city, segregated from non-Hispanic whites and blacks, as well as other Hispanics such as Puerto Ricans. Geographic concentration, economic specialization, and ethnic solidarity have bred a large number and variety of Dominican associations (Sainz 1990; Georges 1988; Sassen-Koob 1979). In 1991, Washington Heights elected its first Dominican representative to the City Council, former school-teacher Guillermo Linares, thus beginning a process of political empowerment. Culturally, the neighborhood has reproduced many aspects of the migrants' traditional lifestyle and institutions, such as political parties and labor unions. Nowadays, the neighborhood is commonly known as Quisqueya Heights, Quisqueya being the indigenous name for the island of Hispaniola (Larancuent et al. 1991).

Some scholars believe that Dominicans have created an incipient enclave economy in Washington Heights, characterized by a thriving network of small businesses catering to the immigrants (Portes and Guarnizo 1991; Hernández 1989a). According to Alejandro Portes and Luis Guarnizo (1991), Dominicans own more than 20,000 businesses in New York, especially grocery stores (*bodegas*), gypsy cabs, sweatshops, travel agencies, and restaurants. A recent study found an average of 12 Dominican businesses per block between 157th and 191st Streets in upper Manhattan (Mahler 1989). However, the vast majority of Dominicans in New York are blue-collar and service workers, mainly employed in light manufacturing, especially the garment industry (Pessar 1987). Entrepreneurs constitute only a small fraction of the Dominican community of Washington Heights. It is within the context of the proletarianization of most Dominican immigrants that their transnational identity must be analyzed.

## Hypotheses

This essay will test the following propositions:

1. The cultural values and practices of Dominican immigrants in Washington Heights are primarily oriented toward the Dominican Republic.
2. The Dominican community of Washington Heights has created a transnational identity as a result of migration and resettlement in a new environment.
3. Dominican popular culture expresses a vibrant ethnic identity, through everyday language, music, religion, and foodways.
4. Dominican immigrants have reshaped the symbols of their nationality into an ethnic culture on the margins of mainstream U.S. culture.
5. Most Dominican immigrants in Washington Heights resist assimilating into mainstream U.S. culture, and remain attached to their home language and culture.

## Method<sup>7</sup>

*Sample.* The site for this study was a city block in Washington Heights, defined as Community Planning District 12 in Manhattan. The block was chosen because of its high concentration of Dominican residents, primarily residential use, and safety. The sample contained 125 housing units and 352 persons residing within four buildings from June 14 to July 25, 1993. The site was an ethnically concentrated urban neighborhood with a large Hispanic population, primarily of Dominican origin.

Table 1 summarizes the site's demographic characteristics. The sample contained slightly more females than males, a majority of young people, and more married than single persons. These

<sup>7</sup> This research followed the guidelines for an alternative enumeration developed by the Center for Survey Methods Research at the U.S. Census Bureau (Brownrigg 1990; Brownrigg and Fansler 1990). My previous fieldwork with Dominicans in Puerto Rico was based on this research strategy (Duany, Hernández Angueira, and Rey 1995).

**Table 1**  
**Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Sample**

| Characteristic                                     | Number | Percent |
|--|--------|---------|
| <b>Sex</b>   |        |         |
| Male   | 169    | 48.0    |
| Female   | 183    | 52.0    |
| <b>Age</b>   |        |         |
| 0 – 10   | 96     | 28.6    |
| 11 – 20  | 67     | 19.9    |
| 21 – 30  | 58     | 17.3    |
| 31 – 40  | 41     | 12.2    |
| 41 – 50  | 36     | 10.7    |
| 51 – 60  | 22     | 6.5     |
| 61 – 70  | 18     | 5.4     |
| 71 and over  | 14     | 4.2     |
| <b>Marital Status (persons 16 years and older)</b> |        |         |
| Single   | 92     | 42.2    |
| Married  | 88     | 40.4    |
| Separated  | 10     | 4.6     |
| Divorced   | 16     | 7.3     |
| Widowed  | 12     | 5.5     |
| <b>Race</b>  |        |         |
| White  | 76     | 42.2    |
| Black  | 21     | 7.2     |
| Mulatto  | 184    | 63.4    |
| Mestizo  | 9      | 3.1     |
| <b>Ethnicity</b>                                   |        |         |
| Dominican  | 269    | 78.2    |
| Ecuadorian   | 17     | 4.9     |
| Puerto Rican                                       | 10     | 2.9     |
| Cuban  | 10     | 2.9     |
| Mexican  | 7      | 2.0     |
| Other Hispanic                                     | 14     | 4.1     |
| Non-Hispanic                                       | 6      | 1.7     |
| Non-Hispanic White                                 | 8      | 2.3     |

Table 1 (continued)

|                              |     |      |
|------------------------------|-----|------|
| <b>Country of Birth</b>      |     |      |
| Dominican Republic           | 194 | 57.2 |
| United States                | 100 | 29.5 |
| Other countries              | 45  | 13.3 |
| <b>Place of Birth</b>        |     |      |
| Large city                   | 219 | 76.6 |
| Small town                   | 38  | 13.3 |
| Rural area                   | 19  | 10.1 |
| <b>Sex of household head</b> |     |      |
| Male                         | 50  | 48.1 |
| Female                       | 54  | 51.9 |

*Note:* N=352. Missing cases vary between 13 and 66, depending on the variable.

characteristics suggest a relatively stable community, despite the impact of continued immigration from the Dominican Republic. We classified two-thirds of the residents as mulatto, a mixture of black and white that closely reflects the racial composition of the Dominican population.<sup>8</sup> Four out of five residents were of Dominican origin; more than half were born in the Dominican Republic. Over three-fourths were born in large cities such as New York and Santo Domingo, confirming the urban origin of most Dominicans in the United States. Women headed more than half of all households, whether or not their husbands were present.

A recent study provides comparative data on the Dominican community of Washington Heights, based on the 1990 Census of New York City (Necos 1993). This study found that approximately 25 percent of the population of Washington Heights was Dominican, 19 percent other Hispanic, 25 percent African American, 26 percent non-Hispanic white, and 3 percent Asian. Hence, our block represents a heavily Dominican neighborhood, with small

<sup>8</sup> In the Dominican Republic, people commonly use the folk term *indio*, or Indian, to refer to individuals with a mixed racial ancestry. In the United States, the majority of these so-called *indios* become white, black, or "other" in a bipolar race system. The change in racial terminology and perception among Dominican immigrants in New York merits a separate investigation.

proportions of both non-Hispanic whites and blacks. Otherwise, the block is typical of the Dominican population of Washington Heights, composed of relatively young, primarily foreign-born, mostly Spanish-speaking, poor, and recent immigrants, with many female-headed households.

*Instruments.* Fieldwork was based primarily on participant observation and personal interviews, focusing on the residents' sociocultural characteristics, their households, and neighborhood. We took detailed field notes on the migrants' beliefs, values, practices, and interactions with other ethnic groups. We concentrated on attitudes and behaviors related to everyday language, music, religion, and foodways. Structured observations on these topics were conducted on multiple occasions during fieldwork in the neighborhood. All field notes were entered into a single data base, producing more than 160 pages typed single-spaced.

We also censused all households in the site and collected basic demographic and socioeconomic data on each member. These data included sex, age, marital status, relationship to the household head, occupation, and economic sector. In addition, we determined the residents' birthplace and national origin. Race, an item of considerable unease among Dominicans, was observed rather than asked of each respondent. As in the rest of the Caribbean, racial concepts in the Dominican Republic are more fluid and establish more social distinctions than in the United States. We classified people into one of four categories according to their physical appearance: white, black, mulatto, or mestizo (the latter referring to a mixture of Indian and European). Although this classification system is not scientifically valid, it provides an estimate of the neighborhood's racial composition, judged by local standards.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, we designed two in-depth interview guides to explore our central research concerns: the definition and assertion of a transnational identity, and popular culture in everyday life. The first part of the interview consisted of open and closed

9 In the 1990 Census, only about 26 percent of New York City's Dominicans classified themselves as black (*New York Newsday* 1993b). Most Dominicans considered themselves either white or "other." Although acculturation rates may vary according to the immigrants' racial perception, our fieldwork did not document cultural differences between persons of distinct physical appearance.

questions ranging from such topics as how Dominicans viewed themselves and others, to whether they belonged to any voluntary associations. The second part of the interview focused on the cultural practices of Dominican households, particularly their everyday language, religion, music, and foodways. The interviews also included background questions on past and present occupations as well as several characteristics of the workplace, such as the ethnicity of employers and co-workers. Interviews were conducted in Spanish or English, depending on the informants' preference, at the entrance or living room of their apartments.

*Procedure.* To begin, we surveyed the area defined as Washington Heights by the Department of City Planning of New York (that is, the area north of 155th Street and south of Inwood) and selected one block within the area. We chose a block that was representative of the neighborhood's socioeconomic characteristics as well as accessible to us as researchers. We avoided predominantly commercial blocks and those suspected to have high crime rates. We decided to focus our attention on four contiguous buildings within the block to increase our daily interaction with residents. We later drew a map of the block and of each building. This map included the most prominent geographic characteristics as well as the approximate location of all housing units in the four buildings. Then we enumerated all the housing units and identified several vacant ones.

The fieldwork itself was divided into three research teams with two members each.<sup>10</sup> Each team was responsible for observing about 40 housing units within the block. Two of the researchers were Cubans from Puerto Rico and five were Dominican students enrolled at the City College of New York, two of whom lived in Washington Heights. The researchers included three women and four men between the ages of 22 and 36. Both the ethnic makeup and institutional affiliation of our team helped us to gain access to the block's residents. Still, several residents refused to participate in the study; some distrusted strangers while others protected irregular or illicit sources of income, such as welfare assistance and

<sup>10</sup> One research assistant worked during the first month, but was later replaced by another student.

unreported jobs.<sup>11</sup>A few were too tired to talk to us after a long day's work or were reluctant to open their doors because of fear of crime.

Initially, we established visual contact with residents without asking personal questions. We visited the block at different times and days of the week to become familiar with the rhythm of daily life in the neighborhood and to contact a wide range of people. We also introduced ourselves to the area's business owners and employees, in an effort to gain their cooperation. At this stage, we recorded the residents' physical features (such as sex, physical appearance, and approximate age) as they entered and left their apartments and in the streets. When people looked at us with curiosity or asked what we were doing there, we explained that we were conducting a study for the City College of New York on the Dominican community of Washington Heights and its culture. We also distributed an official letter from the Dominican Studies Institute confirming its support for our project. We later approached residents to engage in informal conversation and establish rapport.

After two weeks of fieldwork, we conducted intensive interviews with Dominican residents willing to cooperate further with us. We also interviewed representatives of Dominican households about their daily customs and beliefs. Responses were recorded in a separate form for each household. We were then ready to process and analyze the results. The next section places our findings in their social context.

## **The Research Site**

In our block, street vendors sold oranges, corn, flowers, music cassettes, and the tropical ice cones that Dominicans call *frío fríos*. On hot summer days, small carts selling *frío fríos* appeared on major street corners. Children opened fire hydrants and played with water in the sidewalks. The men usually spoke Spanish, listened

<sup>11</sup> During our fieldwork, dozens of Dominican women were indicted for fraudulently receiving welfare assistance in New York City. Most of the women were supposedly unemployed, single heads of households with small children. The judge's warning that he would treat Dominicans more harshly in future trials caused a minor commotion in the Dominican community and among civil rights activists (*New York Newsday* 1993a).

to *merengue*, said *piropos* to young women passing by, played dominoes, drank Presidente beer, played the lottery, talked about Dominican politics, and read Dominican newspapers such as *El Nacional*, *El Siglo*, and *Listín Diario*. Women took their children out on strollers, shopped at the *bodegas*, or talked with their neighbors in front of their buildings. Teenagers walked in groups to the local public school, bathed in the area's swimming pools, or listened to rap music on huge cassette players. Some people in the streets looked Mexican or Central American, because of their accent, indigenous features, and small stature. But most of the area's residents were Dominican immigrants.

With easy access to the George Washington Bridge, 181th Street is the neighborhood's transportation and commercial center. The old subway tunnel and elevators at the 181th Street station were badly run-down, and have been the object of recent protests by local residents.<sup>12</sup> In the mornings, most residents took the subway to work in downtown Manhattan and returned uptown in the afternoons. Others rode the bus to New Jersey's factories across the Hudson River. Near the subway station, many businesses specialized in sending remittances to the Dominican Republic, such as the Banco Dominicano. Gypsy cabs from the Dominican-owned Riverside Taxi Agency, usually large dark-colored American cars, constantly crisscrossed the streets looking for potential customers. A newsstand at the corner of 181th Street and Saint Nicholas Avenue carried ten Dominican newspapers, flown daily from the island.

Many cafeterias and restaurants sold typical food from the Dominican Republic. Traditional items included main courses like *mangú*, *carne guisada*, *sancocho*, *mondongo*, *cocido*, and *cabeza de cerdo*; side orders like *arroz con habichuelas*, *empanada de yuca*, and *tostones*; drinks like *jugo de caña* and *batida de fruta*; and desserts like *pastelillos de guayaba*, *yaniqueque*, *dulce de coco*, and *pan dulce relleno*. Grocery stores offered tropical staples ranging from plantains to *mamey*. A discount beauty salon sold a wide variety

12 During our fieldwork in Washington Heights, students from Salome Ureña Junior High School demanded that the Metropolitan Transit Authority remodel the station. Some teachers, local politicians, and community activists joined the protest (*El Diario/La Prensa* 1993c).

of Dominican brand names, such as Lafer and Capilo. Small businesses offering private telephonic services to the Dominican Republic have proliferated. A single Dominican entrepreneur from San Francisco de Macorís owned 12 of these places, and planned to open 50 more in the near future. Our block had six public telephones “because they make money,” according to a telephone installer to whom we talked.

Although primarily residential, our block had ten stores on the ground floor: two *bodegas*, two beauty salons, two bars, a restaurant, a bakery, a liquor store, and a hardware store. Dominicans owned seven of these businesses. The immediate vicinity also had other *bodegas*, convenience stores, *botánicas*, travel agencies, car shops, and other small stores. Several business owners complained about the stiff economic competition in such a reduced space. “People aren’t buying now because they have no money,” said an ice cone seller. In addition, rising rent prices threatened to force many store owners out of the market. In our block, merchants paid between \$1,700 and \$2,315 a month to lease very small commercial spaces.

Most employees of Dominican businesses were Dominican, although many stores employed other Hispanics as well, especially Ecuadorians, Mexicans, and Salvadorans. Many store owners displayed their ethnic origin by blasting music on the sidewalk, usually *merengue* and *salsa*, sometimes *bachata* and *bolero*. Some businesses were local subsidiaries of enterprises in the Dominican Republic, such as Nitín Bakery. Others sold Dominican drinks like Cola Quisqueya, Refrescos Nacionales, and Cerveza Presidente.

Commercial signs attested to the strong presence of immigrants from the Cibao region, such as Acogedor Cibao Supermarket, Cibao Vision Center, Cibao Meat Products, and Hielo Cibao. A Dominican immigrant who planted corn and black beans on Broadway Avenue and 153rd Street longed to have “his own little Cibao” in Washington Heights (*The New York Times* 1991d). During our fieldwork, a young man walked in the sidewalk with two roosters, a common sight in the Dominican countryside. Some Dominicans refer to their neighborhood as “El Cibao” or “La Platanera” (Sepúlveda Castillo 1982), much as Puerto Ricans call Spanish Harlem “El Barrio” or the Lower East Side “Loisaida.”

Private social clubs from the Dominican Republic abound in Washington Heights. A recent study of 18 voluntary associations found that they reached almost 20,000 Dominicans in the area (Sainz 1990). Dozens of recreational associations are based on hometown origins, such as those from Esperanza, Tamboril, Moca, and Baní. Club members dance *merengue*, play dominoes and baseball, watch Spanish soap operas, exchange information about jobs and housing, and raise funds to send back to their country. Some groups select a beauty queen and participate in New York's Dominican Day Parade. Although most clubs are still oriented primarily toward the Dominican Republic, they are increasingly concerned with the day-to-day problems of the immigrant community. The clubs help to receive newly arrived immigrants as well as to reaffirm the cultural roots of the established ones (*The New York Times* 1991b).

Despite its large Dominican population, Washington Heights is a multiethnic, multiracial, and multilingual neighborhood. Near Yeshiva University on 186th Street, middle-class Jews have occupied newly renovated buildings. "Some of these buildings are very luxurious," according to a Cuban bar owner. Hassidic Jews occasionally walked by the neighborhood on Saturdays on their way to the synagogue. "There is a social clash between Jews and Dominicans," commented a long-time Dominican resident of the neighborhood.

Whereas Jewish-Dominican relations have often been tense, most Dominican contacts with other Hispanics have been cordial. On several buildings, Puerto Rican flags hung from the windows days before and after the Puerto Rican Day Parade in June. This symbolic gesture suggests that some residents were Puerto Rican and that Dominicans also celebrated the Parade with their Puerto Rican friends and neighbors. Physical traces of a large Cuban immigration remain in the neighborhood, especially businesses with Cuban names such as Restaurante Caridad, Cafetería El Mambí, Havana Bar, and Restaurante Sagua. But many Cubans have left the neighborhood for New Jersey and Florida. Our block also had Greek, Chinese, Italian, Nicaraguan, Peruvian, African American, and other ethnic groups among its merchants and tenants.

Tenants kept their doors tightly closed and rarely met in the hallway, except for a few newly arrived Dominican immigrants. Interethnic contacts were limited, especially among people of different physical appearance. The buildings' physical layout did not foster social interaction in the open, public spaces to which Dominicans are accustomed in their home country. The block lacked a common meeting area, except perhaps for the *bodegas* and nearby parks. When they were not at work, most of the tenants' daily life took place behind close doors, in the privacy of their apartments. Many expressed fears of crime and a few were afraid of being deported by immigration authorities.<sup>13</sup> "Neighborly relations don't exist here as in Santo Domingo," complained Freddy. "My neighbors are Anglos and in four years I haven't talked to them." Only once did we see children playing in the hallways.

Nonetheless, some residents have managed to forge a small community, by means of a frequent exchange of favors, mutual aid, and emotional support. In one building, tenants took care of their neighbors' children, took their trash down to the basement, shared food, or bought them plantains at the marketplace. Each building had several major networks of social interaction, giving the place a sense of a self-enclosed little town. Long-time residents tended to know most people on their floors and some in other floors as well.

Most immigrants maintained their cultural traditions at home. Some tenants placed Spanish stickers on their apartment doors, especially with religious messages like "*Jesús Cristo única esperanza*," "*Cristo cambiará tu vida*," and "*Construyamos la paz con Cristo*" ("Jesus Christ is our only hope," "Christ will change your life," and "Let us build peace with Christ"). Inside their homes, Dominicans often hung religious prints on the walls with images such as the Sacred Heart and the Last Supper. One tenant, Mercedes, had a Spanish sign quoting the Book of Genesis: "This is nothing but the house of God and the door to heaven."

Some families had calendars with a painting of the Virgin Mary, obtained in a local *bodega*. Others stuck a Dominican flag or coat-of-arms in a visible place of the living room. Many Dominican

<sup>13</sup> Some residents distrusted our motives as researchers and were afraid to open their doors because burglars roamed the neighborhood, sometimes posing as police officers or electrical repair workers. A woman had recently been raped in the area.

homes had plastic-covered furniture, plastic table and cloths, and plastic flowers as their main decoration. Some displayed the faceless ceramic dolls typical of the Dominican Republic, as well as plates painted in bright colors with folk themes from their country, usually a rural landscape, a peasant scene, the Cathedral of Santo Domingo, or a tropical beach. Such objects graphically recreated a Dominican atmosphere in Washington Heights. Decorating homes with folk items from their country is common among Puerto Ricans and other transnational groups in New York.

Many Dominican homes and businesses had small shrines with images of Catholic saints and the Virgin Mary in a corner of the hall or a private room. These humble altars were usually surrounded by flowers, lighted candles, food, and glasses filled with fresh water, wine, and other alcoholic beverages. Although the most popular figures were the Virgin of Altagracia and Saint Lazarus, the altars represented a wide range of religious images: Saint Claire, Saint Anthony of Padua, Saint Barbara, the Holy Child of Atocha, the Sacred Heart, the Holy Family, and the Virgin of Fatima, among others. Like other Hispanic Catholics, many Dominicans believe that the saints will protect them from misfortune and help them to advance economically. One Dominican woman who wore a necklace with a medallion of the Virgin of Altagracia explained: “when you’re away from your country, you need protection. And your country needs it too.” Even an Irish-American woman had an altar dressed in typical Dominican fashion with the help of an immigrant friend. The next section describes the immigrants’ socioeconomic characteristics and elaborates on their cultural practices.

## Results

*Socioeconomic Characteristics.* Table 2 summarizes the sample's socioeconomic features. First, most Dominican immigrants were born in the largest urban centers of the Dominican Republic: Santo Domingo, Santiago, San Pedro de Macorís, La Romana, San Francisco de Macorís, and Puerto Plata. The most common city of origin was San Francisco de Macorís,<sup>14</sup> followed by Santiago and Santo Domingo. Second, most adults had at least an elementary education; 40 percent had between 9 and 12 years of schooling. Third, almost half of all employed residents were unskilled service workers, followed by operatives and laborers. The most frequent occupations were cleaners, porters, home attendants, waiters, cooks, parking attendants, taxi drivers, security guards, factory operators, seamstresses, and mechanics. (Two out of five residents were students and housewives). Fourth, more than half of the workers were employed in the service sector, followed by commerce and manufacturing. Finally, the sample had few married couples and many female-headed, extended, and single person households.

Our data confirm several trends observed in prior studies of the Dominican community of Washington Heights, and suggest newer trends as well. As expected, the vast majority of Dominican immigrants were born in major urban areas, concentrate in the intermediate levels of the educational system, and originate in the middle strata of their home society. These results corroborate the selective nature of Dominican migration to the United States and contradict the common stereotype of displaced villagers from the Cibao (see Hendricks 1974).

On the other hand, the proportion of single female heads was much lower than that found by other studies of Dominican households (for example, Pessar 1987). In many cases, we were able to identify “welfare mothers” whose husbands were present but hidden from government authorities. Repeated observations of several Dominican households revealed a male adult who had

14 As one informant noted, San Francisco de Macorís is popularly associated with well-to-do *Dominican-Yorks*, who have made their fortunes trafficking drugs (see *The New York Times* 1991c). However, most residents of our site were working in legal, though often irregular, occupations.

Table 2  
Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Sample

| Characteristic                                   | Number | Percent |
|--|--------|---------|
| <b>Family Structure</b>                          |        |         |
| Married couple                                   | 30     | 27.3    |
| Single female headed                             | 26     | 23.6    |
| Single male headed                               | 2      | 1.8     |
| Extended family                                  | 24     | 21.8    |
| Single person                                    | 15     | 13.6    |
| Unrelated persons                                | 13     | 11.8    |
| <b>Education (persons 25 years old and over)</b> |        |         |
| 0 – 4  | 15     | 11.4    |
| 5 – 8  | 36     | 27.3    |
| 9 – 12   | 54     | 40.9    |
| 13 – 16  | 25     | 18.9    |
| 17 or more                                       | 2      | 1.5     |
| <b>Occupation (employed persons)</b>             |        |         |
| Professionals & technicians                      | 8      | 7.6     |
| Managers & administrators                        | 1      | 1.0     |
| Office workers                                   | 6      | 5.7     |
| Sales persons                                    | 7      | 6.7     |
| Craft & repair workers                           | 14     | 13.3    |
| Operators & laborers                             | 18     | 17.1    |
| Service workers                                  | 51     | 48.6    |
| <b>Economic Sector</b>                           |        |         |
| Construction                                     | 3      | 2.9     |
| Transportation                                   | 1      | 1.0     |
| Manufacturing                                    | 18     | 17.3    |
| Trade  | 19     | 18.3    |
| Public administration                            | 1      | 1.0     |
| Professional services                            | 12     | 11.5    |
| Repair & business services                       | 9      | 8.7     |
| Personal services                                | 36     | 34.6    |

*Note:* N=352. Missing cases vary between 13 and 66, depending on the variable.

not been reported at the beginning of our study. However, most female heads were the main economic providers of their families. In this context, the men's traditional authority was eroded and women's autonomy increased. Thus, transnational migration often restructured Dominican families. Marriage separation, whether temporary or permanent, is a common feature of transnational households.

Perhaps more important, our data suggest that Dominican immigrants in New York are not massively moving upwards in the occupational ladder, becoming entrepreneurs or creating a diversified enclave economy. Rather, many Dominicans have been displaced from light manufacturing, especially the garment industry, to the low-wage and low-skilled service sector, thus moving sideways or downwards in the labor market. Some informants had lost relatively well-paid jobs as mechanics, seamstresses, or carpenters as a result of the city's economy downturn. Others were barely surviving the recession, selling food in the street or driving gypsy cabs. In sum, New York's economic restructuring has undermined the labor market position of Dominicans in Washington Heights.

| Occupation | Number | Percent |
|------------|--------|---------|
| Employed   | 105    | 37.4    |
| Unemployed | 43     | 15.3    |
| Retired    | 20     | 7.1     |
| Disabled   | 4      | 1.4     |
| Housewife  | 18     | 6.4     |
| Student    | 91     | 32.4    |
| Total      | 281    | 100     |

Table 3 further documents the marginal status of most immigrants in the labor force. Only about a third of the residents were employed, including unstable and irregular jobs such as

informal child care and cooking from the home. About 15 percent were officially unemployed, many receiving government benefits such as unemployment assistance and unemployment benefits. The remainder were outside the labor force, including retired and disabled persons. Few women reported their main occupation as housewives, but most youngsters were students. The ratio of working to non-working residents (including the unemployed, retired, and disabled, housewives, and students) was about one to three. It is against the backdrop of intense socioeconomic deprivation that the transnational identity of Dominicans in Washington Heights must be examined.

*In Search of a Better Life.* To begin, Dominicans express their cultural values and practices in their reasons for migrating. Our interviews confirmed that the majority of the Dominicans moved to the United States “in search of a better life” (*buscando mejor vida*, as they typically put it). The migrants’ conception of a better life was clearly rooted in material progress, as reflected in higher wages, more employment opportunities, and higher standards of living. “My parents came to make more money, to advance,” said Joannie. “I came because I was alone with my two children,” said Ana Sofía, “and I didn’t make enough money to support them. *No me alcanzaba.*” “I came because of the economic crisis in the Dominican Republic,” Freddy said. “In Santo Domingo I was dying of hunger and I wanted to improve my situation,” added another immigrant. A neighborhood merchant pointed out: “We who have come to this country almost always hope to accumulate some money to retire” back in the Dominican Republic. And Antonio quipped: “Everyone likes dollars.” As I will argue later, Dominicans often articulate a paradox between their cultural traditions and material progress, between their intense desire to preserve their identity and their quest for upward mobility. This apparent contradiction is part and parcel of many transnational communities.

Some informants emphasized noneconomic reasons for migrating, such as “I came looking for a better fortune for my children,” “I needed to discover new horizons,” “I like to explore,” “Looking for a better future,” or less commonly, “We had to come to avoid family quarrels.” A few respondents fled to the United

States to avoid political persecution after the Dominican Civil War of 1965. A recurrent theme in our interviews was migration as a constant search, in which people looked for—and sometimes found—rewarding experiences at the end of a painful struggle for survival and improvement. Although migration had an unmistakable economic logic, social networks invariably facilitated the resettlement of Dominicans in Washington Heights.

A central image in the migrants' discourse is the family, broadly defined to include cousins, uncles and aunts, and sometimes *compadres* (co-parents) and *padrinos* (godparents). Kinship ties played a leading role in the decision to move to the United States. Many younger Dominicans, especially women, came because “they brought me” or “they asked for me” (*me pidieron*). “They” were usually one's parents, spouses, or children, but sometimes more distant relatives. “My entire family was here,” explained Rocío. “So I had to come.” “I've brought 22 relatives to this country over the past twenty-five years,” boasted Daniel.

Scholars have noted the resilience of kinship ties among Dominicans, who tend to visualize the migration process as a *cadena* (chain) of relatives widely scattered across space (Garrison and Weiss 1979; Grasmuck and Pessar 1991). This social chain operates as a transnational system of personal linkages, often organized around the mother figure or another female member of the household. What needs further emphasis is that the very origins of the migratory experience, as well as the resettlement process, are embedded in the migrants' extended family. Moreover, the strong kinship ideology of Dominican migrants means that much of their ethnic identity and popular culture is preserved in the private domain of the household.

Most interviewees said they had migrated legally to the United States, usually with a resident visa obtained through a close relative. This finding may reflect our decision to interview people who felt more comfortable with us, and thus many undocumented persons did not participate in the interviews. However, several Dominicans acknowledged that they had arrived on tourist visas (*de paseo*) and overstayed their temporary permits. Most of these “visa abusers” had regularized their legal status in the United States, sometimes

by marrying a U.S. citizen. Only one respondent said he had come illegally, using the documents of another person. One interviewee said he was “getting his papers in order” to become a resident.

The most common pattern was for one family member, usually the husband, to migrate first, and then to bring the rest of the family once he or she had secured permanent residence in the United States. Antonio recounted his experience:

I came by myself. Little by little I brought my children as adults. Things aren't easy here for kids. I came with a tourist visa. The carpenter's lodge helped me to come here. I later married a Puerto Rican woman and became an American citizen.

Daniel was also the first to come from his family:

I came as a merchant marine. I didn't have a visa. I got the permanent residence easily. I found a lawyer who charged me 1,500 dollars to solve my problem. After five years I became a citizen and brought the family, beginning with my wife.

Esperanza's story is typical of many Dominican women who followed their migrant husbands to the United States:

My husband asked for me and my children. He came in 1963 and recognized his children. I came with six kids via Puerto Rico. I came directly to New York, where my husband met us. Pan American served me very well. We all had visas from the U.S. consulate in Santo Domingo.

Similarly, Joannie told us:

First came my mother, then my stepfather from Puerto Rico. Later the children came from Santo Domingo. Our parents asked for us.

The process of family reunification, however, often spans decades because of the legal and financial obstacles of sponsoring the migration of relatives from the Dominican Republic. Because half

of the sample's Dominicans immigrated to the United States after 1979, most had relatives in their home country. Some complained that current visa regulations in the United States make it difficult to petition the entire family from the island. As a result, many Dominican families remain divided between two nations.

*The Family and the Fatherland.* Why did the immigrants settle in Washington Heights? Again, family reasons predominated among our interviewees. Several said they came here because they had relatives in the neighborhood, who provided them with shelter, food, and orientation upon arriving in New York. Most respondents—30 out of 36—had close relatives living in Washington Heights, primarily children, siblings, and cousins. The second most popular destination for newly arrived immigrants was the Bronx, where the Dominican population grew quickly in the 1980s (New York City, Department of City Planning 1992).

Many immigrants also had close friends in Washington Heights, often from the same hometown *barrio* in the Dominican Republic. “I knew people here who could take care of my children,” explained Rosa. “Here I can relate to my people,” added Juana. The neighborhood’s Dominican atmosphere, with its Spanish-speaking stores and employment opportunities for Hispanics, was a key attraction for many immigrants. The desire to preserve their cultural identity led many Dominicans to Washington Heights. The neighborhood thus became a transnational space, an American landscape reshaped by Dominican culture.

A handful of respondents mentioned more pragmatic reasons for relocating in Washington Heights, such as “Everything was close by here” or “I can’t pay a higher rent.”<sup>15</sup> But the neighborhood’s main magnet was its dense Dominican community, with its wide range of informal support systems, social institutions, and commercial services. In Washington Heights, single men can eat Dominican food in cheap restaurants and drink in bars served by Dominican women. An old woman mentioned that here she could find any product from the Dominican Republic,

15 Rents in the block ranged from \$250 for a one-bedroom apartment to \$650 for a renovated two-bedroom apartment. These were comparatively low prices for Manhattan in 1993.

especially in the *botánicas*, for I am sick woman and I have to make my teas with roots from my country. *Maguel*, for example, is very difficult to find elsewhere. That's why I feel like I'm in Santo Domingo.

We also met a man who sold *botellas*, a folk medicine made with the roots and leaves of tropical plants. He said the medicine helped to purify one's blood, clean the kidneys, and strengthen sexual appetite. Dominican folklore is kept alive in the streets and homes of Washington Heights.

| Social Relations                             | Percent (N=37) |
|--|----------------|
| Has relatives in New York City               | 97.3           |
| Has relatives in Washington Heights          | 83.3           |
| Has Hispanic friends                         | 74.1           |
| Has non-Dominican friends                    | 73             |
| Found last job through friends and relatives | 63.3           |
| Works with other Dominicans                  | 45.7           |
| Has relatives in the Bronx                   | 38.9           |
| Works for a Dominican                        | 18.2           |
| Belong to Dominican associations             | 13.9           |

Table 4 shows that Dominicans are moderately encapsulated within their community. The vast majority had relatives in New York City, especially in Washington Heights and the Bronx. Most found their last jobs through friends and relatives. Almost half of the interviewees worked with other Dominicans, although few were employed by Dominicans. Three out of four interviewees had non-Dominican friends, especially Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics. However, few had non-Hispanic friends, such as African Americans and non-Hispanic whites. Finally, most Dominicans did not belong to any voluntary associations, whether Dominican or not.

Although most immigrants have not joined Dominican clubs and other organizations, those who have cited a host of reasons for doing so. Joannie explained:

I liked to sing and dance. So I joined Alianza Dominicana. I later stopped going because it was at night and my mother didn't like it.

Dersis participated in several Dominican organizations, especially Alianza, because "it made me feel closer to the community. But now I have three children to take care of and it's hard to attend meetings." Other interviewees said they belonged to Dominican clubs because they wanted to "relate to their people." "I wanted to have friends from my hometown," said a member of the Club Puertoplateño. "I was a member of the Club Gregorio Luperón in Puerto Plata," noted José, "and now most of us are living here, so we formed the club here." Some respondents belonged to all-Dominican religious institutions, such as a nearby evangelical church, because they shared "an interest in Jesus Christ" and "the sense of comradeship."

*Ingroup and Outgroup Perceptions.* Most respondents—31 out of 37—felt Dominican, not American and not even Dominican-American. When the immigrants described their country of origin, they often used emotional terms like *mi patria* ("my fatherland"), *mi tierra* ("my land"), *mi país* ("my country"), and *la madre tierra* ("the motherland"). Respondents constantly emphasized the possessive adjective (*mi*) when referring to the Dominican Republic, but not to the United States, which they usually called *este país* ("this country"). This semantic difference typically denoted an emotional distance and a critical attitude toward the host society. According to one informant, "life in this country is shorter because there's a lot of stress." Antonio added: "This is a commercial country and it's hard to make friends." On the other hand, Estela said: "I was born there and I like my country." Antonio reiterated the main theme:

That's my fatherland. I was born there. I had my children there. I can't forget my little piece of land. But I'm grateful to this country.

Most interviewees would probably agree with Dersis' dictum: "you still feel that you belong to the country where you were born." Noelia explained further: "You love your country like you love your family." "You carry that in your blood," added a third informant. Only two immigrants identified themselves as American: "I feel almost American," Paula said. "I feel I belong here because I've been here for 14 years now," said María. But "it's difficult to feel American," according to Daniel, "because there's a lot of discrimination against Hispanics. They won't even let us speak Spanish at work." Finally, long-rime residents like Octavina have developed an ambivalent identity:

When I'm here, I feel American. When I go to my country, I feel Dominican, even though I have no rights there. I'm loyal to this flag, but I love my country.

How do Dominicans distinguish themselves from other ethnic groups in New York City, such as Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics? This was one of the most difficult questions for our respondents, and they showed little consensus on the core of Dominican identity.<sup>16</sup> The most frequently cited characteristic was the Dominican accent in speaking Spanish, followed by standard references to *merengue* and *comida criolla*, ethnic foodways. "If you don't eat rice and beans and plantains, you're not Dominican," claimed one woman. Another informant said he preferred a good plate of *mangú con salchichón* to being wealthy.

Some informants noted that Dominicans shared distinctive psychological characteristics, but they could not agree on the specifics. Octavina said, "it's a treat to watch Dominicans working;" but others thought that Dominicans were lazy. Some believed that the Dominican community was united and harmonious, but Dersis pointed out that Dominicans "only get together to party." According to Rafael, "Dominicans have no sense of *compañerismo* (comradeship), they kill each other." The interviews generated a long list of adjectives for Dominicans, some of them

16 Sainz's (1990) Dominican informants also found it difficult to identify differences and similarities among Hispanics, although most rejected the term as a label for their ethnic identity.

incongruent, such as happy, loud, sociable, proud, ambitious, difficult, complicated, clean, loyal, decent, respectful, patriotic, aggressive, and nonconformist. Despite some negative overtones, the Dominicans' self-portrayal was predominantly favorable.

Concerns about drug trafficking emerged spontaneously during the interviews. Joannie stated that “many Dominicans don't think of helping the country; they come to sell drugs and do bad things.” Mercedes referred to recent police disturbances in the neighborhood:

We're not worth anything. The kid who got killed was a delinquent. You leave your country looking for improvement and what you find is shame [...] Oh, we suffered so much hunger in Santo Domingo!

Another interviewee dramatized the situation: “Dominicans have spoiled themselves; they come here like lawless goats [*chivos sin ley*].” “I'm even ashamed of being a Dominican,” added another informant, “because of the bad reputation we have.” According to Antonio, “the Dominican community is a lot of garbage and the young people either sell drugs or kill people for money.” Many immigrants have internalized the stigma attached to the Dominican community and promoted by the mass media.

| Practice  | Percent (N=59) |
|---|----------------|
| Cooks mostly Dominican food                               | 94.9           |
| Speaks mostly Spanish at home                             | 88.1           |
| Shops mostly at Dominican grocery stores and supermarkets | 86.7           |
| Belongs to the Catholic religion                          | 78.0           |
| Listens mostly to Dominican music                         | 65.5           |
| Listens mostly to Spanish radio                           | 62.5           |
| Watches mostly Spanish TV                                 | 59.3           |
| Reads mostly in Spanish                                   | 49.1           |
| Celebrates mostly Dominican events                        | 42.4           |

*Culture, Nationality, and Citizenship.* Nonetheless, most interviewees remain attached to their culture of origin. Table 5 shows how Dominican households fared on several indices of cultural persistence. The data suggest that the immigrants retain a strong allegiance to their traditional foodways, spoken language, shopping preferences, and religious affiliation. For instance, most interviewees bought their groceries in Dominican-owned *bodegas* and practiced the Catholic religion. Television watching, radio listening, and musical tastes showed a weaker attachment to Hispanic and Dominican culture. Moreover, most household members did not read primarily in Spanish, nor did they celebrate public events of Dominican origin.<sup>17</sup> Most immigrants conserved many Dominican beliefs and customs, although increasingly mixed with American culture. Thus, Dominicans have created a transnational identity in Washington Heights.

The Americanization process was advanced among second-generation Dominicans, those born and raised in the United States. The latter group constituted about 39 percent of the site's Dominican population. Dominican teenagers often spoke English among themselves, watched American TV programs, wore oversize jeans, sported short hair cuts, listened to rap music, and adopted the hip hop styles of their African American and Puerto Rican peers.<sup>18</sup> Our impression was that young Dominicans tended to be more aggressive and distrustful than their parents, perhaps as a result of their personal experiences with ethnic strife in New York City. According to a middle-aged immigrant,

17 The major community event, New York's Dominican Day Parade, has been plagued with organizational problems due to personal and political rivalries. These problems have undermined popular participation in the Parade (see *El Diario/La Prensa* 1993a; *Village Voice* 1988). In 1990, about 250,000 Dominicans participated in the Dominican Parade in Manhattan. In 1993, only 50,000 were expected to attend the Dominican Parade in the Bronx (*The New York Times* 1990; *El Diario/La Prensa* 1993d).

18 According to Juan Flores (1988), hip hop culture has three essential components: rap, breakdancing, and graffiti. Hip hop emerged among African American and Puerto Rican youth from the poorest inner-city neighborhoods in New York, especially Harlem, El Barrio, the Bronx, and Brooklyn. Lately, Dominicans have incorporated *merengue* rhythms into rap, both in the United States and Puerto Rico.

the young ones are the ones who set roots and stay here, but those who came as adults never adapt completely. Here's there's a lot of rush, an accelerated lifestyle. Over there life is more mellow.

However, Columbia University researchers have found that young Dominicans are creating a new identity by distinguishing themselves from Dominican culture and from other ethnic groups, specifically Puerto Ricans and African Americans (Ana Yolanda Ramos, personal communication, October 8, 1993). So far, second-generation Dominicans have maintained a social distance from other lower-class minorities in the United States.

Most of the Dominican immigrants we interviewed —26 out of 37— have not yet become U.S. citizens.<sup>19</sup> The most common reason for this pattern was insufficient length of residence in the United States. Lack of English knowledge was a secondary explanation. However, even long-time residents and those familiar with English were reluctant to shed their Dominican citizenship. “I’m not interested,” “I feel Dominican,” and “I don’t plan to live here forever” were additional explanations.

On the other hand, those who had become U.S. citizens were often motivated by practical rather than ideological reasons. “I wanted to bring my family here,” several interviewees said. “When you’re old you can’t go through the daily hassle of changing your cards and standing on line” at the airport, Rosa said. Antonio became a U.S. citizen because “I didn’t want to renew my residence every time I went back to my country.” “I did it because it was convenient,” answered Daniel. Only one Dominican said he had become a citizen because he wanted “to participate in the civil life” of the United States. Most did not perceive any material advantages to being a U.S. citizen other than petitioning for their relatives to the United States.

Our interviews confirmed the strength of a return ideology among Dominican immigrants. Two out of three respondents said

19 According to *The New York Times* (1993), only 18 percent of the Dominican immigrants admitted to the United States in 1977 were naturalized by 1989. This naturalization rate was almost half the figure for all immigrants. Accordingly, Dominican associations in New York and New Jersey, such as *Alianza Dominicana*, actively campaign for the naturalization of Dominican immigrants to increase their political bargaining power in American politics.

they would like to go back to live in their country.<sup>20</sup> Three out of four have returned to visit at least twice in the last five years. The most extreme case was that of Daniel, who estimated he had gone back 50 times since he arrived in New York in 1968. He had returned four times in the last year alone. “I love to go for pleasure,” he said, “*a pasear*.”

When asked why they would like to live in their country, respondents established a clear dichotomy between *aquí* (“here”) and *allá* (“there”).<sup>21</sup> Here is where they can make and save money, advance economically, help their families, and secure a better future for their children. But “here you live behind closed doors and with no back yard,” Noelia noted. As Pepín explained,

The way of life is different here. Here life is more rushed. Over there it's easier, more peaceful.

There is “my country:” a place where one belongs, enjoys, rests, lives peacefully and happily. “Over there you live with much pleasure,” said Rosa. Estela explained,

I love my country. Over there in my land—in San Pedro de Macorís—it's not as hot as here, especially if you live near the sea. I'm not there because my whole family is here.

“Over there is where the good things are,” summarized another informant. “*Allá es que está lo bueno*.”

20 In comparison, a recent study found that about half of Colombians in Queens planned to return to their country (Institute for Puerto Rican Policy 1992). Patricia Pessar (1985) has found that Dominican women intend to stay in the United States longer than the men because the women have gained greater household autonomy as a result of migration.

21 This binary opposition is typical of transnational communities like the Puerto Ricans. In “The Flying Bus,” writer Luis Rafael Sánchez (1987:24) has portrayed “Puerto Ricans who want to be there but must remain here; Puerto Ricans who want to be there but cannot remain there; Puerto Ricans who live there and dream about being here; Puerto Ricans with their lives hanging from the hooks of the question mark *allá? acá?*, Hamletian disjunctives that ooze their lifeblood through both adverbs.” Like Puerto Ricans, many Dominicans circulate between the United States and their country of origin, if only temporarily.

Most of the immigrants we interviewed still feel more at home in the Dominican Republic than in the United States. Even after living for decades in New York, Dominicans do not completely abandon their emotional attachment to their native country. Elderly immigrants often plan to retire to the island because, as Mercedes noted, “when you’re old you’re better off in your country.” Another Mercedes pointed out: “If I’m sick and dying, I’d like to be taken to my country to die.” Antonio said:

I feel much better over there. I can walk everywhere. Nothing hurts in my body like it does here. God willing, I’m returning.

Even Héctor, a young Dominican raised in New York who has never been back to his country, felt he did not belong to American society: “this is not my country,” he explained. “Here I feel *arrimada*,” said one woman, “like a stranger.” According to Dersis, “returning is every foreigner’s dream. So I’m preparing the bridge to return one day.” Rosa coincided: “you always dream of returning to the motherland.” And a grocery store owner lamented,

I haven’t gone back [to the Dominican Republic] in seven months, and the nostalgia of going there is killing me. I’m almost there now.

In synthesis, Dominican immigrants in Washington Heights share a romantic image of their native country, in contrast to their current situation in the United States, which they tend to perceive as necessary but transitory. “What is it they like so much about here?” Ana Sofía asked rhetorically. Another respondent claimed: “There’s no place to live in like my country.” This division between an immediate and a remote space, between present and past, between home and host country, is a common feature of a transnational identity.

## Discussion

The findings of this study will be discussed in terms of the five basic hypotheses stated earlier in the essay. Overall, the results confirm that Dominicans have created a transnational community in Washington Heights. The migrants' identity combines cultural elements and social networks from sending and receiving societies, with a prevalence of the sending society. The Dominican community of Washington Heights defines and expresses its hybrid identity through popular culture in everyday life.

*Cultural Orientation Toward the Dominican Republic.* Like previous studies (see Hendricks 1974; Georges 1988), our data suggest that Dominican immigrants in New York City continue to rely on traditional beliefs and customs from their home country, such as eating *mangú* or dancing the *merengue*. At present, assimilation into mainstream U.S. culture is not the dominant trend among the immigrants, but rather a creative blending of Dominican and American elements. The Dominicans' persistent attachment to their culture of origin has several explanations. On one hand, the Dominican exodus is relatively recent, taking off after 1965, and increased in the 1980s as a result of deteriorating living conditions in the Dominican Republic and the availability of low-skilled jobs in the United States in Puerto Rico. Today, most Dominicans in New York are still first-generation immigrants. The exodus will probably continue in the 1990s, renovating the Dominican community abroad.

On the other hand, the immigrants' concentration in Washington Heights has created a population center sufficiently large to sustain many Dominican institutions in the diaspora. For example, scores of voluntary associations have kept the homeland alive in the neighborhood. Residential segregation and racial prejudice have furthered the immigrants' encapsulation into their own community and limited contact with other ethnic groups. Moreover, the ease of transportation and communications between the Dominican Republic and the United States has encouraged a circular flow of people, ideas, and commodities. Finally, an incipient

enclave economy has strengthened ties of ethnic solidarity rather than interethnic cooperation.

*The Creation of a Transnational Identity.* Migration and resettlement in an alien environment have transformed the popular culture of Dominicans in Washington Heights. Most immigrants do not maintain their culture intact but acculturate with increasing time and contact with the host community. This trend is notable among young Dominicans, who tend to be more exposed to American culture at school, through the mass media, and in their peer groups. For instance, many Dominican teenagers use “Spanglish,” or code switching between Spanish and English, as their primary mode of communication. The data presented in this paper suggest a heterogeneous and dynamic process of accommodation that includes the selection of new U.S. traits, especially from marginal cultures; retention of some Dominican beliefs and practices, especially in the private sphere of the household; and the creation of a syncretic culture that crosses over territorial boundaries.

Nevertheless, few immigrants have entirely shed their Dominican identity even after living for a long time in the United States. Many *Dominican-Yorks*, although raised in the United States, dislike the term “Dominican-American” because they feel it denies them full membership in either society.<sup>22</sup> Most Dominican immigrants have not yet become U.S. citizens, nor acquired English as their home language. Most intend to return eventually to the Dominican Republic and regularly visit the island. Ethnic newspapers cover important events in both the Dominican Republic and the Dominican community in New York and New Jersey. Ambivalent attitudes toward the host society characterize the immigrant community, torn between the desire for material progress in the United States and persistent emotional attachment to the Dominican Republic. Many immigrants undoubtedly see no contradiction between the two sentiments. Still, a sense of duality permeates the Dominican community of Washington Heights, from television preferences to political participation.

22 This interpretation is based on several group discussions with my Dominican research assistants and an interview with Idanys Rodríguez, Coordinator of the Unión de Jóvenes Dominicanos, New York, July 23, 1993. On this issue, see also Torres-Saillant (1989a).

In sum, the dichotomy between *aquí* (“here”) and *allá* (“there”) structures the mentality of many Dominicans in New York. This division reaffirms the migrants’ transnational identity, situated on the borders between two different cultures.

*Popular Culture and Transnational Identity.* Most Dominican immigrants find it difficult to articulate their collective sense of self. But they express their identity clearly through popular culture. The strongest index of their national origin is their traditional foodways, followed by their preference for speaking Spanish, shopping in neighborhood *bodegas*, and practicing the Catholic religion. The immigrants also favor Dominican music as well as Spanish radio and television, although to a lesser degree. Furthermore, many Dominican residents of Washington Heights display their identity by setting up altars for the saints, placing national flags and maps on the walls, and playing loud *merengues* and *bachatas*. Although many immigrants cannot pinpoint exactly what is unique about Dominican culture, the signs of their transnational identity are visible and audible. Many of these symbolic markers are not unique to Dominicans—they are shared by other Hispanics in New York—so that a common transnational identity may eventually emerge among various immigrant groups from Spanish America and the Caribbean. At present, however, Dominicans prefer to identify themselves primarily on the basis of national origin.

*A Marginal Culture.* Most Dominican immigrants have incorporated into the lower strata of the labor and housing markets of New York City. Ethnic prejudice and racial discrimination have systematically excluded them from the mainstream of American society. Negative stereotypes promoted by the mass media, especially since the 1992 riots in Washington Heights, have stigmatized the entire Dominican community as violent drug-trafficking gangsters. Scattered tensions and constant competition for scarce resources have made it difficult to establish political alliances with Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics. Consequently, Dominicans occupy a subordinate position within the structure of ethnic groups in New York City. Under such circumstances, “‘assimilation’ may not be to mainstream values and expectations, but to the adversarial stance of impoverished groups confined to the bottom of the new economic

hourglass” (Portes and Zhou 1991:12-13). It remains uncertain whether second-generation Dominicans in New York will make common cause with other minorities, such as African Americans and Puerto Ricans, or assert a separate identity.

*Resistance to Assimilation.* Like other transnational communities, the Dominican community of Washington Heights has not assimilated linguistically and culturally, but retains a large part of its cultural heritage. The “ghettoization” of vast numbers of poor and dark-skinned foreigners has deprived them of the opportunity to interact with other ethnic groups, learn English, and acquire the necessary skills to incorporate into the U.S. mainstream. Many Dominicans maintain an emotional distance from American society and feel alien to its culture. Travel back and forth to the Dominican Republic reinforces the return ideology of Dominicans abroad. Most Dominicans view migration as a temporary stage in the life cycle, not as an irreversible decision leading to complete absorption into the American melting pot. The fatherland thus remains the key to the migrants’ world view, the point of departure in the construction of their transnational identity.

## **Conclusion**

Although researchers have drawn clearly the socioeconomic contours of Dominican migration, the everyday life of Dominicans in New York City remains outside the fringes of academic discourse—or, to quote Silvio Torres-Saillant’s (1991) apt phrase, on “the periphery of the margins.” By focusing on the socioeconomic components of the migratory process, most scholars have overlooked the cultural dimensions of the Dominican exodus. With a few exceptions (Torres-Saillant 1989a; Rey Hernández 1992), researchers have not probed beneath the surface of aggregate data to understand the beliefs, customs, and world view of Dominican migrants. And yet this process of transporting, transforming, and recreating their lifestyle is central to the immigrant experience in New York. Because of the prevailing interests of academic researchers, Dominican migrants have often appeared as an “uncultured” other,

lacking the most basic attributes of human beings (see Torres-Saillant 1989b for a criticism of this trend).

Recent studies have underlined the decline of ethnic distinctions among the descendants of white immigrants in the United States (Alba 1990). Ethnic identity based on a particular European ancestry is fading away as a prominent way of organizing social interaction. Instead, a new group based on origin in any European country is emerging as the dominant sector of American society. Scholars have often characterized this new identity as optional, situational, and individual, rather than ascribed, static, or collective. From this standpoint, ethnic identity becomes a strategic choice that people manipulate in certain social contexts to advance their personal interests.

However, the process of identity formation differs substantially for white Americans and other racial and ethnic groups, especially African Americans and Hispanics (Portes and Zhou 1993). For instance, most Caribbean immigrants in the United States are classified as black or at least nonwhite. Due to geographic proximity and cheap transportation, circular migration is more common among recent migrants from the Caribbean than among groups of European origin. Few Caribbean immigrants in the United States wish to leave their homelands definitively and many remain provisionally inserted into American society (Chaney 1987). In contrast to most European immigrants, Caribbean immigrants maintain constant contact with their original cultures. The restless circulation of people between the Caribbean and New York City has engendered many transnational communities. As Constance Sutton (1987:20) argues, "It is the emergence of this transnational socio-cultural system which suggests that the model of immigrant/ethnic incorporation into a 'culturally pluralistic' American society is not the destiny of migrant Caribbeans."

The present study has documented the emergence of a transnational identity among Dominicans in Washington Heights. This identity is characterized by an ambivalent attachment to the host society and a persistent outlook toward the home island, as well as family networks that cut across geopolitical boundaries. The establishment of a solid Dominican community in

Washington Heights ensures the preservation of ethnic solidarity and cooperation. Although kinship and friendship ties span two countries, cultural beliefs and customs are firmly rooted in the sending society. Place of origin, rather than destination, provides the basic reference point for most immigrants. However, transnational migration transforms social relations and generates a new identity that transcends traditional notions of physical and cultural space (Glick Schiller et al. 1992). Among other changes, the diaspora calls into question the immigrants' conception of ethnic, racial, and national identities as defined in their home countries.

Washington Heights serves as an intermediary point of settlement, a place where Dominicans can speak Spanish, meet fellow Dominicans, attend mass in Spanish, shop in *bodegas*, listen to *merengue*, and remain encapsulated within a Hispanic culture. Voluntary associations and organized public events are not the primary expression of the migrants' transnational identity, but rather the informal practices of everyday life. Through popular culture, especially through spoken language, music, food, and religion, Dominicans celebrate their sense of belonging to a transnational group. In essence, Washington Heights rekindles the spirit of a moral community among Dominican immigrants in New York City, thereby reinventing Quisqueya on the Hudson.

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