“... I thought you were black.” An autoethnographic exploration of the fragmentation of identity and culture.

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“... I thought you were black .”
An autoethnographic exploration of the fragmentation of identity and culture.

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Honors Anthropology Senior Thesis

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Note from the Author

"If anthropology doesn't break your heart, then you're not doing it right."
- Ruth Behar

Writing this thesis has been a trying experience. Within these pages, you will find the therapeutic expedition of a caramel-colored, Spanish-speaking, second-generation black Dominican woman from Newark, NJ who took advantage of this research opportunity to better understand the racial and ethnic parts of her identity which have caused her much turmoil and low self-esteem. Centering myself, my identity, and my story in this research and grappling with the complexities of the subject matter has been an exhausting yet liberating experience. I have contemplated many times throwing away this thesis, as I 100% understood that it was an optional part of my anthropology degree. But yet I continued to push through all the tears and pain, even with the recognition that I had no adequate support from my surrounding faculty in carrying this emotional burden. I want to thank the many different Afro-Latinox people across the United States I reached out to in the course of my research and who shared their stories with me and continued to reassure me in this labor of love.

As a Black Latina (Afro-Latina), that has constantly lived in this borderland of identity, neither fully at home nor completely displaced,

repeatedly caught in the tension between fitting in and standing out,

struggling with a sense of both connection and alienation,

existing in a state of flux, where my sense of belonging is constantly shifting,

I write this in hopes that my story and my theoretical understanding of my identity crisis may soothe another soul who feels alone in this battle. I hope that this writing will encourage others to take the first step in their paths of self-discovery and provide them with the courage to continue seeking knowledge, even when the journey ahead is painful.
Note on Terminology

Taking inspiration from Lorgia García-Peña's book, "The Borders of Dominicanidad," I would like to begin my thesis with a list of the primary identity terms I will be employing, along with a brief explanation of my usage. These terms are intricate, as their meanings may differ depending on the context and location in which they are used. I have leaned on García-Peña and the “Keywords for Latina/o Studies” published by NYU Press to guide my understanding of the terms below:

**black:** a *global* term for identifying individuals and cultures of African descent. A racial identifier.

**blackness:** diasporic Black identities that encompass both the shared history of Afro-descendant groups and a dynamic racial and cultural category.

**Latinx:** someone of Latin American descent or origin living in the United States (Brazil included). The Spanish language is highly gendered, with nouns ending in 'a' being feminine and those ending in 'o' as masculine. Latinx (or Latine) is a gender-neutral term for Latin Americans, notably members of the LGBTQ+ community. It originated in the mid-2000s within activist circles primarily in the U.S. as an extension of earlier gender-inclusive variations such as Latino/a (with the slash) and Latin@ (with the "at" sign). This is an ethnic and cultural category encompassing all people from the Latin American/Caribbean region. Whereas the term Hispanic is more exclusionary, only refreshing to individuals from Spanish-speaking countries in the region.

**brown:** not an isolated construct but a rather integral component of larger systems of racialization and social stratification. While "brown" often refers to people of mixed racial or ethnic backgrounds, particularly those with Indigenous, African, or Asian heritage, it carries multifaceted political and cultural implications. "Brown" symbolizes a powerful assertion of resistance against the pervasive force of whiteness and racism, embracing the intricate and varied nuances of Latinx identity. However, "brown" remains a concept fraught with tension and complexity, reflecting a contested history of racial categorization and hierarchy. Although it is often used to unite marginalized communities against oppressive systems, "brown" has also been criticized for obscuring the unique experiences and struggles of specific groups within the Latinx and Indigenous communities. Ultimately, "brown" represents a dynamic and evolving term that defies easy definition or categorization, embodying the fluidity and diversity of human experience.¹

**African American:** (also referred to as Black Americans and Afro-Americans) is an ethnic group consisting of Americans with partial or total ancestry from Africa. They are descendants of people who were brought to the United States during the transatlantic slave trade.

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**Afro-Latino/a/e/x:** used to describe Latinas/os in the United States who are of African ancestry and choose to identify as black in addition to their ethnic identification with their Latina/o national origins. These terms are not limited to the United States; activists of African descent in Latin America and the Caribbean have also embraced them. The academic exploration of this group is often overlooked in Latina/o studies, with many scholars treating the racial mixture of Latinas/os as eliminating any racial differences. This academic discipline rather extends the Latin American studies concept of *mestizaje* (the idea that a population with a mix of races is a sign of racial peace and safe from racial conflict and inequality) into the belief that Latinas/os in the United States are racially enlightened as a result of their racial mixture, without examining its subtext of white supremacy. The lack of AfroLatina/o research in Latina/o studies obscures the complexity of the socioeconomic racial hierarchy that exists throughout Latina/o communities. Indeed, Afro-Latinas and Latinos in the United States consistently report experiencing racist treatment from other Latinas and Latinos, in addition to being viewed as outsiders in the construction of Latina/o identity. It is hoped that as knowledge of Afro-Latinas/os increases, the field of Latina/o studies will continue to expand and progress beyond representations of Latinas and Latinos as racially homogeneous.²

**mestizaje:** racial category which directly translates to ‘mixed’ in English. It is generally identifying those with Spanish and Indigenous background. These definitions vary greatly depending on the Latin American country

**diaspora:** a critical concept and descriptive category that refers to the dispersion of a people or community from their original homeland, usually due to forced migration, political or economic pressures, or social and cultural factors. In addition to the physical displacement of people, it is also about the cultural, social, and psychological impacts of such displacement. This concept highlights the importance of transnationalism and interconnectedness, as well as the resilience and creativity of diasporic communities in adapting to new environments while retaining a sense of cultural identity and heritage. It is informal, unofficial, ambiguous, even improvisatory, undocumentable, and expressive, imaginative, creative, and critical. Simply put, no one can produce official evidence establishing "diasporic" status.³

**creole/criollo:** Descendants of the Spanish colonial caste whose ancestry is white European.

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Preface: Culture and Identity

Culture is the beating heart of society, a dynamic and intricate tapestry woven from a vast array of beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and material practices that inform how we live and make sense of the world. Far from being a fixed or stagnant entity, culture is a vibrant and ongoing process of negotiation and transformation that ebbs and flows within and across different groups and contexts. This rich tapestry encompasses a diverse range of expressions, from the language we speak to the art we create, the music we make, the literature we read, the religion we practice, the politics we engage in, and the everyday practices that shape our lives. Yet, culture is not just a matter of personal taste or preference; it is deeply intertwined with power relations and social structures, reflecting and reproducing patterns of domination and resistance in society. As such, it is a vital battleground for marginalized communities, who wield it as a tool to assert their identities, reclaim their histories, and challenge the dominant norms and discourses that seek to silence their voices.

This understanding of culture is rooted in the readings of Arlene Dávila, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Renato Rosaldo, three anthropologists whose work pushes for the decolonization of anthropology. Classical and anthropological definitions of culture have distinctively equated it with civilization or with the ethos of a people or a folk tradition that flows from a "people" and is linked to a particular location. The definition has associated culture with collectives that are "bounded," constraining its understandings from being anything but fluid and exchangeable by groups that may be diasporically spread and not bounded in time and space, like Latino/a/x.

Our beliefs are shaped by culture, which presents us with a particular version of reality. The dominant paradigms within a culture are often transmitted to us through cultural influences and are rarely subject to questioning. Anzaldúa says “Culture is made by those in power-men.
Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them. How many times have I heard mothers and mothers-in-law tell their sons to beat their wives for not obeying them, for being bociconas (big mouths), for being callejeras (going to visit and gossip with neighbors), for expecting their husbands to help with the rearing of children and the housework, for wanting to be something other than housewives?" This is what she refers to as cultural tyranny and it something she argues we ought to break out of, for culture is not a coherent or homogeneous entity.

Dávila calls attention to the importance of renewing or renegotiating the role of power within a culture. She recognizes how the word itself has come to mean and manifest in many different ways, whether it is defined in terms of values, objectified in terms of material representations, or equated with “civilization” and calls the reader to appreciate its complexities. Its complexities call for an interdisciplinary approach that addresses all that culture proves and also helps to hide. For example, it is important to take into account that in our contemporary neoliberal and colorblind society, the word "culture" is often used interchangeably with "difference" and can be utilized to evade conversations about race and racial differences. This is something we commonly see within our Latin American societies which push a “raceless” agenda due to their history of extensive racial mixing. Due to this, it is crucial to integrate the interdisciplinary work of race and racialization processes in our comprehension of culture to uncover the power structures that may be reinforced or masked through this term.

Along with culture, identity is another factor that ought to be understood as fluid and crucial to be studied through an interdisciplinary lens. Anthropologist Stuart Hall challenges the traditional view of identity as a fixed and predetermined concept, but rather a complex and

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ongoing process of negotiation and adaptation. He suggests that identity is not simply an expression of one's cultural practices or heritage, but rather a "production" that is shaped by a range of factors, including social, political, and historical contexts. By recognizing the constantly evolving "production" of identity, we can move beyond simplistic and narrow conceptions of culture and engage in a more inclusive and equitable dialogue about the nature of our diverse and complex world.

Recognizing the fluidity of culture has been crucial in post-colonial movements, especially for marginalized communities striving for acknowledgment. In these societies, there is often a fervent drive to reclaim their cultural identity, hoping that it can unveil a glorious and magnificent history that counteracts negative emotions like despair, self-loathing, surrender, and denial. This pursuit aims to rehabilitate individuals by mending their relationship with themselves and the community. Through reclaiming cultural identity, individuals can recover their self-esteem and reinforce their bonds with others.

These authors call to embrace the complexities and contradictions of cultural identity, find strength and empowerment in the spaces where different cultures intersect and collide. Anzaldúa calls this the borderlands, sites of innovative cultural production that demand further exploration. They provide a vision of the world in which diversity is celebrated, and where the struggle for liberation and justice is ongoing and ever-present. With theoretical understanding, I invite you to read my borderland story: a woman who also grew up within multiple cultures and struggled to find herself within the binary paradigms of the United States’ racialized culture. Through my story, I hope to further illustrate the ideas of Arlene Dávila, Gloria Anzaldúa, and

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Renato Rosaldo, who encourage us to resist simplistic and limiting categorizations of cultural identity.

As we explore the intersections of different cultures, we can find new ways of understanding ourselves and others, and create innovative forms of cultural expression. By embracing the complexities of our identities and experiences, we can find strength and empowerment in the spaces where different cultures intersect and collide. My borderland story is just one example of the ongoing struggle for liberation and justice in a world that celebrates and yet also demonizes diversity. I hope that through my story, readers can gain a deeper understanding of the ideas put forth by Anzaldua, Dávila, and Rosaldo, and find inspiration to continue exploring the complexities of cultural identity in their own lives.
Go Back and Get It

*Sankofa (SAHN-koh-fah) – A Twi word from the Akan Tribe of Ghana that loosely translates to, “go back and get it.” You need to understand where you come from in order to know where you are going.*

Amidst the worries of quarantine, the extreme awareness of my mortality that surrounded me, and the stress of hybrid learning, I desired change from my current my reality. Once borders began to open up again, I decided to take a semester to study abroad in Ghana with the School of International Training in the fall semester of my junior year. Originally, I was scheduled to venture to Rwanda, but the universe had other plans for me as Covid-19 and some unforeseen circumstances led me to the shores of Ghana instead. As someone who believes that everything happens for a reason, this twist of fate reignited an identity struggle I have been secretly battling and continuously silencing since my freshman year of high school.

The study abroad program\(^8\) that I participated in was structured around an experiential learning model and our topics were grounded in the concept of Sankofa. One of our last excursions in the semester was visiting the Nkyinkyim Installation, housed by the Osramba Studio of the Ancestor Project. Kwame Akoto-bamfo, a visionary Ghanaian artist, produced an expansive acreage of artwork where, among other talented artists, he uses sculpture and the natural elements to communicate the story of Africa's heritage. Among the diverse range of sculptures, there were several goats composed of wire scattered around a patch of tall trees. The centerpiece of the installation was a female goat, also crafted from wire, perched atop the main

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\(^8\) The School for International Training’s study abroad program is structured around the experiential learning model. It challenges traditional teaching methods by exposing students to the richness of learning outside the classroom and through community engagement. As a visual and hands-on learner, I found this approach to be a refreshing change of pace from my university's typical classroom experience.
building's roof. Her tracks on the wall marked the path she took to ascend to her elevated position. This is the tale of the "She" G.O.A.T:

Goats are known for their inquisitive nature and their penchant for scaling steep terrain. In this goat community, the "She" GOAT was a legend, having climbed higher than any other goat before her. One day, a curious goat discovered the tracks leading up to the roof, and upon gazing up, found the "She" GOAT perched on top. The intrigued goat inquired about how she was able to climb up the wall, to which the "She" GOAT revealed that she had to return to the forest and learn about where *she came from* to find the strength to climb against the wall. From her vantage point, the "She" GOAT was able to see the world from a different perspective, unlike her fellow goats who were restricted to the forest floor. The goat on the wall below yearned to join her but was hesitant to follow the same route. Instead, as pictured in the figure, stood on her hind legs and braced herself against the wall, determined to find a shorter path.

As the tour guide concludes the story he says:

*One must know where they come from in order to understand where they are going.*
As I stood gazing at the wire goat sculptures standing on her hind legs, trying to climb up the wall, my mind began to spiral into an existential crisis. At that moment, I tried to transport myself back to the forest of my ancestors, searching for something to guide me up the metaphorical wall before me. But I came up empty-handed, feeling lost and untethered. My mind began to race. The older we get the more consciously aware we become of things in our life and at this point in my life, there was a battle raging inside of me that was consistently silenced by my mind saying “we have better things to focus on.” This battle centered on my very identity. As the story of the "she" GOAT unfolded before me, and Sankofa delved deeper into my soul, I found myself questioning statements that once provided some sort of solace when questioned about who or what I am:

*I am Dominican.*

*I am Black?*

*I am Dominican, but also black?*

*I am Dominican from Newark, NJ.*

*My parents are immigrants from the Dominican Republic.*

*I am Black?*

The labels I once thought were *enough* to define myself now rang hollow, their echoes haunting my consciousness. How could I claim to be Dominican and or Black yet know so little about my people and ancestry? The very words that once rolled off my tongue now felt like shaky ground beneath my feet. My mind raced as I began to unravel every single part of myself that I thought to be true, parts of myself I had internalized, sinking further into my existing imposter syndrome. It was a battle that simmered beneath the surface, drowned out by the noise of everyday life. But
as Sankofa’s message burrowed deeper into my spirit, the questions became too pressing to ignore.

I grew up speaking of my Dominican heritage with pride, but now what did that really mean? How could I confidently stand and claim myself to be Dominican and yet know nothing about my people, my ancestry, and what this claim truly meant? How is it possible that I could be Dominican and Black? Unlike what I perceived to be the norms of Black culture, I grew up speaking Spanish, watching Spanish soap operas, and eating mangu con salami y queso frito. The rhythmic beat of Bachata and Merengue served as the soundtrack to our Saturday cleaning sprees, while the fragrance of sofrito and adobo wafted through our home. Almost every day this heavy smoke from my mother’s blow dryer began to characterize our home when she brought her salon business to our kitchen. We packed boxes brimming with sentimental treasures and practical goods to send to our relatives in the Dominican Republic at the end of every year. We celebrated everything and found any and every reason to bring the family together for some huge potluck-like feast.

The arrival of the season was marked by two things: our trusty 10 year old plastic Christmas tree, which we decorate strictly every year on November 1st, and my mother blasting the same musica navideña playlist from Youtube:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{Que caliente estoy, (estoy caliente)} \\
&\text{Que sabroso estoy, (estoy sabroso)} \\
&\text{Que calamidad, (estoy caliente)} \\
&\text{No tengo pa’ tomar, (estoy sabroso)}
\end{align*}
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We ditched the traditional Thanksgiving turkey in favor of a succulent pernil (pork shoulder), accompanied by sides like: Moro de Habichuelas (rice with beans), patelon (plantain lasagna or

\footnote{“Que Caliente Estoy” by Bonny Cepeda}
sometime cassava), regular lasagna (*we add raisins*), *ensalada de papa* (potato salad), and some baked chicken. This was essentially the same menu for Christmas.

The pivotal moment that spurred me to embark on a journey of self-discovery and prompted me to write what I now understand to be autoethnography occurred on my return to college in the spring. I scoured every avenue to find my way back to the Dominican Republic that summer. Growing up, I spent every summer in the Dominican Republic, but as I grew older, my summers became consumed by internships and volunteer work. A powerful inner voice motioned me to return to that space as a more conscious individual. And so, I did. I spent the summer of 2022 serving as an educational assistant at *Accion Callejera* in Santiago, Dominican Republic.

Prior to my departure though, I was introduced to the concept of an honors thesis and seized the opportunity to delve deeper into the identity crisis that had plagued me for so long. I drafted a proposal that posed the question of whether Dominicans could be considered Black and explored the implications of such a designation. Despite my understanding that Dominicans were a blend of indigenous, African, and Spanish heritage, I had consciously overlooked the African component. I wanted to look at the work of cultural activists who through museums, art, tours, and education are bringing the history and impact of enslavement on the island back into national dialogues about Dominican history and identity. After taking a history course titled “Race & Nation in Latin America” I began to recognize that much of Latin American history is being told mostly from a Spanish-Latino perspective, dissociating the importance and significant contributions of black-Afro-descendant culture and almost leaving an empty bias on the resistance of the African diasporas in places such as the Dominican Republic.
My summer volunteer experience at a youth development center in Santiago, Dominican Republic was supposed to be the catalyst for my quest to dive deep into the cultural work happening on the island to combat these Spanish-Eurocentric narratives. However, upon returning the following semester, I found myself more uncertain than ever before. The grueling emotional demands and time constraints of my role at the youth development center left me with little opportunity to actively pursue my original intentions of delving into the suppressed Afro-Dominican culture. But, as I reflect on my journey, there were several noteworthy moments that I will be exploring further in this paper. Despite my initial ambitions, I was left with more questions than answers.

As the semester kicked off, I wasted no time in immersing myself in literature that spoke to blackness in the Dominican Republic. To my surprise, there was a wealth of research on the topic, with much of it centered on the complex relationship between the Dominican Republic and its neighboring sister country, Haiti.\textsuperscript{10} Through this exploration, I came to understand that when you view a nation through the lens of its history, many of its \textit{abnormalities} start to come into focus. Each journal led me to follow its bibliography which then led me to long conversations with my family members over the phone and at the Thanksgiving and Christmas table. I was to contextualize why Dominicans often resist being categorized as black.

Initially, my intentions with this space was to argue that "Dominicans are black," but instead, I find myself seeking a space of \textit{validation}, one that acknowledges the truth that

\begin{footnote}{The Dominican Republic and Haiti share a 376-kilometer border on the island of Hispaniola. Spain had controlled the entire island, but in the 18th century, the French settled the western portion and made it a prosperous sugar plantation economy. About 500,000 African slaves were imported into French Saint Domingue, outnumbering Frenchmen by 10 to 1, compared to the population in Spanish Santo Domingo where only about 100,000 African slaves. In 1791, the slave population in Saint Domingue revolted and declared their independence, creating the first black republic in the western hemisphere. This sparked new tensions between Haiti and Spanish Santo Domingo, with the Dominican elites seeing themselves as fundamentally different from the Haitians. Fearing the French would use Dominican territory as a base to try to reconquer Haiti, the Haitian government occupied the Dominican Republic from 1822 to 1844. The merging of these two parts of the island is what forged the Dominican identity, which included whiteness, Catholicism, and slavery.}
Dominicans are indeed black, and delves deeper into conveying what this reality means to my personal identity journey. I have come to realize that the issue for me is not about proving whether Dominicans are "in fact" black, but rather exploring why I have been forced to choose between these two identification labels. Within the pages of this autoethnography, I invite you to explore the complex nature of blackness as it manifests itself within a daughter of two Dominican immigrants born in Jersey City and raised in Newark, New Jersey:

A girl who took a very non-traditional educational route and with the help of a scholarship program left the house at 14 years old to attend a predominantly white college preparatory high school in the small town of New Milford, Connecticut.

A girl whose entire life was her education, granting her the ability to open her mind to the world, traveling to places like India, Nicaragua, and Ghana.

A girl who is about to be the first college graduate in her household after attending yet another predominantly white four year institution, this time in what once was the capital of the confederacy.

Methodology: Autoethnography

Autoethnography as a methodology in cultural anthropology has only emerged in recent years. Compared to traditional teaching of anthropology that encouraged “objective” research methods, this approach involves researchers examining and reflecting on their own personal experiences and connections to broader cultural, political, and social contexts within their study. Inspired by anthropologist Rosaldo Renaldo, he states that the autoethnography writes so as to
capture experience in ways that reverberate in the lives of others. In his book, “Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis,” Renato highlights that true understanding comes not only from intellectual analysis, but also from emotional involvement. He argues that if we approach our studies objectively, our research would be lifeless. To fully understand society, we need a multidimensional comprehension that engages our whole being. In his words, "The process of knowing involves the whole self."

In essence, Renato's call to action extends beyond a mere re-evaluation of how we present our ethnographic narratives, and instead implores us to question what constitutes knowledge - how we attain it, what it comprises, and why it matters. Classical anthropology discouraged the expression of emotion, social responsibility, and political engagement, but Renato's efforts have since established these elements as fundamental pillars of our discipline. By using personal narratives as a key form of data, autoethnography can offer a unique perspective on cultural phenomena and would allow the information to be presented in a much more honest manner. Utilizing autoethnography as a methodology has enabled me to reframe my experience as an integral part of the research process. As described by former Afghan president and anthropologist Ashraf Ghani, “ethnography is a form of discourse that arises from the process of encounters.”

I am also leaning on the concept of intimate ethnography, explored as a critical feminist ethnographic practice by Alisse Waterston. Intimate ethnography is a genre that blends the lines

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14 In her work, Waterston delves into how her father adapted to the various forms of violence that repeatedly devastated the communities where he lived, namely Poland and Cuba. Prior to the Holocaust, Waterston's father had relocated from Jedwabne, Poland to Havana, Cuba and changed his name from Menachem Mendel Wasersztejn to Miguel Waserstein. During World War II, he joined the U.S. military and adopted the new identity of Michael Waterston. Despite the transparency with which his daughter writes, she recognizes the challenges of recording
between scholarship and storytelling, as well as between the academic and personal realms. This hybrid form defies easy categorization and encourages a more fluid approach to understanding and conveying cultural insights. It is rooted in anthropological imagination, contextualizing both the subject and the subject matter, avoiding the pitfall of reducing one to the other, and instead exploring the myriad of complex layers that comprise the work of ethnography. It skillfully captures the relational life narrative and multifaceted humanity of its subjects, utilizing a range of media, including photographs.

Grounded in active self-reflexivity, I will use my own experience with blackness to describe and critique a few of the dominant narratives surrounding Dominican identity and blackness. These narratives include things such as the *me no black meme* and the Dominican Republic's controversial relationship with Haiti. By doing so, I hope to not only offer a more nuanced and intersectional understanding of what it means to be Dominican and black, but also contribute to a broader conversation on the ways in which race and identity intersect in our society. Through this autoethnography, I aim to explore the complexities and contradictions that exist within my own identity and to offer a glimpse into the ways in which these same tensions play out on a larger scale within the Dominican community.

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“I no Black, I Dominican.”

_Arelis holding her first born daughter, Sherley, next to her husband Julio._

I did not know I was black until my freshman year of highschool. The picture above perfectly illustrates my reaction when one of my classmates in my freshman year of highschool enlightened me on this reality. It was a seemingly normal lunch period and after almost every meal I would get a cup of strawberry yogurt with peanut butter, granola, and chocolate chips. Sometimes I would add a banana. As I sat to enjoy my yogurt that day, I overheard three black students in my class naming off all the “black kids” that attended our predominantly white four-year catholic college preparatory, co-educational boarding, and day school located in the hallmark movie like city of New Milford, Connecticut. As they neared the end of their count, one said “OH, and Sherley!” I turned around and stated: “I’m not black, I’m Dominican.” The three black students looked at me, confused by my comment, responded, “same thing.”
Same thing? What do you mean? That night I called my parents and proposed the question “am I black?” to which my mother reassured me by saying, “no, you are Dominican.” Several other incidents followed that year where my teachers and friends would automatically categorize me as a black, African-American student. Then when my mother would call me, usually leading me into a full Spanish conversation, it would cause everyone around me to stop and stare.

“Wait, you speak Spanish?” they would ask.

“Yea, I’m Dominican.”

“Oh, I thought you were black.”

Going to Canterbury picked apart a part of myself I grew up very confidently stating: I am Dominican. Those who spoke Spanish at my school did not look like me, they were white international Latinos, thus I never found solidarity in that community. I felt like an outlier, made to choose between one or the other because I, for some reason, could not coexist within both. The constant categorization by faculty and students led me to internalize this new categorization of myself. This contradiction led me to dismiss my Dominican identity entirely. I wasn’t white, that’s all I could confidently understand. Any further thought from that was silenced by my mind reminding me “we have better things to focus on.”

Growing up, I had no frame of reference to help me consider the overlap of these two identities. I grew up in one of the projects in Newark, NJ. These projects housed predominantly low-income people of color. I was surrounded by people who looked like me, interacted with both English and Spanish, and had very similar immigration stories. I did not attend a Newark public school but rather a small K-8 charter Christian school in downtown Newark called Newark Christian School. There were about 100 students of color who were being taught by an
all-white, middle-aged, Christ-devoted faculty. Race was not a topic of conversation found within these classrooms. My friends and I found ourselves more comfortably identifying ourselves within our ethnicity rather than race.

I’m Nigerian,

I am Dominican,

I am Ghanaian,

I am Haitian,

I am Colombian.

At the Canterbury School my sense of self was suddenly thrown into question. It was in this new environment that the weight of my race became apparent and my blackness was brought to the forefront of my consciousness. Yet, in the same breath, it was also subjected to constant interrogation and scrutiny, leaving me to grapple with the complexities of my identity at the age of fourteen.

“Wait, you speak Spanish?” they would ask.

“Yea, I’m Dominican.”

“Oh, I thought you were black.”

Or the emphimis

“Where are you from?”

Knowing what they mean, I still like to respond with “New Jersey”

“Oh, but where are you really from?”

“... my parents are immigrants from the Dominican Republic”
“Pero ella se ve ma Dominicana que yo”
“But she looks more Dominican than me.”

As previously mentioned, my study abroad trip to Ghana awakened within me a strong desire to reconnect with my ancestral land. During the following summer, I spent eight weeks volunteering at a youth development center in the city of Santiago, which marked my first conscious return to the island. As a matter of fact, I fondly recall spending my second-grade year in a Dominican school while grappling with familial health struggles that necessitated my sister and I’s relocation to my grandmother’s home in the Dominican Republic. However, as I advanced to high school, internships and volunteer work inevitably hijacked my summer schedule, and thus, I was unable to visit the island for nearly six years. This was my long-awaited return to the land of my forebears, and it felt nothing short of exhilarating.

If one has ever traveled to the Dominican Republic, they may have noticed a customary act of clapping once the airplane lands. While initially amusing, in a newfound state of mindfulness, I have developed a profound appreciation for this practice. The ability to fly itself is a remarkable feat, and it is a further miracle that the pilot can safely bring us back to the ground on the massive, combustible machine that is a plane. As I get off the plane, my body recalls the joyful moments I have experienced on this land. I inhale deeply, taking in what I believe to be a uniquely refreshing type of air. Having traveled to various destinations in my brief lifetime, I can confidently say that the air in the Dominican Republic is a distinct experience. The air here is dense and comforting, permeating every part of my lungs and offering a soothing embrace that feels like a warm hug.

Although this was a space I grew up knowing, it was my first conscious experience. I thought maybe I would stick out like a sore thumb due to my many years away from the island, but I found myself becoming invisible within the crowds pretty fast. My Spanish is accented
enough where my *dominicanness* was not questioned. It wasn’t until I stumbled in a sentence or accidently slipped into Spanglish that anyone caught on to my “American” status. One day my Dominican coworkers and I were building paper medals for the kids as we were preparing for the big field day coming up. One of the male educators joked about my *popi* (*boujee*) anthropology major and how I wasn’t *really* Dominican, being that I was raised in the United States. I always tend to feel awkward in these spaces because there is some validity in that statement, yet at the same time, if I am not *really* Dominican, what am I? A female coworker interjects by stating *pero ella se ve ma Dominicana que yo… tu te pareces mas Americano que ella* (but she looks more Dominican than me, you look more American than her). As her words washed over me, a broad smile spread across my face. Internally, I felt a surge of pride as Fernando Villalona's iconic song "Soy Dominicano" began to play in my head:

*Dominicano soy*

*De mis raíces yo no voy a olvidarme*

*Soy de una raza tan humilde y tan grande*

*Que de su espera se hacen rayos de sol*

¡*Dominicano*!

Although she was referencing mostly my physical appearance, it got me thinking about what it *really* means to “Dominican.” Clearly I looked the part, but that was not enough for someone who has been trying to find more validation in this personal identification. I decided to sit down and engage this conversation with the two most Dominican people I know, my parents:

*Anecdote from my conversation with my parents December 21st, 2021. Mother (Arelis), Father (Julio), Sister (Leslie).*

**What does it mean to be Dominican?**
Arelis: To be Dominican is to be a humble and joyful person, a humanitarian. A person who always knows how to dance... The first thing they do is learn to dance. As that is in the blood. To have rhythm, to catch the rhythm of the dance... *Relambusco.*

**What is relambusco?**

Arelis: Like sabroso.

Leslie: we got the sauce.

Julio: *whispers to himself* What does it mean to be Dominican? Complicated question... because being Dominican is an ethnicity.

**Well, what are the characteristics of a Dominican?**

Julio: Now that's a question.

Arelis: They don't work. *both parents laugh*

Julio: The characteristics of a Dominican are simply based on being caring. To be supportive, to be good people, to be a humble person.

Arelis: We are caring, that is the greatest virtue we have. No matter how bad a person may be, if someone falls, if there is an accident outside, we will take you to the doctor without knowing you. If you pass by and we see you hungry, we feed you, even if we don't know you. We always open the door to our house.

Julio: Dominicans are people of solidarity.

Arelis: Very caring.

Julio: But basically that is something of Latin America, of the Latin American.

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My mother and father in the early 1990s.

The roots of my family tree run deep in the Dominican Republic, where both my mother and father were born and bred. But their experiences couldn't have been more
different - while my mother belonged to the middle working class, my father was considered *sugar water and bread* poor. Education was a luxury for him, as he dropped out of school in the fifth grade to help his single mom and three younger siblings. In contrast, my mother managed to complete high school and even pursued further education in trade school. They had known each other since elementary school.

My father always tells us that it was love at first sight for him when he saw her walk into his fifth grade classroom. He attempted several times to seduce her, but her mother did not like him for her. He says it was because he was poor and “always looked dirty.”

Only after arriving in the United States did they reconnect, and according to my father, that was when she finally succumbed to his charms. Growing up, I noticed how my father was always very vocal about his Dominican pride, he didn’t really let the American assimilation get him. He is constantly listening to the Dominican radio, watching Dominican news channels, and only really eating Dominican food. He visits the island every chance he gets and is currently constructing a retirement home there, where he intends to spend the rest of his days. My mother has grown to love the
American way of life and has no desire to return to the island for her retirement. I am not sure what’s going to happen there, but they will figure it out.

How do you describe a Dominican in appearance?

Arelis: *Comparon.* He likes to look good, always. And the women also dress up a lot, from the moment they get up, it's either with their dubbi or their on their way to the salon.

Julio: Well, every Latino or from whatever race would like that.

Arelis: We are peculiar. If we go to a wedding, we always want to stand out.

Julio: not everyone. I'm simple, *a mí me da una cosa con otra.*

Arelis: Oh really, *tú lo que es haragán* (you're just lazy).

Julio: Dominicans like to pretend. They like to pretend what they are not, even if they don't have money. You can identify us by our speech and accent.

Arelis: Also the way we walk. The men, I know the way they walk. They are very haughty, like they prove to themselves that they are hot.

Julio: Mostly you can tell by his attitude. He looks like a person who is always cheerful and always wants to be funny, even if it's not for a joke. Outstanding, yes.

Arelis: the Dominican *tiene cotora* (has balls).

Julio: *El dominicano es un tigre.*

Arelis: You are not going to be a shy Dominican. If their shy, they are mixed.

Julio: I'm mixed then. *mother begins to laugh*

But how does one look physically?

Julio: I could not tell you, physically it is something subjective, because for example, there are many Hispanics that look alike, there are Boricua that look like Dominicans,

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15 With this adjective, in the Dominican Republic, a person is branded as presumptuous and arrogant.
there are Colombians that look like Dominicans, Venezuelans that look like Dominicans. That is to say, we have an ethnicity very similar to all that the Latin Caribbean.

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Throughout the duration of this conversation, there was no mention of phenotypic markers. To them, their Dominicanness was defined by their character, dancing abilities, and attitude. My father’s final comment about the appearance of a Dominican being subjective is what Liliana Mera Limé was commenting on with her creation of the “faceless dolls.” Handcrafted with care, Liliana Mera Limé, a Dominican potter, creates simple ceramic dolls with no discernible facial features. With a rich tapestry of ethnic and racial backgrounds, including the Taino, Spanish, French, and African, Limé realized it would be impossible to create a single doll that accurately represents the full spectrum of Dominican women. The absence of facial features, then, is a tribute to the diversity and richness of the Dominican identity. Each doll is a blank canvas, representing the boundless potential and unique beauty of every individual, regardless of race or ethnicity.

Black Card Revoked.

A fun and nostalgia-filled game celebrating American black popular culture. It's bound to invoke hilarious debates among young and old alike. Don't get your black card revoked!

Have you ever played Black Card Revoked? It’s a card game built by a company called “Cards for All People” which aims to create “nostalgia-filled casual party games that test knowledge of cultural milestones and moments.” They have created other card games including Latino Card Revoked and Jewish Card Revoked.

Having your “black card” revoked here means that you, as a black person, have made black people look bad in some way or done something that is stereotypically “not black” thus no longer able to hold the identification. My first encounter with this card game was my freshman year of college. A group of upperclassmen had invited me to their game night and we ended the night playing this game. At this point in my identity journey I was starting to feel more
comfortable identifying myself as black but still had hesitations because my identification
continued to be questioned once I began speaking Spanish. In college now the conversations went:

“Oh, I thought you were black”

“... well am I not?”

“Well, you know what I mean. Like black black.”

Physically I was automatically assumed to be African-American (“black black”). Since I do not have a Spanish accent, it wasn’t until I hopped on the phone with my parents that my Dominican heritage was then recognized.

It’s a Saturday night and we are sitting in a circle in the basement of one of the dorms on campus. After playing a pretty intense game of Taboo, someone suggested we play “Black Card Revoked.” In the game, each player starts with 10 points, and they lose one for every question they get wrong. The game is won by making sure you aren't the first player to lose all of your points. It’s essentially a trivia game on black American culture. At the end of the night, I was the one that got her black card revoked.

In retrospect, I recognize that the intention of the game was not to trigger a full-blown identity crisis. However, as I struggled to hold back my tears in that room, the little sense of certainty about my black identity was shattered into a million pieces. The emotional turmoil I experienced in that moment was a stark reminder of how fragile and vulnerable my sense of self can be, particularly when confronted with unexpected challenges to our beliefs.

What factors are involved in determining the extent of someone's blackness? Is it a culture? A physical embodiment of distinct features? An interwoven history and shared heritage? Or is it a personal journey of lived experiences? If we historically contextualize this word
“black,” it can be traced to 16th century white European colonizers trying to differentiate between themselves and the people of the newly discovered African region. This categorization was then reinforced and perpetuated through centuries of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. Despite its dreary history, it's important to note, however, that today the term "black" is something that black communities have reclaimed as a source of pride and identity. But because the transatlantic slave trade was extremely expansive throughout the entire western hemisphere, not just the United States, the concept of blackness ought to be understood as a fluid entity.

Negritude, the Spanish term for blackness, is commonly perceived as a spectrum outside of the American context. Unlike the strict dichotomy of black and white prevalent in America, Latin American racial experience acknowledges a wider range of racial identities due to the historical encouragement of intermixing. In contrast, the United States perpetuated these strict categorizations through segregation and Jim Crow laws, which entrenched the notion of a rigid racial binary. The divergent approaches of the white colonizers to "whiten" or "cleanse" the race have led to vastly different experiences of racial identity in Latin America and the United States. Consequently, a Dominican individual who may be labeled as black in the United States may not necessarily carry the same classification in the Dominican Republic, where a more complex and nuanced understanding of race exists. It often takes leaving the Caribbean for Dominicans to come to the realization that they fall under the "Black" category as defined in the United States.

As I explored further into the phenomenon of Dominicans disassociating themselves from blackness in the United States, commonly expressed through the meme "me no black,"17 I gained a deeper understanding of its significance. One critical factor is the perception that the term "black" in the United States not only refers to physical appearance but also includes a shared African American culture and history. Therefore, when a Dominican refuses to identify as

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black, it can be interpreted as a way to protect and maintain their unique Dominican identity, which is rooted in its own cultural heritage and customs.

Anecdote from a conversation with my paternal side of the family on Christmas, 2022.

Do you think Dominicans are black?

Titi: Dominicans are black, I can say that now because I am reading stuff on my phone. But it was something I didn’t come to understand until I came to the United States. When I was growing up in the Dominican Republic they would make fun of me and call me la negra, but then when I got here black people started calling me lightskin. *she begins to laugh* I think it's so ridiculous that people be out here saying stupid shit like “I am not black,” like look at you! Put it this way, even D’Angelo who is super light skinned, you look at him and you know he’s black.

Abuela Chipa: they are black, but not all of them. But the real black person is the American black person… I consider myself black but that's really because I know I am not white. From what I understand, my great grandfather was a Spaniard who married my great grandmother que era una morena morena, so then my mom was mixed and had me with my dad who was also moreno… so we can’t be white because we aren't white, but now we can't be black because we aren't black, so what are we? In El Campo, we would say that I am jabao, a mixture… this never really bothered me because I have to keep living my life, porque imaginate tu, I was living to survive …

My grandmother (middle) with her two youngest grandkids Jamir (left) and D’Angelo (right).
Immigrant communities, regardless of race, often internalize a sense of "otherness" as a survival strategy against the pervasive forces of racism and colorism. In a cruel twist of fate, however, this very mentality can lead to division and further perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. For instance, immigrants arriving in the United States who may not have been considered black in their countries may distance themselves from Black Americans as a means of differentiating themselves from a group that has been historically oppressed. Thus, the phrase "me no black" can stem from a combination of prejudice against Black Americans as well as a strategy for self-preservation that has been employed by marginalized communities throughout history.18

In many Latin American countries, political leaders have employed strategies to "whiten" the population, which has further pushed the colonial anti-black mentality. The Dominican Republic is no exception. “...Dominican identity consists not only of how Dominicans see themselves but also of how they are seen by the powerful nations with which the Dominican Republic has been linked in a relationship of political and economic dependence.”19 The United States has a troubling history of supporting and or instilling these authoritarian leaders throughout Latin America and in the Dominican Republic it was with Rafael Trujillo. Dictator Rafael Trujillo, who had Haitian heritage himself, subscribed to white supremacy ideology and aimed to "improve the race" by eliminating those perceived as Black, including Haitians and dark-skinned Dominicans. This led to escalating tensions between the two countries and culminated in the Parsley Massacre of 1937, in which over 20,000 Haitians, Dominicans of Haitian descent, and dark-skinned Dominicans were brutally killed by military forces and

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19 Dominican Blackness and the Modern World
civilians. Trujillo's attempts to promote eugenics, repress African-origin narrative and cultural practices, and create racial categories that excluded Blackness persisted even after his 30+ year dictatorship ended, and continue to impact Dominican culture today.

Across the diaspora, there exist various narratives of black individuals who strive to attain a level of whiteness to access better resources. This behavior is a learned cultural phenomenon that is shared, integrated, and performed. Common practices include using whitening creams and hair relaxers to achieve straight hair. Such practices can be attributed to deep-seated generational and present-day trauma from racism and self-loathing. Fear of being mistreated due to their skin color drives a desire for proximity to whiteness, seen as a means to a better life in a racist society.

It's worth noting that Dominican people of African descent don't place as much emphasis on racial characteristics in defining their social identity, as opposed to societies where ethnic groups are sharply differentiated and strictly classified. Instead of viewing their blackness as the focal point of their identity, they often prioritize their nationality, which encompasses their culture, language, and shared experiences. Given the mixed ancestry of the population, Due to the mixed ancestry of the population, Dominicans have a rich vocabulary of ethnic terms that describe varying degrees of skin color. In one study of the city of Santiago de los Caballeros, a scholar identified a list of 21 terms used by residents to denote different racial traits. In contrast to the United States, where racial cultural understandings are frequently used to discuss issues related to race, Dominicans are not as familiar with this type of discourse and do not typically use language that affirms their black identity. Their history has not taught them to view their economic struggles and mistreatment as a result of racial oppression, and as a result, they have just started to incorporate black empowerment into their social resistance strategies.
Anecdote from my conversation with my parents December 21st, 2021. Mother (Arelis), Father (Julio), Sister (Leslie). Translated from Spanish to English,

Tell me what you know and what you understand about Dominican history.

Julio: Very little. We Dominicans are not dedicated to knowing our culture or history. We know the world's culture more than our own.

Why?

Arelis: At school they teach us more about the outside than the inside.

Julio: Our education is an ecclesiastical education.

What's this?

Julio: Based on religion, cults. Our education is a religious education more than a scientific one, that's why we are not very smart. We are more of beliefs... Unfortunately, until today, well, I think the last 10 years here, because it is already advancing a little more. The environment is forcing us to modernize.

Arelis: We are learning to unlearn.

Julio: Exactly. We are learning to unlearn. We are making progress, but very slowly.

What is the Dominican made of?

Julio: Culturally?

Arelis: Platano. *laughter*

Arelis: Indigenous descent

Julio: No, African.

* mom makes a noise*

Julio: We are of African descent. The motherland, Africa. It's the reality. Culturally, it is difficult for the Dominican to believe that because we are dominated by Spanish and European ideology. They don't want to accept that we come from Africa. Our ethnicity is black mixed with Spanish European, and indigenous... the least we have is the indigenous, because in the European expansion, the Europeans eliminated all the indigenous, conquering, which I rather don't say conquest, but I say genocide... they eliminated everything that was inferior to it. That's my opinion.
And you mom?

Arelis: What was the question? Repeat it to me again.

Well, Dad said our Dominican ancestry is African and you said...

Arelis: No, nosotros estamos liguo (we are mixed). Indigenous descendant…

Julio: Very little.

Arelis: And also of Spanish descent... Most Dominican surnames are of Spanish descent. And that's why you hear Dominicans going around saying things like “mi bisabuelo era español” (my great grandfather was Spanish).

But then, mom, you say indigenous and you say Spanish, but you don't say African.

Arelis: sí, lo que pasa es que estoy menos empapada.

What is empapada?

Julio: that you lack that information.

Okay, but you had the opportunity to study more than Dad.

Julio: Of course, she went to college and everything over there. I didn't make it past middle school.

Did you learn anything about that story Ma?

Arelis: Yes, that we are descendants of the Indians, that's what they teach us the most, and of the Spaniards. Africa, I don't remember that.

Julio: That's why, culturally, what I'm telling you, we're frozen in European in time. ¿cómo te digo? The Spanish culture induces us, they do not want to accept that mixture. They erase it with the indigenous claim. So, they teach us those things in school, for example, they tell us Christopher Columbus came to the Dominican Republic, came to the American continent, discovered the American continent and populated the American continent, but they don't tell us with whom. So, they do not clarify that practically the American continent was populated by all the slavery that was brought from all those countries. Ahí está el detalle.

and why do you think we don't talk much about that African descent?

Arelis: Because of racism?
Julio: Not necessarily because of racism. how do I tell you? I imagine, I say, the ideology of classes. The one with the most power is the one who tells the story, do you understand me? They create the truth. Demographically, we deny that we are black and that we are African. We deny it. We rather say, I'm Spanish, oye hombre. If you're looking for the Spanish curriculum, it is similar to the Dominican curriculum. It is the same, but with more gaps in the story. Entonces nosotros nos quedamos en ese hueco.

The desire to reconnect with our Taino indigenous heritage is admirable, but unfortunately, it has been exploited. For centuries, the Dominican-Spanish elites ("criollos") have romanticized the indigenous people while denigrating Blackness. In the Dominican Republic, it's not uncommon to hear people describe themselves as a raceless mix or "one singular mixed race" due to the Latin American culture which perpetuates the narrative that we are a homogeneous group. While this concept of Latinidad was originally meant to celebrate diversity, it has also been used to negate the existence of blackness and deny the prevalence of racism in our society. The harsh reality is that those who are closer to whiteness in appearance, socioeconomic status, and opportunity are living completely different lives than people who look like me. By perpetuating the myth of a singular mixed-race identity, Dominican society and other Latin American societies can avoid confronting the pervasive racial inequalities that exist.

Dominican Blackness: “We just got off on a different stop”

As I delved deeper into my ancestral history, each new discovery left me more outraged than the last. It was particularly irritating, given my seventeen years of education in the American education, understanding the sheer enormity of the transatlantic slave trade that had been vastly downplayed. Over 95% of enslaved Africans were transported to the Caribbean and Latin America - the first vessel landing on the shores of Hispaniola, which is now split between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. “[The Dominican Republic] has an intercourse with blackness and African roots that would seem incontestably to qualify it as an ideal candidate for
induction into the watery corridors of the “transcultural, inter-national formation” of “the black Atlantic.” In 1522, the Dominican Republic received its first shipment of enslaved individuals - a staggering 97 years prior to the United States. However, in our education about black history, it seems as though the US is the sole site of black existence, completely ignoring the pivotal role the Caribbean and Latin America played in shaping blackness in the Western Hemisphere. The lopsided power dynamic between the US and this region has pushed its history to the fringes of the American archive, only accessible to those with the will to seek it out.

Even though the reality of their ancestral heritage is undeniable, Dominicans have long grappled with an uncertain sense of racial identity. Despite the fact that close to 90% of the population can trace their roots back to Africa, it has taken some time for Afro-Dominicans to come together under a shared banner and demand recognition for their economic, cultural, and political contributions. Finally, this united front is gaining momentum and visibility, as a powerful force for change. Dominican Scholars such as Silvio Torres-Sallaint, Lorgia Gargia Peña, and Ginetta E. B. Candelario, argue that the distinctive slow socio-racial formation in the Dominican Republic is due to the historically unique material conditions of the colonists, their slaves, and their descendants. The beginning of a distinct Dominican identity arose from the social and racial interactions between the Creole21 elite and the Afro-Hispanics in the Spanish part of Santo Domingo. During the Spanish colonial period, these groups became more politically, socially, and culturally self-aware. The Spanish colonial policy had a devastating impact on the economy of Santo Domingo, resulting in the impoverishment of the small Creole community in the seventeenth century. Due to the predominance of the African and Afro-Creole population, a more socio-racially inclusive system was created, alongside the specificities of

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21 Descendants of the Spanish colonial caste whose ancestry is white European.
cattle ranching, domestic slavery, and manumission rates in the Spanish part of Santo Domingo. This resulted in the formation of a large, relatively independent rural class of former slaves and their descendants who were incorporated into the colonial system through the Catholic church, the military, and kinship systems.\footnote{Torres-Saillant, Silvio. (2000) “The Tribulations of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Racial Identity.” Callaloo, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 1086–111. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3299726.}

This development of what is considered by Torres-Sallaint to be the *mulatto class*, signaled the beginning of the Dominicans' conscious separation from blackness. There rural class former slave farmers differentiated themselves from the Haitians, who experienced much less intermizing. As the mulatto class grew in prominence and influence, it became increasingly important for its members to distance themselves from blackness and to assert their identity as "mixed-race" or "mulatto". This process of conscious separation from blackness was not limited to the mulatto class alone; it was also reflected in the broader Dominican society, where people of all racial backgrounds were encouraged to view their identity in terms of nationality rather than race. In this sense, Dominican nationalism served as a means of erasing the black heritage of the island, rather encouraging people to unite under their *Dominicanidad*. *Todos somos Dominicanos* (“we are all Dominican”) is a common phrase you will hear throughout Dominican media. This color-blind and colonialistic encouragement have also aided in the continuation of racism and colorism in the Dominican Republic. The emphasis on national identity over racial identity has led to the erasure of the experiences and struggles of darker-skinned Dominicans and African descendants, who continue to face discrimination and marginalization in society. Moreover, the glorification of mixed-race identity as a symbol of national unity has often served as a means of upholding the status quo and preserving existing power structures, rather than challenging them. As a result, many Dominicans have been unable to fully confront the legacies
of slavery, colonialism, and racism that continue to shape their society, and also aids in understanding their immediate denial to the American society’s identifications.

My Borderland: Afro-Latinidad

To live in the borderlands means you are neither hispana, india, negra, espanola ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed caught in the crossfire between camps while carrying all five races on your back not knowing which side to turn to, run from;

Anecdote from “To Live in the Borderlands” by by Gloria Anzaldúa

Soy parte de dos mundos – I am part of two worlds.
Dos mundos de colores diferentes – Two worlds of different colors

Soy Latina y a la misma vez Africana – I am Latina and African
Hablo español e ingles – I speak Spanish and English.

Mis compañeros latinos me vencomo “negrita, morenita, morena, negra” – My Latino peers see me as “negrita, morenita, morena, negra”

Encambio, en Richmond soy “African-American o Black”
Instead, in Richmond I am seen as “African American or Black”

¿Pero, será que pertenezco a estas o me obligó a encajar? – But, do I fit into these identities, or do I just squeeze myself in to fit?

Anecdote from “El Sueño y la Realidad de una Afrolatina “The Dream and Reality of an Afro Latina” by Shanteny Jackson

Finding anthropologically grounded research on the Dominican identity found itself not as difficult as I had previously imagined. In my seventeen years within the American education system, I rarely heard anything about the Dominican Republic. Along with this, it was not until I began seeking out information for this thesis did I find identity stories which had the same and or
similar fragmentations. This year, in my senior anthropology capstone class, I was introduced to the first real theory that helped contextualize my identity narrative, Gloria Anzaldua and her theory of the *borderland*. “

A borderland, according to Anzaldua, is both “set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge” and yet also “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants…”23 Her work in “Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza” is a powerful and poetic exploration of the transitional space where cultures intersect and collide. She encourages contemporary awareness that all identity is constructed across *differences* and argues for the need of a new politics of understanding with difference at the forefront. Rosaldo and Anzaldua recognize that culture is not as stagnant as classical anthropology has taught it to be, the borderlands proving its fluidity.

In her writings she maps out the plurality of *self*, or the border consciousness, emerging from a subjectivity structured by multiple determinants like gender, class, sexuality, and contradictory membership in competing cultures and racial identities. She describes the *borderlands* as a place of both beauty and pain, where the boundaries between different cultures are fluid and constantly shifting. It is a place of transformation and liberation, where new identities can be forged in the fires of struggle and resistance and where the past and present are able to coexist in a tangle of memory and experience. Her work is a constantly shifting process of breaking down binary dualisms and creating the third space that allows contradictions to co-exist in the production of new elements.

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But within this diversity, Anzaldua also recognizes the violence and oppression that can occur as there are very prevalent power dynamics that exist between different cultures, and the ways in which dominant cultures can exert their influence and control over marginalized ones.

Anzaldua's words speak to me on a personal level, as I too am a product of the complex interplay between multiple identities and traditions. I am a *borderland* woman:

In the borderlands of my afro-latinidad,  
I navigate the intricacies of two worlds,  
neither fully Black nor fully Dominican,  
but something in between, a hybrid of histories.

My tongue, a battleground, a site of constant tension.  
A tongue that knows no limits, no bounds,  
shifting from Spanish to English with ease,  
a fluidity that confounds.

I am told to choose, to pick a side,  
but how can I when both are part of my dimensions?  
Only one box to check.  
*Oh I thought you were black.*

I am a mosaic of history, a tapestry of tales,  
my ancestry a melting pot of contradictions,  
I am the daughter of conquistadors and enslaved rebels,  
of warriors and poets,  
of conquerors and survivors.

In the borderlands of my afro-latinidad,  
I am learning to embrace the contradictions, to live in the in-between.

I am not a half, a fraction, a compromise,  
but a whole, a fusion, a new creation.  
I am Afro-Latina, a bridge between cultures,  
a reminder of the power of diversity and the beauty of liberation.
Sources


