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**Curls, Kinks and Colonization: The Decolonization of Afrodescendant  
Women's Bodies in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic**

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Spring 2018

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**Abstract:** This paper documents the experiences of Afrodescendant women in the Dominican Republic who choose to wear their hair naturally curly, despite the norm to straighten it. I argue that Afrodescendant Dominican women are decolonizing racial and gendered discourses of the Afrodescendant body through their pursuit of beauty, blackness, health and self-definition. I draw on Ana Irma Rivera Lassén's allegory of the spiderweb to suggest that my informants are the spiders of their webs, weaving the discourses of the Afrodescendant female body into a web in which they are free to move in/through their multiple identities and find empowerment.

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*I perched on the edge of the couch by the door, looking around the salon at dozens of brown skinned women. They had curly hair framing their faces, coiling down to their shoulders, or kinky curls cut close to their heads, as they sat in chairs arranged around the salon seats. A little girl in a blue flowered dress, blue shoes, and soft fuzzy curls in a halo around her head climbed through the sea of legs, as the women laughed and talked to one another. As the event drew to a close, the women began to gather their friends and family and began to leave. I descended the stairs with Carla, an artist with light brown skin and a loose, large, wild black and grey afro. As we left the salon and stood in the narrow cobblestone street in La Zona Colonial (The Colonial Zone), a warm breeze floated between us. Carla turned to me and said "You are lucky Allegra. You are here in an incredible moment, this" she gestured to the women leaving the salon "has never happened before. Things are changing."*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

When I arrived in the Dominican Republic in 2017 and began to explore the capital city of Santo Domingo, I mostly saw brown-skinned people moving about their lives. I noticed that the women had straight long hair falling down to their shoulders or pulled in a tight updo. But every so often, I would see a few women running to get on the subway, or sitting next to me on a guagua (a form of small bus) with curly hair. Six or seven years ago, seeing a woman with curly hair would have been extremely rare, but when I arrived, curly hair was becoming more and more common. I had unknowingly stumbled into a pivotal moment: the early years of the societal shift in which more and more Afrodescendant Dominican women were choosing to wear their hair curly instead of straightened.

This is not an isolated phenomenon; Afrodescendant women are choosing to wear their natural curls in many countries, such as South Africa, the United States, Brazil, Spain, the United Kingdom, Amsterdam and France (Banks 2000; Johnson 2016; Tate 2009). In some places, this process is decades old, in others just beginning, as in the Dominican Republic. Much has been written about the importance of hair for African and Afrodescendant people, but far less has been written about the rise of curly hair. The literature on hair in Afrodiasporic communities asserts

that hair and hair styling is culturally significant for Afrodescendant communities, and has been used as a form of social control throughout slavery and colonialism, into the present (Byrd & Tharps 2014; Banks 2000). Anthropologist Kia Lilly Caldwell argues that black Brazilian women were reinvesting their bodies with positive significance through their curly hair, while Tate articulates the political nature of hair, and discusses the (lack of) distinction between "natural" and "unnatural" Black hair styles in the UK. Each of these authors provides an in depth understanding of the significance of Black hairstyling according to the specific histories and unique construction of race and gender where they conducted research.

Although the small amount of literature about the increasing use of curly hair in Afrodescendant communities is essential and needed, no academic work has been published about the increasing prominence of curly hair in the Dominican Republic, as this phenomenon is quite new. Although slavery, colonialism and the domination of western ideologies are common across regions, the case of the Dominican Republic is unique due to the specificities of its own history of colonialism, slavery, and the construction of race and gender. The most significant divergence in the case of the Dominican Republic is that most of the literature on curly hair has been written about Black communities and/or in countries of the global North, whereas those who are choosing to wear their hair naturally in the Dominican Republic do not all identify as Black, due to the specific construction of race. In this case, the rise of curly hair is occurring in a community of mixed race Afrodescendant and Black women, in a context where Afrodescendance is rejected by those who are Afrodescendant themselves. In this paper I recount and analyze the experiences of Afrodescendant Dominican women in the specific sociocultural context of the Dominican Republic. After four months of research in the Dominican Republic, during which I conducted roughly 20 interviews and many hours of participant observation, I

argue that Afrodescendant Dominican women are decolonizing the raced and gendered discourses of the Afrodescendant body to define it as beautiful, healthy and agentic. Utilizing Ana Irma Rivera Lassén's allegory of the spiderweb in my analysis, I show that my informants are the spiders of their webs, spinning them into a home that supports and sustains them. They are weaving the discourses of the Afrodescendant female body into a web in which they are free to move in/through their multiple identities and find empowerment.

I begin by exploring my positionality in relation to those of my informants in my research as well as the process creating of this ethnography. Next, I summarize the historical context of anti-blackness and the construction of race in the Dominican Republic, then move on to describe the rising number of curly haired women in the Dominican Republic. I will then explain the theoretical framework of my analysis: decolonial Afrofeminist theory, and Ana Irma Rivera Lassén's analogy for the Afrodescendant woman of the intersectional spiderweb. I conclude by describing the specific ways my informants are weaving their webs by decolonizing the gendered and racial discourses of the body through embodying beauty, Blackness, health, agency and self love.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The nexus of the curly hair movement in the Dominican Republic, and the main locations where I conducted participant observation, were the first two salons for natural hair in the Dominican Republic. Salon culture is prominent in the Dominican Republic, as most women spend hours in a salon every week straightening their hair. Dominican salons are places where women come together to talk, laugh, and create community through Dominican beauty practices (Calendario 2000). The salons for curly hair differ in that they go against traditional Dominican

beauty practices, but nevertheless, they remain a place where Dominican women regularly visit, talk and create community with one another.

The first salon, which I will call Reina Rizada, was started by Carina, a Dominican born woman who had grown up in the United States, and returned after her graduation from college. I visited the salon several times to interview Carina, attend one of their many events about women's empowerment, and get my own hair cut and styled. Reina Rizada is housed in one of the old, pastel colored buildings with a second floor balcony looking out over the cobblestoned street, that characterize La Zona Colonial (the Colonial Zone). This is the colonial area in Santo Domingo that abuts the very first (western) street of the Americas.

The first time I visited the salon, I ascended the stairs and entered an elegant and bright space. A large reception desk, made of natural, weathered wood stood across from the door, behind which a smiling woman with bouncing, shining curls sat. One wall of the narrow salon was lined with cushioned salon chairs, while the other was lined with sinks to wash customers hair, and large hood dryers that looked like an astronaut's helmet. A few women sat on the couch by the door, waiting for their appointment, while others sat in the salon chairs in various stages of getting their hair detangled, cut, or styled. Carina moved about the space, her defined curls hovering around her head and reaching to her shoulders. She smiled and laughed with the hair stylists, and talked with customers, many of whom she knew by name.

The other salon, Caribeña Natural is in another area of the city, a more residential and historical neighborhood. I was able to get to know this salon by getting my hair done there several times, and conducting interviews with the owner, La Maga. When I entered the salon for the first time, I encountered a small room with two adjacent, smaller rooms on either side that held salon chairs and washing stations. The walls were white and the rooms well lit, making the

space seem to glow. This salon was quieter and calmer than Reina Rizada, with the same warm and intimate atmosphere. The hair stylists spoke softly as they traded stories and jokes with their customers and each other. La Maga quietly moved through the rooms, organizing materials, and jumping in to wash customers' hair or finish styling their hair as needed. La Maga is a tall, thin, assertive woman with a soft voice. She was not animated or as expressive with her face and body like Carina, but she was attentive and considerate with those she interacted with. Her light brown curly hair was pulled up into two puffy *moños* (buns). It was in these spaces where I listened to customers talk about their hair and their experiences with it, and where I was educated by the women washing or styling my hair about how to care for it, and how to navigate Santo Domingo as a foreigner and a woman with curly hair, that I learned of the difficulties of wearing curly hair in the Dominican Republic, as well as the empowerment and self love women also experienced in their curly haired journeys.

Aside from participant observation, I also conducted face to face interviews with ten Dominican women one to four times each, the interviews lasting 20 - 60 minutes. I audio-recorded each interview and transcribed and analyzed them. The interviews were conducted in various locations in Santo Domingo over the course of four months in 2017 when I studied abroad there. I also gathered additional data through informal conversations with Dominican women during that time.

I found some of my informants through the staff of my study abroad program, and the rest were friends of the initial informants, all of whom lived in Santo Domingo. My informants ranged in age from their early 20s to their mid 50s and had a spectrum of skin tone, what I would observe as very light brown skin to dark brown/black skin (these are my descriptors, not some of the 22 racial terms in the Dominican Republic). Although they all had curly hair, the women had

a range of hair textures; some had tighter curls, while others had looser coils. Each of my informants had received secondary education and most were middle or upper middle class. One woman was still in university, two were researchers at a university, two were salon owners, four worked in marketing and one was a self employed artist. All of the interviews were conducted in Spanish, except for two, which were with women who had lived or studied in the United States for several years and chose to speak in English. I use pseudonyms for my informants (which most of them chose) in order to protect their privacy.

My body and identities affected how I moved through space and interacted with others in the Dominican Republic. In the United States, I am perceived as a light skinned Black woman, and I identify as such. I wear my curly hair naturally and have my whole life. Many Dominicans thought I was also Dominican, until I spoke Spanish and they noticed my accent. Many Dominicans believed me to be Latina because I looked like them. At times, my clothing and the way I carried myself made it clear to others that I was not Dominican. For example, I would occasionally not follow the norms of respectable attire, such as wearing sandals in school or shorts in the street, and be treated as a foreigner, but when I adhered more closely to the norms of clothing, people would speak to me as if I were Dominican, like ask me for directions. When I said I was Black, many Dominicans would inform me I was not, because I looked like them, and they were not Black. They would assert that they were Dominican, Caribbean, Latin@ or a range of other racial signifiers— except Black. Because I wore my hair curly, I received insults as well as compliments from strangers and acquaintances about it.

My identity as a Black feminist woman and my understanding of race and Black hair politics in the United States influenced how I perceived my informants and how I made meaning out of their words. When I arrived in the Dominican Republic I struggled to understand how the



people around me looked like me and did not identify as Black, or being of African descent. Learning more about the history of the Dominican Republic gave me a better understanding of what I was experiencing, but as I sat down to write this paper, I found myself trying to prove that they were Black, as if it were my place to impose an identity onto them. I struggled to reconcile my subjective experience of my racialized female identity and my US based understanding of social justice and liberation, with my wishes to find connection with my informants, as well as my desire to accurately portray their lives and words in a way that did not silence them. Throughout the writing of this paper I have had to deepen my understanding of the social construction of race in the Dominican Republic, as well as the socially constructed nature of my own identities, and the subjectivity of my own experience. Additionally I had to delve deeper into my data and experiences with my informants to find what they were telling me, not what I wanted them to tell me. I realized the women were not speaking to me about identity politics per se, they were showing me how they were molding their lives and bodies according to their own wishes.

Although I was able to connect with my informants about caring for our natural hair and the comments we got in the streets, my different racial and national identities were present in our interactions. While we shared some common oppressions and privileges such as race, gender and African ancestry, as well as class and age in some cases, we did not share others such as nationality, ethnicity and age. Because of this I cannot claim to see through their eyes. However, I have done my best to listen, learn from and reflect on their stories, words and experiences. I have "picked up the reflections of life around me with my own instruments, and absorbed what I gathered according to my inside juices (Hurston 1969)," in the ethnographic tradition of anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston.

## **ANTI-BLACKNESS AND RACE IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

In the Dominican Republic, 90 percent of the population is of African descent; however, very few recognize their African ancestry because Blackness and African ancestry are actively rejected in Dominican society (Torres-Saillant 2000). According to Ginetta Candelario, a Dominican anthropologist, "for much of Dominican history, the national body has been defined as not-black, even as black ancestry has been grudgingly acknowledged. In the place of blackness, official identity discourses and displays have held that Dominicans are racially Indian and culturally Hispanic "(2007, 2). Claiming Indian (indigenous) racial identity rejects both histories of both Spanish and Haitian domination, ignoring the fact that Dominicans have very little indigenous heritage. It explains the brown skin of the Dominican population without acknowledging their Afrodescendance and, to a lesser extent, removes itself from Spanish colonial influence (Candelario 2007).

This racial identity was constructed throughout the complex history of Spanish colonization, slavery and conflict with Haiti. Taínos, the indigenous people of the island of Hispaniola (what is now Haiti and the Dominican Republic) were wiped out by Spanish colonizers. The colonizers then brought enslaved Africans to fuel their plantations and later the cattle ranching economy. The small population of white Spanish people mixed with the Africans over time, producing a mixed race population, although the African ancestry is more prominent (Candelario 2007). Anti-blackness is linked to the colonial mindset and slavery, as well as anti-Haitianism. The west side of Hispaniola was colonized by the French, and they too brought over enslaved Africans. The French slaves revolted in the first successful slave revolution in history, becoming the Haitian nation. After Haiti gained independence in 1804, it took control of the

Spanish side of the island (now the Dominican Republic) for 22 years, ending slavery. Upon its independence from Haiti in 1844, the Dominican Republic returned Spanish rule and reinstated slavery. The Dominican elite preferred being governed by their white colonizers than their Black neighbors. The country now celebrates its independence from Haiti, rather than its independence from Spain, though this occurred after their independence from Haiti (Torres-Saillant 2000).

As we can see, Dominican identity is constructed in opposition to Haiti and to Blackness. Blackness is equated to Haitians, and thus the scripts of discrimination and hate for Haitians and Black people are one and the same. No matter how dark skinned a Dominican is, they are not called Black because they are not Haitian; instead, they are referred to using various words that indicate skin tone (Hazel 2014). This anti-Blackness and anti-Haitianism has been cultivated and enforced by various state regimes throughout Dominican history. The dictator Rafael Trujillo enacted a particularly deliberate effort to erase Blackness from the Dominican population through *blanqueamiento* (whitening). He sanctioned the massacre of between 15,000-60,000 Haitians living on the Dominican side of the Dominican-Haitian border. He intended to give this land to white Europeans who he invited to immigrate to better (whiten) the Dominican population (Hazel 2014). His dictatorship spoke of Haitians as morally and intellectually inferior, and these discourses continue today (Torres-Saillant 2000).

Dominican identity hovers between the denigration of Blackness and the uplifting of the white colonial ideal (Hazel 2014). Not white, but not Black. Trujillo utilized the ambiguity of this identity to construct a national identity by finding a way to distance the nation from the foreign authorities of Spain and Haiti, without acknowledging their African ancestry. He used the term *indio* (Indian) as the national racial identity of Dominicans, although Dominicans have very little indigenous ancestry. By using the term *indio*, Trujillo created a Dominican identity

that recognized their color (not whiteness) while ignoring and erasing the undesirable African ancestry. This was codified on the national identification cards (*cédulas*), with terms such as *indio claro*, *indio oscuro* (light indian, dark indian) to describe their skin tone while stating their indianness (Hazel 2014; Torres-Saillant 2000). This racial description on identification cards continued until a few years ago, according to my informants.

Anti-Haitianism and anti-Blackness has been perpetuated throughout history and continues today. Although Taínos are recognized as the racial and cultural signifiers of Dominican identity, Hispanic culture and norms are still upheld as valuable and superior. We can see this in European colonial discourses of the body that privilege light or white skin and straight hair, such as in media that privileges white or light skinned people. Hispanic culture is also celebrated and codified in Dominican textbooks and histories, while African ancestry is scarcely recognized (Torres-Saillant 2000).

The significance of brown skin has been attributed to the Taínos, but one phenotypical feature betrays one's African ancestry: curly hair. Both Spaniards and Taínos have straight hair, thus, any waves or curls in one's hair unmistakably indicates Blackness. Candelario points out that hair is the primary racial indicator that marks someone as Black or Afrodescendant. She explains, "While skin color and any African heritage are the phenotypical symbol and genealogical and ideological codes for determining racial identity in the United States, for Dominicans the phenotypic symbol is hair, and the ideological code is anti-haitianism" (2007, 7). Because of this, Afrodescendant women must straighten their hair in order to evade the stain of Afrodescendance and be seen as Dominican and socially acceptable. It is this historical construction of the race of the Dominican body that women reject by wearing their hair curly.

## THE RISE OF CURLY HAIR

The catalyst for the increasing number of women who are choosing to wear their hair curly in the Dominican Republic was ignited by the increasing availability of information on how to take care of and style curly hair on the internet. This information had been lost in the hundreds of years in which Dominican women have straightened their hair. Carina, the owner of Reinas Rizadas, described the significance of information on the internet as she sat across from me, her curls held back in a chic ponytail, and her dark brown skin set off by her bright red lipstick. She said:

I think it's the power of social media and how images spread and how the media is no longer the only way to communicate information. Now we have social media that allows us to break these boundaries and to tear down some of these norms and rewrite them and redefine them and I think that it has been a mixture of where we are as a culture and sort of these new forms of communication that have definitely, that have made it so things would be this way and I think that is where we are in our journey as people.

Carina points out that social media has provided for the sharing of information and images that go against the common discourses of the white body as beautiful, and given women the knowledge to wear hair curly. She also points out that it was time in Dominican culture and their ongoing healing from slavery and colonialism to take this next step.

Youtube vloggers (video bloggers), instagram personalities, and websites that show tutorials on natural hair care, were mainly produced by African Americans in the United States, and later translated into Spanish. Now vloggers and bloggers from across Latin America and the Caribbean are producing their own resources in many languages. Carina and La Maga, the women who started Reinas Rizadas and Caribeña Rizada, initially gained a following online by translating and creating content about curly hair. The salons they each created are also credited for the rise of the curly hair movement. Each of the salons created a place for Afrodescendant

women to learn how to care for their hair, and find others who also made the choice to wear their hair curly and create a community.

The increasing number of people who are wearing their natural curls in the Dominican Republic are primarily women. This is congruent with the other literature on curly hair (Banks 2000; Johnson 2016; Tate 2016). Men mostly wear their hair cut short, and for some, you could not see their curls. Additionally, their bodies were disciplined and controlled differently in Dominican society.

The women who are part of the recent boom of natural hair are mostly middle to high class, indicating the classed aspect to this particular form of decolonization. Sociologist Chelsea Johnson (2016) points out that women of a lower socioeconomic status have less access to the internet, and products for natural hair. Additionally, going against normative discourses of the body means running the risk of retaliation, such as losing employment or being seen as less professional. This is a risk those of low socioeconomic status can rarely take. Thus, we must keep in mind that although the Afrodescendant women who wear their natural curls may have many oppressed identities, they also hold privileged identities that partially enable this form of decolonizing action. Given the specificity of the multiple identities that Afrodescendant Dominican women hold, their experiences must be analysed through a framework written about and by women who share many of their identities, which can be found in Decolonial Afrofeminism.

### **DECOLONIAL AFROFEMINISM**

It is crucial to analyze the the experiences of Afrodescendant women through the lens of Afrodescendant decolonial feminist thought—which I refer to as Decolonial Afrofeminism—

specifically Afro-Latina/Caribbean feminists. Afro-Dominican lesbian feminist theorist Ochy Curiel summarized the meaning of decolonization, drawing from various Afro-Latina/Caribbean feminists which I will draw on in this paper. Curiel states:

I understand decolonization as the recognition of the economic, political, and cultural historical domination between nations which resulted from the European colonization of other peoples, and the effects produced by coloniality in our social imaginary. Decolonization is, therefore, a political and epistemological position which traverses individual and collective thought and action: our imaginaries, our bodies and sexualities, and our ways of being and doing in the world. This necessitates a kind of “cimarronage” drawn from imposed and colonized social practices and the construction of “other” thoughts in accordance with our lived experiences (2016, 50-51).

As Curiel describes, the basis of decolonial theory is that decolonization operates from an understanding of domination as a result of colonization. She points out that it is a sort of "cimarronage" or maroonage, she refers to "cimarrones" escaped slaves that lived in forests and mountains out of reach of colonial rule. This "cimarronage" is the creation of knowledge and practice outside of dominant discourses, drawing from both "colonized social practices" and the lived experiences of the oppressed and othered. I analyze the mechanisms and lasting effects of colonialism in the discourses of ideal and unwanted bodies and theorize from the everyday experiences of Afro-Dominican women who wear their hair curly. I focus on individual women as part of the collective, and how they are decolonizing their bodies by creating a new discourse of the Afrodescendant body through their "ways of being and doing in the world," specifically their choice to move through the world with curly hair.

Additionally, I use Afro-Puerto Rican feminist Ana Irma Rivera Lassén's allegory of the intersectional spiderweb to analyze the lived experiences of curly haired Afrodescendant Dominican women. Rivera Lassén developed this allegory to describe the multiple identities of Afrodescendant women and their path to liberation. She goes beyond Kimberlé Crenshaw's

concept of intersectionality—the concept that many axes of oppression and identity such as race, class and gender come together in the lives of Afrodescendant women (2001)—and asserts that Afrodescendant women are not a static entity being "crossed by intersections", they are "moving with their identities in a diverse manner" (Rivera Lassén 2016, 64). They have multiple identities that are non-linear, dynamic, and come together in unique ways. She characterizes this as a spiderweb. Rivera Lassén argues that if Afrodescendant women see themselves as the fly stuck in the web they will be trapped, but if they see themselves as the spider *spinning* the web, the spiderweb will be "a house that protects and gives us strength to challenge exclusions "(66). She is not insinuating that Afrodescendant women are the makers of their own oppressions or identities, or that they should accept the discourses that stigmatize and oppress them. Instead Rivera Lassén argues that:

In order not to be a fly stuck in the web, we must recognize our strengths, see ourselves like the spider that carefully lives in the web made of our multiple identities. If the spider is who spins the web because it is her home, she will make it in a way that sustains her. The spider walks in the beauty and weave of her home, a home that defines her, nourishes and protects her. The spider moves, she is not still, she walks with and through her multiple identities (2016, 67).

Utilizing this allegory as a theoretical framework, I argue that my informants are the spiders of their webs, weaving their webs by decolonizing racial and gendered discourses of the Afrodescendant body through intentionally wearing curly hair.

### **THE WEB: DISCOURSES OF THE BODY**

Before investigating how Afrodescendant Dominican women are positioning themselves as the spider and weaving their webs, we must understand the strands that make up the web. The strands of their web are the colonial raced and gendered discourses of the desired vs the undesired body that discipline the Afrodescendant female.



Racist and sexist colonial discourses construct the white body as beautiful, desirable, employable, moral, and healthy (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992; Tate 2018). The Black body is constructed in contrast to the white body as ugly, dirty, immoral and diseased. The desired white body and the unwanted Black body are intimately connected, in that the undesirability of the Black body creates the desirability of the white body. This discourse renders the Black body only intelligible through a racist worldview in which the actual Black body is "truncated", only understood through images of Black inferiority, deviance and ugliness (Tate 2018; Yancy 2012). The discourse of the white body in the Dominican Republic is not exactly the same as in other regions, but it still stresses the value of white bodies, and lack of value of Black bodies.

This whiteness in the Global North West and Global South West most often relates to being of European descent as shown in skin colour, hair texture and facial features. Even though across this region 'whiteness' can assume many looks, visible European descent and societal acceptance of the body as 'looking white' mean that socially constructed whiteness must still appear on the surface of the body in order for it to be read as white (Tate 2018, 67).

In the case of the Dominican Republic, "white" might not be the white skin of the stereotypical Northern European, but light brown skin, straight hair, a thin nose and thin lips. The ideal body is valued based on its closeness to the European white body. This white body is held as ideal through representation in media, indicating to society "which bodies matter and which do not" and which "must be erased from the social body" (Tate 2018, 67). Signs of the Black or Afrodescendant body, such as curly hair, must be erased from the social body, because they do not align with the white body, and indicate the unwanted Black body. This discourse of the ideal body is distinctly gendered in that for the ideal female body, straight, long hair indicates desirability, marriageability, and femininity.

These raced and gendered discourses were impressed on Dominican society by colonial powers that continue today to discipline the bodies of Afrodescendant women. The Comaroffs state the manipulation of bodies was a mechanism of colonialism:

Those who seek to forge empires, or to remake existing worlds, will try to impress themselves upon the physiques of their would-be subjects...conquerors and colonizers seem typically to feel a need to reverse prior corporeal signs, often making bodies into realms of contest (1992, 41).

Afrodescendant women's bodies are realms of contest, being acted on and disciplined by colonial discourses of the body. Foucault (1995) describes the phenomenon of panopticism, the architecture of a society which disciplines the bodies and actions of a society by creating the sense of constant visibility, which causes the population to discipline themselves and each other . This discourse, created and instilled through colonialism—and enslavement as a project of colonialism— continues today. Afrodescendant Dominican women's bodies are disciplined by Dominican society (friends, family, employers etc) when they deviate from the gendered and racial discourses of the body. Wearing curly hair is an expression of that deviation from the norm that exposes these women to a state of constant visibility, in which their bodies are openly commented on and insulted in public and private spaces.

### **Disciplining Dominican Afrodescendant Women's Bodies**

These discourses of the desired White body and the unwanted Black body are the essential strands of Afrodescendant Dominican women's spiderwebs. They come together in the spiderweb and in Afrodescendant Dominican women's bodies and lives through discipline. In order to fit the colonial discourse of the ideal white body, Afrodescendant Dominican women must go to the salon every week to straighten their hair. Most Dominicans have varying textures of curly hair, so they must use chemical relaxers to straighten their hair once a month in the

salon, and return each week to get a blow out (a blow dryer and brush used to keep hair completely straight). As Julia, an animated, fast talking informant told me, most Dominican women spend several hours in the salon each week, the cost of the salon being part of their monthly expenses.

When my informants stopped relaxing their hair and getting blowouts, they either slowly grew out and cut off the relaxed hair a bit at a time in a process called *la transición* (transitioning), or they cut off almost all their hair, leaving about an inch, letting their naturally curly hair grow out; this is called *el gran corte* (the big chop). When they stop straightening their hair, they are disciplined in various ways. Their parents, friends, employers, and people on the street or on public transportation would comment on their hair. With the rising popularity of curly hair, these negative comments are increasingly interspersed with comments of encouragement and admiration. Regardless, the negative comments persist. Several of my informants have been told to relax their hair by employers and peers. Comments such as "Fix your hair!", "Unkempt/messy girl!", "Crazy woman!" or "Haitian!" are directed at them. Once, a woman on the street was so offended by my informant's hair, she took out a lighter and attempted to burn her curls. Other times more subtle remarks are made around the dinner table or on a date, where it is implied that curly hair is unprofessional, dirty, messy and ugly. Mama Tingó, a dark skinned Social Worker and professor in her Twenties with large dark curls with blonde tips, told me of many encounters where she was mistaken for a student because of her "unprofessional" hair, and told to fix (straighten) her hair to be more presentable:

When I was in the parking lot of the professors the security guard tells me "This isn't the students' parking lot". He was arguing with me a lot, "This isn't the students' parking lot," I said. "I'm not a student, I'm a professor." He gave me a look, "You are a professor!" And I say, "Yes I'm a professor". So he says to me, "You aren't adhering to the code of ethics of the university." "How am I not

adhering to the code of ethics?" "Yes because you have to come dressed tidily to the University, are you seriously a professor?" I said yes.

Because she did not meet the conventional image of a professor, which, she told me was skinny, white, high class, with straight hair and a thin nose, the security guard assumed she was not a professor and reprimanded her about her appearance. As a professor, she has received many comments that she must fix her hair to look more professional and appropriate. Mama Tingó and several other women mentioned that not only were they disciplined for having curly hair, but they felt even more disciplined when they did *el gran corte*, because they were not only showing their Afrodescendance, they were defying the image that femininity means having long hair.

The mixed race artist activist, Carla, the only informant who had always worn her hair curly, quietly told me of a traumatizing experience she had as a child at school because of her curly hair:

Carla: One day in school when I was about fourteen a teacher took me out of the classroom because of my hair. Back then I didn't understand what the problem was until that teacher took me out of class and so then I said well dang [my hair] upsets other people. After that it was a process of personal growth and learning, a lot of stuff about African heritage and why we negate it. Now I use my hair like a personal statement to say, "Look, I don't have a problem with recognizing the Black part of me.

Allegra (interviewer): What did your teacher say to you when he took you out of class?

Carla: He told me he wasn't going to teach class until I fixed my hair because I looked crazy. I left the class and cried. He said that to me in front of my classmates, which was the worst. I think about that a lot, I became really aggressive, I talked back to the teachers a lot, and my classmates bullied me a lot.

This experience was very difficult for Carla, and it caused her to think about why her curly hair was so hated, and what that indicated. Although this happened about 15 years ago, young girls getting removed from class because of their hair and told not to return until they

straightened it is still a common occurrence. Many incidents like this were mentioned to me during my fieldwork. These women's narratives illustrate the disciplinary techniques from different social institutions such as school, the family, and employers, for failing to adhere to the ways their bodies have traditionally been disciplined by colonial racial and gendered discourses. We can also see the specific importance given to hair in these discourses and the severe disciplinary practices it provokes.

These discourses of the ideal vs the unwanted body and the ways they are enforced are some of the strands of the Afrodescendant Dominican women's web. The strands are the ways their bodies have been defined in raced and gendered ways. Now that we understand the the strands of their web, how are the women becoming the spider? How are they weaving their web by renegotiating these discourses of the body? In the following sections I examine how my informants are decolonizing these discourses and their bodies through embodying beauty, health and, self-definition.

## **THE SPIDER: WEAVING HER WEB**

### ***Rizada y Bella ~ Curly and Beautiful***

Each of the woman I interviewed saw her curls as beautiful, shifting the meaning of the Afrodescendant body from ugly to a discourse of beauty that includes Afrodescendant features. After the initial shock and difficulty of returning to their curls, my informants *se enamoraron* — they fell in love with their hair. Mama Tingó, who returned to her curly hair before the natural hair movement gained traction, described the process of reconstructing a discourse of beauty for herself after doing *el gran corte*, and with little affirmation and encouragement from those around her.

You are always validating that you are beautiful... the moment when you look in the mirror and you are encountering yourself again [is difficult], you aren't seeing a face with straight hair that you always did, to see it with short curly hair that they always taught you was ugly and you are constructing, and the process of construction hurts, you look weird in the mirror.

She is constructing a new image of herself, of short curly hair as beautiful. As her hair grew and she learned how to take care of it and style it, she says, "I started to fall in love even more". She got used to her hair, and sees it as beautiful. Another woman, Brocólí, described her love for her hair to me. As we sat together in a hallway in the art building of her university, the young light skinned student spoke quickly, animated and excited as she patted her short looser curls and told me, "I like to see my *pajonaso* (big afro), my *arbolito* (little tree). It looks like pah! It looks powerful." She sees her hair as beautiful and powerful, reworking the definition of beauty as straight haired.

Several of the women made sure to tell me that just because they chose to wear their hair curly, they were not implying that straightening one's hair was bad. Carina made sure I understood this:

Curly hair is beautiful but also straight hair is beautiful and what's most beautiful is the right to wear your hair as you want without repercussions from society or from anyone. And I think that that's where we're headed to a point where people will walk down the street and wear their hair in all sorts of ways and no one will look at them and think twice about the reasons behind them wearing their hair in that way.

By seeing their curls as beautiful, women are creating a discourse of beauty that *includes* curly hair as well as straight hair (with the hope of allowing Afrodescendant women to each weave their own definition of beauty).

***Rizada, Negra y Bella ~ Curly, Black and Beautiful***

While each of my informants implicitly redefines the Afrodescendant body by wearing her hair curly, several of them explicitly redefine the Black and Afrodescendant body as beautiful. Luna, Mama Tingó and Carla wear their hair curly to explicitly, politically, declare the beauty and reality of their Blackness or Afrodescendance to themselves and to others. Luna and Mama Tingó are Black feminist academics who work to make social change through their research and teaching. They both are dark skinned and identify as Black. Both chose to wear their hair curly to live according to their goals of decolonization. Both are aware of the anti-Blackness in Dominican society and the vestiges of colonialism. They seek to explicitly decolonize their bodies and minds by wearing their hair curly. Mama Tingó described her decision to go natural when she was studying Social Work and learning about colonialism and racism. She articulated, "I wanted to act consistently as a social worker, because I had to practice what I was preaching and understand all of this issue of racism and this aspect of unconscious racism that we sometimes reproduce without knowing." For Mama Tingó, straightening her hair was a form of denying her Blackness, which was against her belief in the beauty of being Black and embracing her African heritage. Similarly, Luna wears her curls because it is part of accepting and declaring her Blackness. She sat across from me in a small coffee shop, filling the room with her impassioned voice and confident demeanor:

For me it has always been a sign of rebellion that says, "Look, here I am!" Sometimes when I'm asked, "What are you, how do you identify, who is Luna?" I say, "Luna is a Black woman" that's the first thing I say. A Black woman who accepts herself as Black and is Black, so it's part of that recognition, that pride, to have my hair like this.

Her hair is part of her identity as a Black woman, it is part of her Black pride. Another of my informants, Carla, wore her hair as a political statement, but does not identify as Black. She wears her hair naturally "as a statement to say 'Look, I don't have a problem with recognizing the

Black part of me". Although she is proud of her Afrodescendencia, she does not want to minimize her Taíno and Spanish heritage by identifying as only Black.

These three women, although they hold different identities, are each renegotiating the discourse of the black body as ugly, and the Dominican rejection of Afrodescendance, in their own way. They deliberately spin a web of Black and Afrodescendant pride and beauty. These webs are not only weaving decolonial discourses of beauty, they are altering discourses of health.

### ***Rizada y Sana ~ Curly and Healthy***

Many of my informants have been called various pejorative or insulting words on the street, on public transport, or by their family, friends or employers. They are called "Despeinada" (messy or unkempt) or "greña" (hair like a mop) and many other words that imply they are dirty and do not care for themselves. The Afrodescendant body has been seen as dirty and unhealthy throughout history (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992; Tate 2018). Through colonial European thought, "the African' personified suffering and degeneracy, his environment a hothouse of fever and affliction...the black body became...associated with degradation, pollution and disease" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992, 215). The Black/Haitian body carries" these connotations in the Dominican Republic. For example, Hazel (2014) notes that to say you "smell like a Haitian" when you smell bad, perpetuates the stereotype that Black bodies are dirty and unclean. Curly hair, as an indicator of African descent, is also seen as unkempt, messy and dirty. In contrast, wearing their curls was a healthier option for many of the women, and it inspired them to be more holistically healthy. By redefining curly hair as healthy, my informants restructure the discourse of the Afrodescendant body as dirty and unhealthy.



Paradoxically, straightening your hair consistently can have various negative health effects. Many of my informants used chemical relaxers every month for over a decade. Additionally, the consistent blow drying can damage the hair. Luna used to get burns and welts on her scalp from the relaxer, and her hair would break and occasionally fall out. Julia, a young woman who recently transitioned at the age of 26, suffered from headaches from the relaxers so terrible that she was told by her doctor to stop using them. This was the instigator for her transition. Similarly, one of the reasons Mama Tingó chose to go natural was because the relaxers hurt a great deal and they made her scalp very sensitive. For many women, wearing their hair curly is a healthier, less painful option.

Additionally, wearing their hair curly motivated the women to care for their hair and their bodies. In the curly hair community (as they refer to themselves) it is widely understood that in order to have healthy, hydrated, shiny and bouncing curls, you need to use natural, non chemical hair products. Each of my informants told me that they use natural hair products without parabens, sulfates, silicones, or other ingredients made from petroleum. These ingredients can damage your hair by making it dry, dull and weak. In addition to putting natural, enriching products in their hair, several women started to eat more healthily and drink water to help their hair. Salon owner La Maga emphasizes to her clients that to have healthy curls, you must put natural, healthy products on it, and put healthy things in your body. Many of her customers ask her how to make their curls grow faster and she answers:

In reality if you want [your hair] to grow you have to eat well. It doesn't matter which product I offer you if you aren't healthy...I always try to explain that you can have a product that works, you can do a scalp massage but you also have to take care of yourself.

Although La Maga sells all natural hair products, she maintains that you must be holistically healthy to have hair that grows quickly. María and Brócoli both mentioned trying to care for

themselves better by drinking water and eating nutritious food. María mentioned that learning how to care for her curls motivated her to take better care of herself:

I connected with this part of me that I didn't know I could connect to...Now I take care of my hair. You have to, like, look into the chemicals that are in your shampoo and you have to like drink more water to have your hair moisturized. It really is a three sixty switch like you're much more aware of what you put on yourself, and even though my family was leaning to the natural side like we ate a lot of veggie food and we don't use processed ingredients at home, like even now this has been a turning point.

For María, learning to care for her curls helped her developed an awareness of how she treated her body and inspired her to be more attentive to her health. Brócoli underwent a similar process; she had started trying to eat healthier and drink more water because she wanted her hair to grow faster and be healthy. Before she returned to her curls she did not put much energy into caring for her hair, now she spends time trying new homemade deep conditioners and researching new techniques on Youtube. She cares about her hair and wants it to be hydrated, shiny, glossy and defined. This aligns with sociologist Chelsea Johnson's argument that the rising use of curly hair is aligning with the rising discourse of environmentalism and eco-friendly naturalness (2016).

Curly hair is a way for many Dominican women to live a healthier life. As women increasingly turn to curly hair as a healthy alternative, they are opposing the discourse of curly hair as unkempt and dirty and Afrodescendant bodies as unhealthy. They are restructuring the colonial disciplining of Afrodescendant bodies as natural and healthy instead of unclean. These women are making a web in which embracing their Afrodescendant features as positive and healthy removed the shameful or negative connotations. Some women choose to go natural mainly because of its healthy nature, others to look how they please, and still others to explicitly embrace and affirm their blackness.

### *Voluntad y el Amor Propio- Agency and Self Love*

Each of my informants wears their hair naturally for the same overarching reason: because they want to. As Afrodescendant women their bodies have been disciplined, objectified and constructed by forces of colonialism, sexism, and racism that have infringed on their agency and ability to make choices for themselves. The fact that they are choosing to define their own bodies as beautiful, Black and healthy resists the colonization of their bodies. Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins writes that by defining themselves, Black women question how they have been defined by others. She goes on to say:

When Black women define ourselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of Black women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects (2000, 114).

Collins' emphasis on Black women's self definition as a means to reject the authority of those who have defined them, empowers women as agentic and human. My informants may define themselves in various ways, but *they* are the agents who define themselves as beautiful, Black, and/or healthy. As such they are decolonizing the discourses that disciplined their bodies and rejected Afrodescendance. They are weathering the disapproval and insults of their communities and loved ones because they want to—and have the right to—look, be, and live how they choose. Julia explained to me how difficult this radical choice is: "Learning how to unlearn everything they've taught you is really hard. It looks easier than it is. There is nothing around you, except what you truly believe, to tell you that you are making a good decision." Julia was going against all of the messages around her, relying on her own conviction and choice to reconstruct the discourses that had disciplined her body and the way she moved through the world.

Choosing to have curly hair to adhere to their own definition of self was empowering for my informants. When I asked Dayana, a dark skinned Black woman, about how she felt after getting *el gran corte* she smiled and told me "[I felt] Completely liberated... in every way." The youngest of my informants in her early twenties, Brócoli, described how choosing to return to her curls made her feel confident:

Some people don't see hair as very important, but for me it is because it's helped me try to listen to myself. What's important is how you see yourself. It's you that's going to wear the look, the hair style, it has shown me to say, "No, I want to have my hair like this, I like how I look."

She was empowered by going against the disciplining of her body and restructuring colonial discourses of the body.

Carina argues that choosing to wear your hair naturally and defining your body for yourself is an act of self love. It is loving yourself to the extent that you would defy social norms in order to be who and how you want to be. Empowerment, self-definition, and agency are all tied to self love. Knowing themselves and loving themselves empowers Afrodescendant Dominican women to advocate for themselves, and to trust their own desires and goals over the noise of colonial white discourses of Afrodescendant women's bodies. To resist centuries of colonial disciplining and exposure to ridicule is proof of how much my informants value themselves. Carina summarized the reasons many women go natural and the weight their actions have:

So another reason why people are doing it, I think is because there's definitely a social political weight on this decision of returning to your natural hair. Because you're defying the status quo and you're defying what is normal, and I think that there are people who are generally doing it too because they want to be defiant of what's been imposed on them. They're like fuck that I'm going to do what I want, what makes me feel good and I don't care what you think about it. And then there are people who are doing it for whatever other reason, you know I think that it's different for everyone. However, I do think that the majority of people are doing it for this sense of self love, which I think is what it boils down to, whether that

person believes it or understands it or not that this self love is directly linked to a social, political, economic stance, it is. If you are wearing your hair naturally whether you want it to be or not it's gonna be revolutionary because it's not what's the norm, so this act of returning to your natural hair is revolutionary and it's a social political act whether that person does it for that reason or not.

Carina points out the diverse reasons Afrodescendant women have chosen to wear their curls, and the underlying theme of self love. No matter how and why women are wearing their natural curls, it is a revolutionary act because they are decolonizing the racial and gendered discourses of the Afrodescendant female body by being curly, healthy, beautiful, black and self defined.

In these ways my informants are renegotiating the racial and gendered discourses in their society in favor of the Afrodescendant body as beautiful, healthy and agentic. My informants are the spider, the agent, the actor in their web, moving through the multiple strands of their identities as Afrodescendant and female, and shifting the shape of the web, altering these identities from limiting and constraining to create new decolonial discourses of the Afrodescendant female body. They are altering the oppressive discourses that defined their bodies as not Afrodescendant and straight haired, and shifting them so they might move through their multiple identities. They are shifting these discourses of race and gender so they can live in their bodies and move through their lives in whichever way they choose. They are in the process of lovingly and carefully weaving their webs, creating a home, a space of beauty, affirmation, agency and empowerment.

## **CONCLUSION**

Throughout this paper I have argued that Afrodescendant women are decolonizing racial and gendered discourses of the Afrodescendant woman's body. By wearing their naturally curly hair, they are defying the hegemonic discourse that defines the Afrodescendant body, more specifically the natural curly hair of Black and Afrodescendant women, as dirty and ugly. This

defiance has led them to redefinitions of their bodies as curly and beautiful, curly and healthy and for some, curly, beautiful and Black or Afrodescendant. The strands of the webs that constrain them and discipline them into a female body that hides African ancestry are being woven into a new pattern, one in which my informants can live within their identities as Afrodescendant, curly haired women as well as healthy, and beautiful. Their actions as the spider weaving their own web and defining their own bodies rejects the colonial oppression of their bodies throughout history.

These Afrodescendant women are constructing their own knowledge and discourses of the Afrodescendant female body. My informants are enacting their own form of "cimarronage" which Curiel asserts is part of decolonization. Cimarrónes (escaped African slaves) created their own independent communities in the forests and mountains of Santo Domingo, rejecting the way in which their bodies had been treated and commodified by colonial powers, they created their own way of being, surviving and living. Afrodescendant women who are choosing to wear their curly hair are liberating themselves from the colonial discourses of the body to develop their own forms of knowledge and discourse based on their own lived experiences and "ways of being and doing in the world" (Curiel 2016, 51).

It is necessary to point out that wearing natural hair is not the only way to be a spider in your web, nor is it the only way Afrodescendant Dominican women are decolonizing their bodies and societies. This particular form of decolonization is simply one I had the privilege to observe and experience. Additionally, the women are not finished with the process of decolonizing their bodies and societies and weaving their webs. Ana Irma Rivera Lassén asserts that the spiderweb will become not only a home, haven and a place of inspiration, it is a place from which to challenge exclusion and seek liberation. Carina expressed to me that the goal of

Reinas Rizadas is not for all women to have curly hair, the goal is for women to continue to be the spider, to find empowerment, advocate for themselves and to be successful:

Our goal is how do we link this big chop to someone wanting to do better at school, to someone wanting to seek a promotion to someone hustling for something, and that's the real social change. Not how many curly girls you see in the street but how many women, black women with curly hair and all sorts of hair will you see managing and directing offices and companies in this country and occupying some seats in the senate and the congress and all these other things. So it's not about how many curls are walking down the street but really how are these women able to impact their lives through this.

The goal is for women to continue spinning their webs, decolonizing their bodies, minds and societies and to make change, giving themselves freedom of movement in their webs to manifest their lives and goals however they choose. It remains to be seen how this societal shift develops, and what intricate and nuanced webs Afrodescendant Dominican women will spin in the future.

Although the rise of curly hair in the Dominican Republic is unique in its particularities, it is part of a global phenomenon of Afrodescendant women choosing to wear their hair curly. It is a component of a collective of Afrodescendant women resisting, altering and shifting oppressive discourses through how they choose to inhabit their bodies and move through the world. Perhaps, these distinct communities will come together, the strands of their webs connecting and reinforcing one another to incite global decolonial Afrofeminist action.

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