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The Creation of the Home: A Sociological and Literary Analysis of Dominicanidad in Public Spaces of Washington Heights and within Dominican Literature

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The Creation of the Home: A Sociological and Literary Analysis of Dominicanidad in Public
Spaces of Washington Heights and within Dominican Literature

Joint Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature, and The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2023

*Para mis participantes, quienes caminan el mundo
siendo unapologetically Dominican.*

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PREFACE

Given that this study will be building on different theoretical concepts that exist within the realms of sociology, literature and history, I have decided to include a guide on terminology that will facilitate the reader's experience and interactions with this thesis. Below is a list of the three main terms I will be employing and redefining: *Dominicanidad*, the physical home, and the symbolic home.

***Dominicanidad*:** Dominicanidad is a term that was coined by Lorgia García Peña to refer to the state of “both the people who embrace the label ‘Dominican’ whether or not they are considered Dominican citizens by the state (such as diasporic Dominicans and ethnic Haitians) and the history, cultures, and institutions associated with them”.¹ In this study, I focus on and expand García Peñas's take on culture and the people who embrace the label by using dominicanidad as the lived and embraced experience of Dominican culture and reproduction of culture in the diaspora.

The Symbolic Home (Home): This home is one that is recreated through the connections between the individual, their space, and Dominican cultural elements. This home does not depend on an attached physical space, but rather on the participation of

¹ Lorgia García Peña, Terminology, *Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation, and Archives of Contradiction*, ix.

Dominicans in its formation. The symbolic home exists in a liminal space that can be physical and/or emotional. It can often be found in the felt experience of Dominicanidad, it thrives within Dominican *testimonios* that can be found in literature.

The Physical Home (Casa): I employ this term within discussions of spaces like Washington Heights and the Dominican Republic (to which I will also refer sometimes as “the island”). However, I argue that the physical home is still in some ways invented as these places acquire symbology through associations and characteristics that are attached to them. The physical home feeds of the symbolic home.

In between languages

The Creation of the Home is a combination of two areas of studies –Sociology and Spanish Literature– that now have an intrinsic relationship with my identity. Both areas that I have experience in two different languages: Spanish and Sociology. As a result, it feels unnatural to communicate my ideas within both of these subjects in only one language. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 are written in majoritively in English. Nevertheless, Spanish will be highly present through the voices of my participants in the form of introductory poems. I have arranged these poems to tell a story about the lives and opinions of my participants, and have only included direct transcriptions and refrained from introducing my voice in them. Parts of the Introduction and Chapter 4 are entirely written in Spanish. I took this decision given the need for theoretical analysis of literature and society written in Spanish within the United States literary world.

Being bilingual is a core part of my identity that I believe has the power to, as opposed to limiting audiences, broaden the types of reader that have access to this project. It also opens the

door to individuals like me Dominicans in the diaspora who go to college to explore the ways language and literature can have power in academic sociological research.

Entre lenguas:

“The Creation of the Home” es una combinación de dos áreas de estudio -la sociología y la literatura hispana- que ahora tienen una relación intrínseca con mi identidad. Ambas áreas en las que tengo experiencias en idiomas diferentes: literatura y sociología, español e inglés. Como resultado, me parece antinatural comunicar mis ideas dentro de estos dos temas en un solo idioma. Los capítulos 1, 2 y 3 están escritos principalmente en inglés. Sin embargo, el español estará muy presente a través de las voces de mis participantes en forma de poemas introductorios. Ofrezco estos poemas para contar una historia sobre las vidas y opiniones de mis participantes y solo he incluido transcripciones directas absteniéndome de introducir mi voz en ellos. Partes de la introducción y el cuarto capítulo están escritos completamente en español. Tomé esta decisión dada la necesidad de análisis teórico de la literatura y la sociedad en español dentro del mundo literario de los Estados Unidos.

Ser bilingüe es una parte fundamental de mi identidad que creo que tiene el poder de, lejos de limitar al público, ampliar los tipos de lectores que tienen acceso a este proyecto. También abre la puerta a personas como yo, dominicanas en la diáspora que van a la universidad a explorar las formas en que el lenguaje y la literatura pueden tener un lugar dentro de la investigación sociológica y académica.

INTRODUCCIÓN

Es eso lo que he traído conmigo, las memorias que parecen no desvanecerse, pero las que debería cuidar no vaya a ser que se me pierdan entre el reperpero urbano de mi casa.

Iliana Emilia García

The sounds of the *güira* and *acordeón* coming from *la placita* rang in my ears as I read the notice that was carelessly left underneath the door and said “due to the following reasons, your rent will be increasing.” Somehow in that moment where the physical home became endangered, the symbolic home of Dominicanidad continued playing, existing and alive. What did this notice mean? Do my parents have the means to move? Where would we even move if Washington Heights is all we have known? But deep inside I knew that my dad would find a way to stay in the Heights because to him this neighborhood provided him comfort, it provided a sense of home that he was not ready to give up. I now question whether what provides him comfort is the physical space itself or if it is the people playing *la guira y el acordeón* and those dancing to

merengue in Plaza las Américas. That same day, my dad headed to the plaza with his foldable chair and met the neighbors in the act of recreating the imagined home of Dominicanidad.

In this study, I focus on and expand on Lorgia García Peñas's conceptualization of culture and the people who embrace the label by using "dominicanidad" as a term that refers to the lived and embraced experience of Dominican culture and reproduction of culture in the diaspora. Focusing on Washington Heights— a neighborhood in New York City that hosts the largest numbers of Dominicans outside of the island— I argue that dominicanidad for Dominican immigrants is a result of the recreation of the imagined home. In Washington Heights, a physical and symbolic home, this is represented by the way Dominicans use public spaces like parks, plazas, and sidewalks. In Dominican literature, the symbolic home is recreated through the connections between the individual, their space, and Dominican cultural elements. In addition, I argue that even when the physical home is endangered by gentrification— as Washington Heights currently faces increases in rent prices and an influx of white middle-class residents— dominicanidad can continue to prevail given that it is inherently a *symbolic* recreation of the home. I use Dominican literature of the diaspora to explore the ways in which migrants have protected, and recolectado their interactions with the physical and imaginary spaces both in the island and in the United States.

How Dominicanidad Landed in Washington Heights

Dominicans are one of the groups, besides Puerto Rico, with the largest percentage of migration on the East Coast of the United States. New York City is one the main cities with the highest influx of Dominican migration, especially in areas like the Bronx— which currently

accounts for the highest percentage of Dominicans, standing at 47% of all Dominicans living in the metropolis of New York as of 2019— and Upper Manhattan (Washington Heights) with the second highest being 24% of Dominicans who live in the city of New York. It is important to note that in recent years these numbers have shifted due to rent increases and processes of gentrification occurring in the neighborhood of Washington Heights. For this reason, many Dominicans have moved to different areas of the Bronx.² However, Washington Heights continues to be associated as *la cuna* of Dominican migration and the creation of the home outside of the homeland as we will see throughout this study.³

While previously known as a Jewish neighborhood in the 1970's, as a result of Trujillo's dictatorship (former president of the Dominican Republic), there was a rise of Dominicans moving into the city of New York and specifically to Washington Heights. At that time, this neighborhood was not appealing to many given the rise of gang and drug violence conducted mainly by white gangs. However, in the 1980's dominicanidad was used as a tool to promote local political movements and to improve the lives of those in the neighborhood.⁴ As Snyder explains "Nationalism, and not for the last time, played a strong role in uptown politics".⁵ These events contest notions of citizenship and belonging as Dominicans in the Heights recreated patriotism and nationality as a tool when their political power was limited by legal citizenship.

² Sebastián Villamizar-Santamaría, "The Dominican Population of the New York Metro Region, 1970-2019" (Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies at The Graduate Center, April 7, 2021), <https://clacls.gc.cuny.edu/2021/03/30/dominican-population-in-nyc-after-1980/>.

³ Cuna translates as the cradle, in this context is used to refer to the place of birth or emergence

⁴ See chapter 3 for an expanded historical context of the neighborhood

⁵ Robert W. Snyder, "Sounding the Powers of Place in Neighborhoods: Responses to the Urban Crisis in Washington Heights and New York City." *Journal of Urban History* 46, no. 6 (November 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144217704131>. 1305.

Literature Review

Dominican Migrant Identity

The sole reproduction of Dominicanidad through political power, as seen in the history of this neighborhood, challenges theories of the assimilation/acculturation of Dominicans in the United States and how “americanized” individuals become as a result of migration. I use the word “americanized” or “americanizado” to refer to the notion of acculturation that implies an acquisition of the US culture and an abandonment of the culture of the homeland, which in this case is the Dominican Republic. This acculturation is measured through everything from their ability to speak English, obtain a job, and attend school to the way they dress and which American traditions they adopt.⁶ Sociologist Milton Gordon defined assimilation as “the entrance of the minority group into the social cliques, clubs, and institutions of the core society at the primary group level”. Richard Alba and Victor Nee expand on Gordon’s definition and explain

⁶ Wendy D. Roth, *Race Migrations: Latinos and the Cultural Transformation of Race* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012), <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10553326>. 9; Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman and Edlin Veras, “Out of the Shadows, into the Dark: Ethnoracial Dissonance and Identity Formation among Afro-Latinxs,” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 6, no. 2 (April 1, 2020): 146–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649219829784>.

that it is also a decline in ethnic distinction and a loss of cultural and social differences.⁷ This implies that assimilation becomes the process by which immigrant groups “acclimate” to the United States and begin to lose their cultural ties to their ethnic identities.

While it is important to recognize how immigrants engage with the cultural expectations of the receiving country, scholars such as Wendy Roth remind us that immigrant groups still maintain the social and cultural ties of their home countries. In *Race Migrations*, Roth affirms that:

Puerto Ricans and Dominicans do not simply settle in their host societies through a range of involvements and continued participation in the societies they left behind. The geographic proximity of their home countries to New York, the availability of inexpensive transportation, and improved technology and infrastructure all facilitate back-and-forth movement, frequent communication, and continuing involvement in the political, economic, and civic life of those communities.⁸

Taking these factors on ongoing exchanges in consideration, one can understand the ways acculturation and assimilation are less likely to occur. In this study, I will also be looking at other ways in which Dominicans make meaning of their identity and its reproduction.

The behavior of Dominicans that Snyder talks about and this rejection of Dominicans seeing themselves as now American residents/citizens can be explained through Suzanne Oboler’s theory of cultural citizenship. Suzanne Oboler discusses that:

Latino Immigrants have been redefining belonging in terms of social and cultural rights. And this includes embracing the notion of dual nationality. Without a doubt, Latinos do not feel fully “American” largely because of racialization, the label that separates them from other groups, and, perhaps above all, the permanent perception in US society of their foreignness (Rocco 2006) (123)

⁷ Alba, Richard, and Victor Nee. “Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration.” *The International Migration Review*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1997, pp. 826. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2547416.

⁸ Roth, *Race Migrations*, 9.

Contingent upon this theory and because racial differences and discussions are part of the United States discourse and culture, immigrants' sense of belonging is dependent on their role within that existing system. At the same time, as Oboler points out, regardless of their identification within these categories their dual nationality places them in a position of “foreignness”. In this case, we are not necessarily thinking about dual nationality in terms of legal status but rather dual nationality as individuals whose identity exists in the context of two different nations. Oboler defines cultural citizenship by explaining that “while citizenship may be commonly construed as a legal status, it is, above all, both a political reality and a lived experience” (116). This invites us to question how the lived experience is nurtured through the physical and mental space of Dominicanidad in The Heights.

Scholars have found that for those who migrate, *dominicanidad* becomes a fundamental part of creating a sense of identity. Sociologist Wendy Roth poses the idea that oftentimes Dominican immigrants “do not simply settle in their host society and immerse themselves in a new way of life.” Instead, “they actively link their home and host societies through a range of involvement and continued participation in the societies left behind.” This approach invites us to consider and challenge existing theories of assimilation and/or acculturation and to consider the means by which Dominicans in the diaspora connect with and maintain their dominicanidad in public spaces endangered by processes of gentrification and displacement. Dominicans in the diaspora use dominicanidad to make sense of their identities and experiences, that are not fixed but as Roth explains are “active” and “continued.”

Little Dominican Republic, The Ethnic Enclave

One of the main reasons Washington Heights lends itself to link the Dominican immigrants with their homes is due in part to its nature of being an ethnic enclave. Sociologists Portes and Manning challenge traditional notions of assimilation through their evaluation of ethnic enclaves. By defining ethnic enclaves as sites with large concentrations of particular ethnic groups, they invite us to think about how these sites of large concentrations of immigrants facilitate the distribution of information, social connections, and economic opportunities. More importantly, these are also sites that enable immigrant residents to maintain cultural and linguistic ties. This connection is particularly important because Dominican immigrants are known for their predominance in New York City in areas like Washington Heights and the Bronx. However, the first being one that throughout time became an enclave itself and known as the "Little Dominican Republic" for its richness in culture and commercial mobility. Portes and Manning state that:

Once an enclave economy has fully developed, it is possible for a newcomer to live his life entirely within the confines of the community. Work, education, and access to health care, recreation, and a variety of other services can be found without leaving the bounds of the ethnic economy. This institutional completeness is what enables new immigrants to move ahead economically, despite very limited knowledge of the host culture and language⁹

This idea of institutional completeness is one that I argue plays a role in creating the mental space of dominicanidad for Dominican Immigrants where national ideologies are dispersed in similar ways to those in the homeland. As mentioned before, Roth argues that these new

⁹ Alejandro Portes and Robert D. Manning, *The Immigrant Enclave: Theory and Empirical Examples*, 2008. 63

societies allow them to continuously participate in the societies they left behind through their proximity to the islands, by communicating constantly and by getting themselves involved in the “political, economic, and civic life of those communities”¹⁰ With both of these frameworks in mind and looking specifically at the neighborhood of Washington Heights, one must consider the role of space and place in the creation of this ethnic bubble or enclave. Theories on enclaves allow us to expand Roth’s idea on the ways that Dominicans immigrants are connecting with the ideologies of the island outside recurrent “back-and-forth” communication.

Within sociology the study of neighborhoods goes beyond a historical account of the neighborhood but it is also about the ways in which people within these communities think with and about their own histories in the neighborhood. Snyder proposes that “sometimes the study of a neighborhood will mean looking out to understand how larger forces shape it [...] Sometimes it will require delving into the words, memories, and actions of people who have up to now been invisible to history.”¹¹ Studying a neighborhood, therefore, is getting to know and understanding the histories of people within the neighborhood. That is to say that a neighborhood cannot be understood only by the physical qualities but by the ways in which individuals make meaning and think of their neighborhoods. Snyder later on explains, they are defined by formal and informal practices. Washington Heights, for example, could be defined by the type of businesses within the neighborhood to the places people choose to hang out in, to the meaning that residents and non-residents attach to the space.

Given the importance of meaning to placemaking, it is not surprising that Dominicans in Washington Heights discuss the material and symbolic role that gentrification plays in their

¹⁰ Roth, *Race Migrations*, 9.

¹¹ Snyder, “Sounding the Powers of Place in Neighborhoods,” 1310.

ability to enact Dominicanidad. At first, the purpose of this study was to highlight the ways in which Dominicanidad was recreated by Dominican immigrants in the diaspora. While I knew that there was a rise of gentrification in the neighborhood, after conducting the interviews it became clear to me that gentrification was not an independent factor but that it was entangled with the reproduction of Dominicanidad in the physical space of Washington Heights.

Gentrification is often described as the racialized and capitalist process by which a neighborhood demographic and businesses change. Some of the cases associated with gentrification are the removal via rental increase and eviction of people of a given race or ethnic background and local businesses as the neighborhood begins to acquire capital value¹². As crime in Washington Heights decreased and people gained control over their public spaces, the neighborhood became more appealing to investors and white middle-class groups.¹³ Beyond a site for real estate opportunity as depicted by gentrifiers, Washington Heights is a neighborhood where culture and history are present and alive. While the rise of gentrification in Washington Heights challenges

¹² Zawadi Rucks-Ahidiana, “Theorizing Gentrification as a Process of Racial Capitalism,” *City & Community* 21, no. 3 (September 1, 2022): 173–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/15356841211054790>; Brandi Thompson Summers. “Reclaiming the Chocolate City: Soundscapes of Gentrification and Resistance in Washington, DC.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 39, no. 1 (February 2021): 30–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775820978242> ; Zukin et al. “New Retail Capital and Neighborhood Change: Boutiques and Gentrification in New York City.” *City & Community* 8, no. 1 (March 2009): 47–64. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6040.2009.01269.x>.

¹³ Saltonstall Gus, Investor Buys \$92M Worth Of Washington Heights Buildings: Report,” Washington Heights-Inwood, NY Patch, March 23, 2022, <https://patch.com/new-york/washington-heights-inwood/investor-buys-92m-worth-washington-heights-buildings-report> ; Ortiz, Isabella “Gentrification in Washington Heights,” The Lexington Line, January 5, 2023, <https://www.thelexingtonline.com/blog/2022/12/27/gentrification-in-washington-heights> ; Karin Lipson, “Washington Heights: The ‘Last Bastion of Affordability’ in Manhattan,” *The New York Times*, June 30, 2021, sec. Real Estate, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/30/realestate/washington-heights-last-bastion-of-affordability-manhatta>

the assumed protection that the ethnic enclave of "Little Dominican Republic" provides for Dominican, my study contributes the idea that even when there is gentrification happening within the neighborhood, existing theories of assimilation must account for the fact that Dominican immigrants find ways to continue to reproduce their culture and create their imagined home through their uses of both physical and literary public spaces like parks, plazas, sidewalks and literary fiction.

La dominicanidad desde la literatura

El síntoma de la dominicanidad dentro de la literatura de los Dominicanos en la diáspora es uno que nos permite ver las maneras en que la dominicanidad logra ser recreada sin necesidad de un espacio físico a través de sus textos. Para estos, la literatura se convierte en un medio para no simplemente contar sus experiencias, sino también grabar sus recuerdos y al igual que los dominicanos que viven en el espacio físico de Washington Heights fomentar su conexión personal con la isla. Rubén Sánchez Féliz es uno de los autores dominicanos en la diáspora que pone énfasis en dicha experiencia. En su antología *Viajeros del rocío: 25 narradores dominicanos de la diáspora* este compila una colección de historias ficticias escritas por dominicanos en la diáspora. En esta antología, Sanchez Féliz también utiliza el argumento de Marc Robinson en el texto *Altogether Elsewhere* para explicar que estas hasta cierto punto, sirven como medio de crear “un hogar portátil” para el dominicano que escribe desde el extranjero. Sánchez Féliz concluye su introducción a esta antología diciendo: “Desde el

extranjero, cada quien con su estilo, edifica su “casa” mediante el ejercicio de la escritura. Aquí la palabra escrita pasa a ser el hogar imaginario y, paradójicamente, real del escritor.” Es importante destacar los distintos roles que cumplen “la casa” como el espacio físico, y “el hogar” como un espacio simbólico. No obstante, dentro de la literatura como explica Sánchez Féliz, el escritor no solo tiene control recrear la casa mediante el uso de la descripción de los espacios físicos dentro de la ficción; también logra recrear el “hogar” que representa un sentido de protección y familiaridad para el inmigrante dominicano. Esta es una relación que estaré explorando a través de este proyecto por medio de textos dentro de la diáspora dominicana.

Methodology

Study Overview and Recruitment Strategy

As part of this study, I conducted a qualitative sociological study where I interviewed ten first-generation Dominican immigrants currently living in Washington Heights. Participants were required to be at least 18 years old and to have lived in the Dominican Republic until at least 16 years of age. I decided to focus on this sampling strategy, because I was interested in recruiting participants who had lived a significant portion of their lives in the Dominican Republic, given the fact that they are more likely to have formed their notions of “home” within their experiences living on the island. Researchers such as Cynthia Feliciano have shown that identity formation is more prevalent in the ages of young adolescence.¹⁴ This means that their experiences on the island would also have an impact on their experiences as migrants in the United States.

In November 2022, I began my process of outreach through the use of social media, by sharing flyers with people in the neighborhood, and by approaching people who were using public spaces in the neighborhood of Washington Heights. Once I gathered my initial group of participants I used snowball sampling to gather the remaining participants.

Interviews

After confirming interest, I scheduled 30-45 minute semi-structured interviews that would either happen in person or via zoom call (as a result of the pandemic, I provided participants with the

¹⁴ Feliciano, “Education and Ethnic Identity” 135.

option of a video call interview). Out of all of the interviews only one of them was virtual. The rest of the interviews were conducted in person in semi-private settings like their homes, a restaurant, or in the park. Interviewees were asked a range of questions that covered topics such as migrant stories, experiences in the neighborhood of Washington Heights, experiences in the Dominican Republic, feelings of belonging, use of public spaces, and their notions of nationality and culture. After each interview I transcribed the recordings and to protect the confidentiality of my participants I replaced their names with pseudonyms.

Participants

I conducted a total of ten interviews with individuals. Seven participants identified themselves as women and three identified as men. They ranged in ages from 21 to 71, and 7 out of 10 immigrated to the United States between ages 30-54. On average participants had lived 17.5 years in Washington Heights at the time of the interview. With the exception of one who has lived in Washington Heights for 50 years.

Name	Age	Gender	Arrival in the US	Years Living in Washington Heights
Rosalba	66	Woman	1972	50
Franchesca	50	Woman	1991	31
José	55	Man	2002	20
Mara	71	Woman	2005	18
Pedro	50	Man	2006	16
Inmaculada	63	Woman	2007	17
Solly	44	Woman	2011	11

Rafael	64	Man	2013	10
Yamile	22	Woman	2014	8
Maria Antonia	52	Woman	2001	21

Table 1: This table shows the total number of Dominican immigrants interviewed throughout my study while indicating their years living in the neighborhood. The table also describes their current age, gender, and year they moved to the United States.¹⁵

Data Analysis

When analyzing interviews, I created a coding scheme that focused on emerging themes such as Dominican businesses, knowledge on gentrification, definitions of Dominicanidad, Washington Heights vs other neighborhoods, What is home?, Use of Plazas, Parks and Sidewalks. Using a coding matrix on Excel, I identified relevant quotes from each participant and connected them to the other themes that emerged from the study as well as to existing literature in the sociology of immigration, space and place, and gentrification. When analyzing interviews, I focused on repetition (themes that emerged repeatedly in the data) and salience (the prominence that interviewees gave particular themes).

¹⁵Table showing participants however, names were replaced with pseudonyms so as to protect their identities.

TESTIMONIOS AND LITERATURE AS A SOURCE FOR SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

From a sociological standpoint, Snyder proposes that neighborhoods are “often thought of as sites of direct and immediate experience, but they are also understood indirectly through works of art and literature” (Snyder 1291). Considering this description of neighborhoods, it becomes essential to consider the ways in which sociology and Dominican literature are able to inform one another in the recreation of dominicanidad. Sociologists like Jan Váña have proposed that in fact understanding the social through the literary allows us to develop a deeper understanding of social life. Váña proposes a new sociology of literature in their article “Theorizing the Social Through Literary Fiction: For a New Sociology of Literature” and affirms that novels are often theoretical work, that merges the social experiences that create meaning and a picture of the whole of social life through the use of fiction.¹⁶

¹⁶ Jan Váña, “Theorizing the Social Through Literary Fiction: For a New Sociology of Literature,” *Cultural Sociology* 14, no. 2 (June 1, 2020): 185. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975520922469>.

In this study I use personal accounts of Dominicans immigrants in the diaspora to understand their lived experiences. At the same time, through an analysis of their literary content and form the reader is able to get to know and experience dominicanidad. Váña points out that this use of aesthetic devices in fictional writing allows us to meditate on the social landscape of this experience. Given that there is an often-assumed inferiority of literature within sociological research, like Váña, in this study, I will like to recognize that treat literature as a resource for sociological research is essential, specially when the experiences and social life of the subjects of study are ingrained within the literary text.¹⁷

In literature, personal histories or *testimonios* are seen as essential components that highlight the past, present and future experiences of individuals within society. In terms of Dominican literature the two anthologies that I will be using for this project are *Viajeros del rocío: 25 narradores dominicanos de la diáspora* by Rubén Sánchez Féliz and *Voces de la inmigración: historias y testimonios de mujeres inmigrantes dominicanas* by Mary Ely Peña-Gratereaux. These anthologies make it their mission to collect literature of life and society. In Peña-Gratereaux's introduction she highlights that these “relatos de vida” (accounts of life) are absolutely necessary for the construction of a collective past and for the Dominican immigrant to come to an understanding of their own identity. The author explains that these narratives are composed of common and shared history that is built upon the day-to-day life of a Dominican in the United States.¹⁸ Utilizing these personal accounts and building history within literature for sociological research, this project allows us to identify and analyze spaces within literature

¹⁷ Váña, *Social Through Literary Fiction*, 182

¹⁸ Mary Ely Peña-Gratereaux, *Voces de la inmigración: Historias Y Testimonios de Mujeres Inmigrantes Dominicanas* (New York: Cayena Publications, 2007), 17.

where dominicanidad in the diaspora can prevail, and be recorded through literary production and cultural recreation.

Un Joyero en Nueva York

Gualey tiene su grupo,
Ciruelitos tiene un grupo,
Camboya tiene un grupo,
Los Salados tiene un grupo,
La Joya tiene un grupo,
Los Pepines tienen un grupo,
Pueblo Nuevo, tiene su grupo y así sucesivamente.

Se le ve por arriba el tigueraje, la cosa
Sentadito con su sillita,
bebiendo,
hablando.

Usted es dominicano.
No deja las raíces autónomas de su país
Por más lejos que esté.

EL OCIO Y LA RECREACIÓN DE LA DOMINICANIDAD

Two spaces that showcase Dominicanidad in the neighborhood of Washington Heights are J. Hood Wright Park and Plaza de las Americas. In this chapter, I will be exploring how *Dominicanidad* is made and maintained in these spaces, as well as assessing the physical and symbolic elements that contribute to this recreation. I use Gieryn's ideas on meaning and placemaking to highlight the participation of Dominicans in meaning making and its contribution to providing a sense of belonging that challenges theories of assimilation even in rapidly gentrifying spaces. The sociologist explains that: "Meanings that individuals and groups assign to places are more or less embedded in historically contingent and shared cultural understanding or the terrain— sustained by diverse images through which we see and remember cities."¹⁹ I suggest that study participants remake their memories of home in the Dominican Republic through their use of and insistence on making Dominicanidad visible in public parks and plazas. It is within this perspective or lens that the symbolic spaces of Dominicanidad take life.

¹⁹ Gieryn, "A Space for Place in Sociology," 473.

J. Hood Wright Park

Public parks (specifically the access to them) are known to be one of the determinants of physical and mental health outcomes in neighborhoods. Research also suggests there is often a disparity in the access that Latinx neighborhoods have to public parks. A lack of access to parks leads to poor mental and physical health outcomes.²⁰ If we think about the activities that happen in a park (forms of physical activity, relaxation, picnic, gatherings) it makes sense that access to parks provide these health benefits.

But what exactly do Dominican immigrants do in J.Hood Wright Park? Some of the main activities that my participants mentioned were playing dominoes, taking the kids to the playground, hanging out, and celebrating birthdays. J. Hood Wright, better known by Dominicans in the area as “El parque de la 173 y Fort Washington,” is a small, yet highly frequented park that, for Dominican immigrants, provides a space for more than just recreation. This park has playgrounds, picnic areas, dog parks, and a basketball and volleyball court. But what about this particular park is important as opposed to other parks in the neighborhood like Fort Tryon, Bennett, and Highbridge? One of the main things is its central location right at the heart of Washington Heights and its proximity to the main avenues like Broadway and St.Nicholas. This is where Dominicans are densely concentrated (see figure 1 below). Another important characteristic is that this park is bounded by masonry that provides an enclosed feeling and creates a more intimate experience. While conducting interviews six out of ten participants mentioned this park as one of the places they frequented especially in the summer season.

²⁰ García, Jennifer J, Gilbert C. Gee, and Malia Jones. “A Critical Race Theory Analysis Of Public Park Features In Latino Immigrant Neighborhoods.” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 13, no. 2 (2016): 397–411. doi:10.1017/S1742058X16000187.

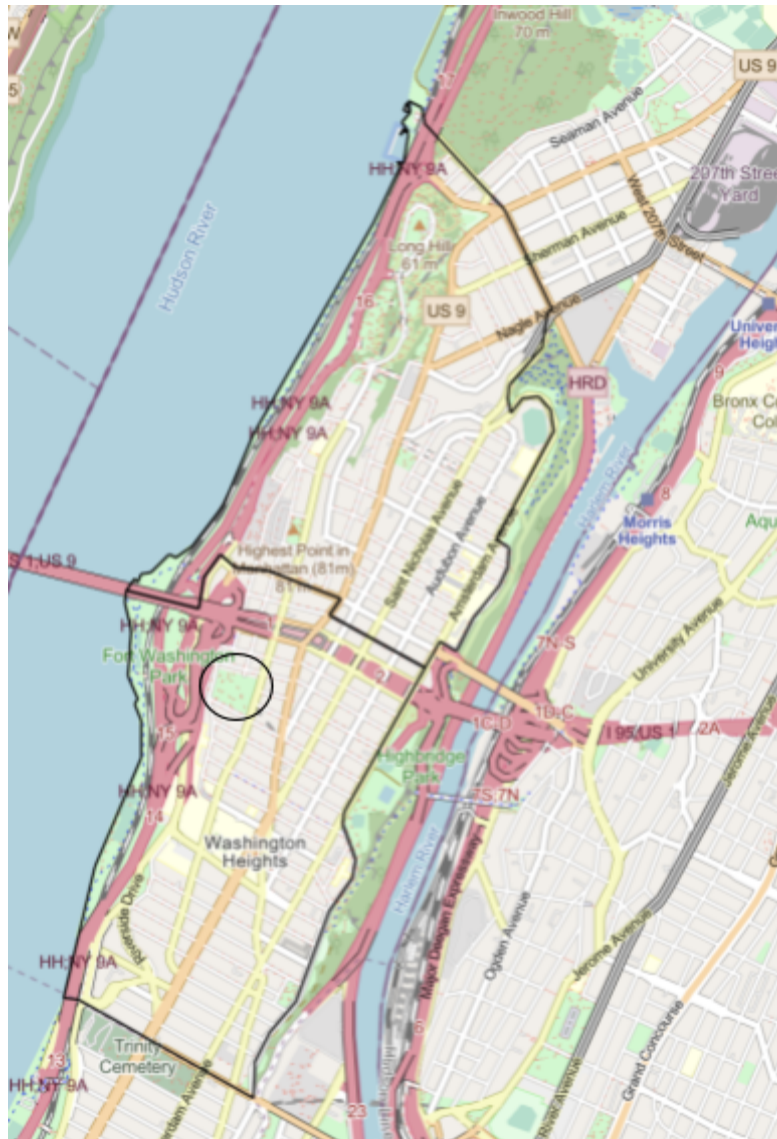


Figure 1. Boundaries of Washington Heights²¹

Perpetuating Comfort through Meaning-Making

However, for some participants, the significance of the park was not about the physicality of the space or the mere fact that it was a park, but about both bringing in aspects of *Dominicanidad* and gaining comfort through belonging. Time and time again, participants communicated that this park is charged with meaning that Dominican social actors bring through their individual and

²¹ Circle represents J. Hood Wright Park. Source: U.S. Census Bureau *American Community Survey (ACS) 2017-2021 5-year estimates*, Table(s) B03002

collective interactions. Take the case of Yamile (20) for example, who makes the comparison between J. Hood Wright park and Fort Tryon Park and describes it in the following way:

Porque la vibra que tu encuentras te hace sentir como que tu estas en DR, como por ejemplo en el verano: la música, la gente que tu te encuentras, el ambiente que hacen. En cuanto a sentirme como que estoy en DR me gusta el de Fort Washington, el de la 174, en cuanto como para yo ir a relajarme y que sea un poquito más calmado me gusta el de Fort Tryon, el que está por la 190 y algo. Al de Fort Tryon tu vas a encontrar a más personas de aquí, más americanos, tu vas a encontrar más mezclas y menos dominicanos. Es super callado y la mayoría son personas de aquí, que no son dominicanos [sic] lo que buscan es un lugar donde no escuchen bulla, que no lo molesten.

In this description, Yamile is associating each park with a different “feeling” or sensation. The idea of the imagined place comes into the picture when she makes the comparison of one physical place providing the feeling of another one that is very distant and probably physically distinct as well. Gieryn’s argument on meaning can help us understand how the distinctions that Yamile makes are not just about the way that she feels but also about the meaning or sense of place assigned to each of these spaces and how it brings her memories of home

Some of the components that Yamile highlights as essential parts of this produced feeling are music, the people you find, and the ambiance that they produce. Beyond music “the loudness” or “la bulla” take part in the recreation of the imagined home by mimicking the ambiance of public spaces in the mainland. At the same time, the idea of the “hacer” which directly translates to “do” implies an active recreation of both the physical and symbolic space of the Dominican Republic in the parks of Washington Heights. It is also important to note that she is creating a distinction of ambiance on the basis of who frequents the parks and what they look for in that space. Yamile especially highlights that in Fort Tryon Park, “los americanos” do not like “la bulla” which translates to noise. This example shows the different representations of how one uses spaces like parks. At the same time, it demonstrates how through meaning-making they

are creating a relationship to these physical spaces where they find comfort in. The meaning they attach to the park invites them to continue to come, and as a result continue to reproduce Dominicanidad and define J Hood Wright Park as a Dominican space.

As previously mentioned, there is a tight connection between the “feeling” that the park provides and the experience of the Dominican Immigrant in it. This invites us to consider the connection between the place and the mental space of Dominicans in Washington Heights. By being able to be in an environment where people play Dominoes, where others talk about Dominican politics and anecdotes they are able to continue recreating the collective identity. I use the idea of “collective identity” to refer to the ways in which individuals are able to find points that connect them with each other, as well as with the Dominican Republic. Some of these notions of collective identity also grow through the continuous participation of people from the Dominican Republic in the park, Rafael explains that the majority of people who visit the park are Dominicans and that in this park “Hay más Dominicano que en otro sitio” highlighting the predominance of Dominicans over other places/parks.

Yamile mentions that in Fort Tryon Park “tu mas estas en lo tuyo, tu no vas a interactuar con las personas” everyone goes to do their own thing, which results in the opposite dynamic and leads more to individualism. Although many of these experiences go beyond the physicality of the space, it is also important to understand how location plays a role in who is taking control of the symbolic space. Besides it being a much bigger park, the areas surrounding the park have a high volume of white non-hispanic people, predominantly Jewish (see figure 2 below).



Figure 2. Population broken down by race and Hispanic origin. Parks mentioned are circled.²²

Botar el Golpe

For Dominicans such as José (55), this park is a place of gathering and talking or as he says “un lugar de hacer encuentros [...] hacer anécdotas de República Dominicana, contar vivencias, ese tipo de cosas.” Similarly, Yamile later explained that for older generations, the park is also a place to talk and discuss Dominican politics “entre ellos mismos” (amongst

²² U.S. Census Bureau *American Community Survey (ACS) 2017-2021 5-year estimates*, Table(s) B03002 <https://bard.maps.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=e6d218a8ba764a939c2add5c081beef9>

themselves). The use of the double plurality invites us to consider how these conversations are creating a sense of belonging and collective identity in parks. By coming to the park participants shared that they were able to foster parts of their identity due to the nature of what is actually happening at the park. In this park they play traditional games like dominó, some are discussing dominican politics, while others are hosting family celebrations, they are seeing each other enjoy their own versions of Dominicanidad. Their ability to talk to each other is not just about being able to connect with people like you, but being able to put at the center elements that are crucial to Dominican culture. One of the main reasons this comparison is interesting is because another participant, Rafael (64), demonstrates that this is not because all Dominicans participate in these conversations:

Bueno, van, no, en el parque van diferentes personas, van personas que no le gusta mucho hablar, van que van a hacer es jugar dominó, así, pero yo solamente voy a chequear y a despejar un poquito la mente

In his case, he goes to “check the place out” and “despejar la mente” (clear his mind). His connection with the place was something that allowed him to clear his mind. As such, it provides him with some of the mental health benefits that research demonstrates emerge from proximity to public parks. Thus, even when Dominicans are not participating actively in the recreation of the home through the reproduction of culture, they are able to connect with the mental and symbolic place of Dominicanidad. In this case, they feel comfort and relaxation because it transports them to the physical home: The Dominican Republic. They feel comfortable because it is familiar to them, familiarity of their culture allows them to be in an environment that is not judgemental and you are embraced by those around you. Rafael’s example, also points out a very important factor which is that there is room for individuality within the collectiveness of

Dominicanidad. For many like Rafael it is not about having to like the same activities, but about being in space that reminds you of the home.

Rompiendo esquemas en Plaza Las Américas



Figure 3. Washington Heights, Map Extracted from Google Maps²³

Up until 2015, Plaza de las Americas “was designed to enhance the market, providing vendors with access to electrical power and water for the first time since they started assembling in 1994”. This plaza is located on 175th Street between Wadsworth Ave. and Broadway (see figure below for reference). However, in 2015 it was renovated by the New York City Department of Design and Construction (DCC) as a space to provide cultural and economic life for the neighborhood. “Now, the vendors and community will have multiple amenities, including

²³ “175th Street, Washington Heights, NY,” Google Maps, accessed February 24, 2023
<https://www.google.com/maps/place/W+175th+St.+New+York.+NY+10033/>

pedestrian lighting and benches, trees, decorative paving, a storage/utility column, an automatic public toilet, and a fountain.”²⁴ It is also imperative to know who was behind the creation of this plaza, as one of the commissioners for the design and construction of this park was the Dominican Immigrant engineer Feniosky Peña-Mora. According to the DCC, this space was designed after conducting surveys and interviews with members of the community of Washington Heights. During the ribbon cutting ceremony alongside Peña-Mora was US senator Adriano Espalliat who is also a Dominican Immigrant. This was a marking point in Washington Heights history given that this plaza was not only a space dedicated to the community but that it was also a sign of support from Dominicans in positions of leadership. The renovation of the physical space formalized community events that were organically happening there. Following Gieryn’s concept of placemaking, in this case, Plaza de las Americas was designed to enhance the imageability of *dominicanidad*.²⁵

²⁴ New York City Department of Design and Construction. “A New Town Square for Washington Heights with Plaza de Las Americas,” November 23, 2015.

<https://www.nyc.gov/site/ddc/about/news-archive/news-ribbon-la-plaza.page>.

²⁵ Gieryn “A Space for Place in Sociology,” 472.

Displaying Dominicanidad



Figure 4. Plaza de las Americas, Photo by José A. Alvarado Jr (<https://www.nycgo.com>)

Given that I moved to Washington Heights in 2016, for me this physical space has always been a symbol of Dominican Culture. I remember working at the supermarket next to the plaza and having the urge to go outside and join community members dancing, listening to music and just enjoying each other's company. While you can find Dominicans in Plaza las Americas everyday, summer weekends have always been my favorite. The plaza gets so full that even the sidewalks around it start to blend in with this space. The center of the plaza becomes the center and stage for those who want to dance and perform, and those in the surrounding serve the role of the

audience. Through these exchanges Dominicans continue to nurture each other and become active participants in assigning meaning to Plaza de las Americas.

When asking participants the reasons why they frequented the plaza, there was a pattern in the type of words they were choosing to describe their experiences. Participants used words like “distrae” (it distracts), “el estrés se olvida” (you forget the stress), “tu tumbas” (you throw), “es terapia” (its therapy), all of these words connect in the sense of stepping away or trying to compensate for an alternate reality. For José, for example, describes Plaza de las Americas in the following way:

...aquí a la placita, lo que tú vienes a disfrutar de la música. Muchos vienen a beber una cerveza, a pasar el momento [...] *Es algo refrescante, porque tú tumba, lo que es el esquema de vida de New York que tú sabes que esto es un día a día. Son cinco días de trabajo, seis días de trabajo, de los cuales tú solamente ves el trabajo y las cuatro paredes de la casa. Luego cuando tú sales a un espacio donde tú no ves ese entorno, tú te sientes en otro mundo.*

In this case, José makes note of the lifestyle of New York City and describes it as a “esquema” (or schema) referring to the rigid structure and the work focus of this society. This further emphasized Wendy Roth’s idea that immigrants, in this case Dominican immigrants, do not necessarily adapt to their host societies but rather participate in spaces where they can connect with their homeland.²⁶ José also explains that Plaza de las Americas erases that schema and makes one feel like in an alternative world. This reference to feeling “en otro mundo” highlights the idea that place can both have a physicality and be artificial or come upon²⁷. In this case, the space serves the purpose of distracting, healing, and connecting. This creation or imagination of the home is not possible, however, without the ongoing participation of Dominicans in the

²⁶ Roth, *Race Migrations*, 9.

²⁷ Gieryn, “A Space for Place in Sociology,” 465.

neighborhood. In fact, for two of my participants, Rosalba and Pedro, visiting the plaza is part of their everyday life. Rosalba, who is unable to work due to her disability, said that she comes to the plaza daily:

Diario, diario, dependiendo de la temperatura, en el verano todos los días sí. Pero nosotros, aquí, está lloviendo, estamos..., nos ponemos ahí del lado del teatro cuando está lloviendo, o del lado del supermercado, de este lado nos sentamos como los días como hoy, que ha llegado como un solecito. Así, porque aquel lado es más frío.

Through her explanations, Rosalba shows that this space is frequented by her and her friend group even through cold temperatures. She also shows that they are experts at using the space regardless of the weather, given the benefits that they gain from frequenting the space. This need to use the plaza and find ways to decompress is particularly relevant given that Dominicans, who mostly live on the east side of the neighborhood, are more likely to be living through

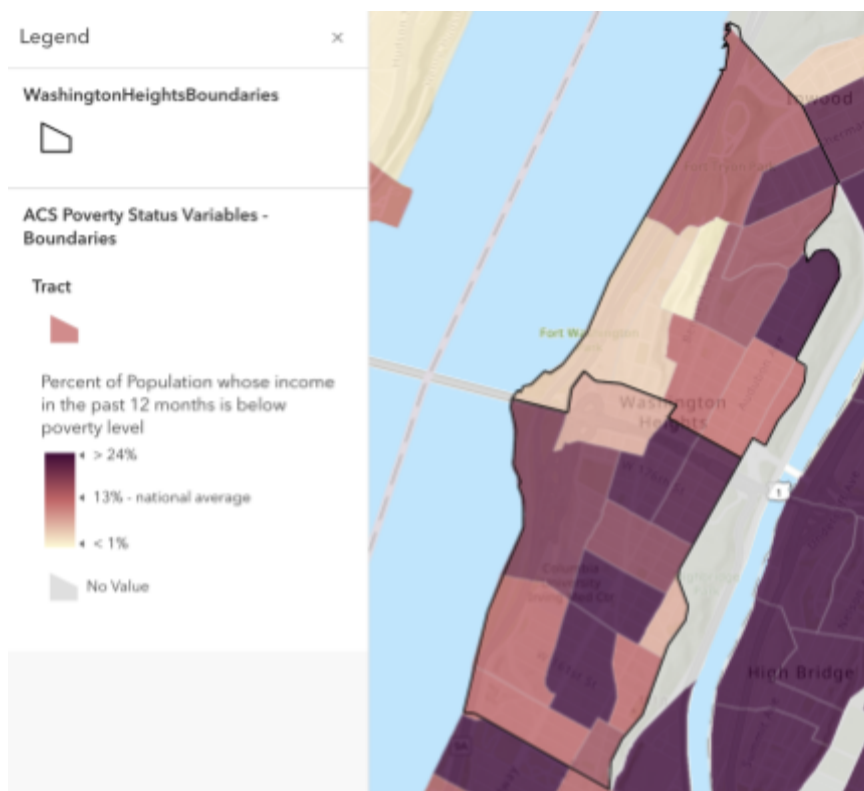


Figure 5. ACS Poverty Status Variables in Washington Heights

poverty. Thus finding community and joy in the park, becomes an important way for them to escape this reality through their interactions with these spaces (refer to figure 4 above)²⁸. This helps us really grasp the importance of *la plaza* for some Dominican immigrants in the area.

Cultural Actors

What factors attract people to the plaza, and what activities take place there? Rafael helps us answer these questions through his motive for visiting the space:

En verano yo frecuento mucho porque hacen mucha actividad de la comunidad, mucho artista, bailes, rifas. Y uno interrelaciona con las personas. Bueno, me siento de una forma más como que relax. Porque en esa plaza uno, como que la mente, uno la distrae en otras cosas que no son los quehacer de trabajo. De trabajo y esas cosas. O sea, es totalmente diferente. Como que la mente se le transforma a uno, en diversión y tranquilidad.

Rafael helps us understand how music (singing, dancing, and watching performances) are central to the dynamics of this plaza. Similar to José, Rafael describes his experience at Plaza de las Americas as a place where one's mind transforms. Highlighting the symbolic and emotional aspect of visiting the plaza. Rafael also highlights the point that there are also community organizations using this space to connect with their desired audience. This enhances the value of the space not only as a space where the mind relaxes and connects with the homeland, but also as a space to connect with the community.

Age was another important factor that came up during the interviews. José explains that although adult and older generations are the ones who visit the park the most, they also interact with younger generations who come to dance and enjoy the activities in the space. This space

²⁸ U.S. Census Bureau *American Community Survey (ACS) 2017-2021 5-year estimates*, Table(s) B03002 ; C17002

<https://bard.maps.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=e6d218a8ba764a939c2add5c081beef9>

then serves not only to create a feeling of home, but also as an intergenerational space that maintains Dominicanidad and Dominican culture among older and newer groups of Dominican residents.

Creating the Symbolic Home through Recreational Spaces

The emotional and mental connections to the space described in the sections above can be interpreted through Gieryn's idea of place attachments. He defines this as:

Place attachments result from accumulated biographical experiences: we associate places with the fulfilling, terrifying, traumatic, triumphant, secret events that happened to us personally there [...] place attachment results from interactive and culturally shared processes of endowing rooms or buildings or neighborhoods with an emotional meaning.
29

The attachment of many Dominicans to spaces like the J. Hood Wright Park and Plaza de las Americas can be a result of the emotional relief that they explained throughout the interviews when describing these spaces. At the same time, these spaces signify a connection to their cultural traditions like playing dominó, dancing merengue or traditional music. José explains that for him, Plaza de las Americas is also a form of therapy:

Es un sitio para ya la gente de edad, como de terapia. De terapia, porque tú por lo menos, tu abuela, en que tu estas, vamos pa' el parque. Ven a ver que es que está bailando, que la música, que se para a bailar, se va con esa satisfacción contenta el estrés que tenía, o el pensamiento, se le olvida porque ya está esperando que llegue el próximo domingo. Si tú estás aquí, este verano, después que te hagas profesional, presentes tu tesis tú viene a ver y dices, mira qué bien, aparecen gente que nunca salen a bailar. Vienen a este sitio y dices mira que bien y empiezan a bailar. Al no saber merengue, que es la música autóctona de nosotros, empiezan a brincar. Y uno la pasa bien, porque el que viene se ríe, es la mejor terapia que hay.

José also adds that this plaza allows people to forget about stress and bad thoughts as they are now looking forward to coming back to the plaza the following Sunday.³⁰ José shows that even

²⁹ Gieryn, "A Space for Place in Sociology," 481

³⁰ When temperatures are warmer, Sundays are the days that people visit the plaza the most, as well as the designated days for community events, and performances.

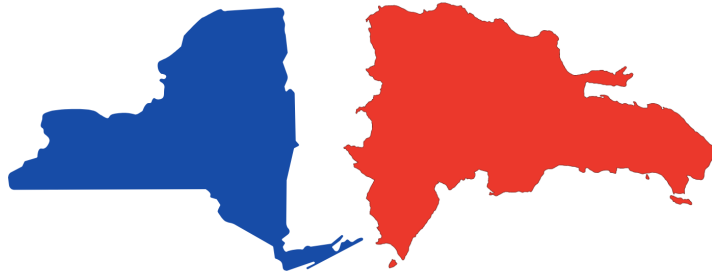
when outsiders (those who are not Dominican) come into the spaces, it does not take away from their culture, but rather becomes an additional form of entertainment and laughter.

It is important to highlight that both Rafael and José point out that the summer is when people visit the plaza the most. This was a shared experience across all participants. They explained that Washington Heights “felt” the most like the Dominican Republic in the Summer season, because the weather allows everyone to be outside. Putting into question how the use of public spaces is central to the Dominican Identity.

In this chapter, I discussed the ways in which Dominicanidad was created and reproduced within physical spaces like parks and community plazas. Both of these spaces have different physical characteristics that allow them to be used in different ways. For example, J. Hood Wright Park is much bigger than Plaza las Américas, which allows for there to be different kinds of activities to be happening at the same time, this opens the opportunity for there to be more individual representation of *Dominicanidad*. It also allows individuals to use the space for their own enjoyment like hosting family gatherings and birthday parties. As opposed to other parks, the associations of it as a Dominican space that are a result of meaning making allows individuals to feel comfortable showcasing their culture as they please in family gatherings (playing cultural music, dancing, and exercising traditions). On the other hand, while Plaza las Américas is much smaller in size, it is this same characteristic that allows individuals to take on more active and defined roles in the recreation of Dominicanidad. The plaza, which from its inception has maintained close ties to the Dominican community, enables Dominican visitors to take on the role of entertainers (vía dancing, singing, performing) and spectators who get to enjoy the enactment of Dominicanidad. Another important feature of this space is the open floor

planification of the space. Given that it was built in between avenues, pedestrians have to pass through and by the plaza in order to get to their destination, making *Dominicanidad* more visible. As shown in this chapter, both of these spaces continue to serve as a reminder of the home.

Espejo Atlántico



Tanto y tanto dominicano, no había
Se acostumbra a la dominicana.
Porque aquí todo lo que tú hagas es
un restaurante dominicano,
música dominicana,
discoteca dominicana.

Entonces uno tiene la confianza de decirle la cosa a ellos
y que ellos le busquen la comodidad a uno
porque son de su país.

La mente se le transforma
aún en más visión y tranquilidad
del lado del supermercado,
de este lado,
nos sentamos como los días como hoy,
porque aquel lado es más frío.

LAS ACERAS Y LA RECREACIÓN DE LA DOMINICANIDAD

In addition to studying defined public spaces like J. Wright Hood park and Plaza de las Americas, it is important that we also consider more informal yet very present spaces like sidewalks in Washington Heights. While the immediate goal of sidewalks is to make cities walkable and allow pedestrian flow in urban areas. I will also be using the Spanish term “La Acera” to mean sidewalks; while it is the direct translation, it is important to note that for Dominicans the idea of “La Acera” goes beyond a path for pedestrian transit. A belief shared by other social scientists like Annette M. Kim who explain that “as cities grow or economies slow, more people turn to the use of sidewalk space to make a living while, at the same time, more turn to them to recreate in the city”.³¹ In fact, in Washington Heights sidewalks play a much more active role in the recreation of Dominicanidad. In this project I will define sidewalks as open spaces that people use for transiting, gathering, work, and buying or selling goods. I will also

³¹ Annette M. Kim, “The Mixed-Use Sidewalk: Vending and Property Rights in Public Space.” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 78, no. 3 (July 2012), 226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2012.715504>.

make reference to La Acera as a vehicle to seeing businesses that cater to Dominicanidad, either through food or services like hair shops. In this chapter, I will be looking at the ways in which Dominicanidad becomes visible in the streets of Washington Heights, specifically examining the role of local businesses, street vendors, and the people themselves in sidewalks.

Ethnic Enclaves

The fact that this neighborhood is predominantly Dominican allows them to set unsaid norms on how they will be using the space and what they are okay with seeing as they walk down the streets of neighborhoods. This dynamic is one that draws Dominicans to move to the space as they are able to replicate many of their cultural practices from the island, making it feel like home. A participant who helps us understand how his preference of Washington Heights over other neighborhoods relates to his pedestrian experience and what he is able to see:

Llegué aquí porque tenía personas que conocía y los trabajos me eran más factible hacerlo desde aquí que en New Jersey. Porque la población aquí de Washington es más de dominicanos. En New Jersey, era peruano. Hondureños. Había esa diversidad y me era más difícil [...] aquí todo lo que tú hagas es un restaurante dominicano, música dominicana, discoteca dominicana.

José compares the place he originally arrived to when he came to the United States in New Jersey, and explains that for him being in a diverse community was challenging. However, he decided to move to Washington Heights because of the familiarity it provided. Some of the reminders of home he mentioned were Dominican restaurants, music, and clubs in the neighborhood. José's experience is key as it highlights the benefits associated with ethnic enclaves that Portes and Manning point out "Once an enclave economy has fully developed, it is

possible for a newcomer to live his life entirely within the confines of the community.”³² In Washington Heights José is able to live his life entirely by being able to walk down the street and see Dominican restaurants, music, and clubs.

While this is José description of “Little Dominican Republic” is one where in his words “todo lo que ves es dominicano” (everything you see is dominican), Pedro notes that when he first moved to Washington Heights it was odd to see people eating rice, but you were more likely to find more american meals in local restaurants:

“Era raro que tú viera una gente comiendo arroz, en los restaurante lo que había era papa frita. Aquí era cafeterías, tu iba a comerte unas tostadas y un sandwichito. Un McDonald con un café con leche. Ya todo eso se ha ido... tú allí te vas a comer, principalmente el mangú.

Pedro highlights the differences between the previous Washington Heights vs the accessibility that Dominicans and people of other national/ethnic backgrounds have to traditional Dominican food like rice and beans and mangú (mashed plantains). This is important as it shows the ways in which this ethnic enclave has been able to grow and make space for the things that people in the neighborhood value like food. Rosalba, who has lived in the neighborhood since the 1960s, also highlights this difference but also highlights when and how the neighborhood starts to change:

Rosalba: Bueno, no había tanto y tanto hispanos como lo habemos ahora, principalmente dominicanos. Eran más bien este puertorriqueños, morenos, pero tanto y tanto dominicanos no había

Interviewer: ¿Y cuándo usted cree que empiezan los dominicanos a venir para acá?

Rosalba: Yo diría que a partir del año, después del 77

Interviewer: ¿Y en qué año más o menos, en qué tiempo usted cree que empieza a llegar, como eso de usted ver más negocio dominicano?

Interviewer: Eso empezó como del 75 para allá.

³² Portes and Manning, *The Immigrant Enclave*, 63.

Rosalba explains that the minorities that lived in the neighborhood were predominantly Puerto Ricans and “morenos,” a word used by many Dominicans to refer to African Americans. She also highlights that Dominican businesses as well as a higher influx of Dominican Immigrants started arriving in the late 1970’s.

Besides an increase in Hispanic and Dominican people in the area, What else is different in *las aceras* of Washington Heights? Rosalba goes on to describe what she started to see more of:

No había nada de eso, eso no se veía dique habichuela con dulce. Ahora hay más, claro O sea, la persona tiene más medios para ganarse la vida, antes no se veían tantas personas vendiendo comida en la calle, así, eso no se veía tanto.

She also says that before you would not see as many street vendors of things like “habichuela con leche,” a traditional dominican dessert.³³ Rosalba notes that street food vendors became more popular as more Dominicans moved to the area. In fact, researchers like Annetter McKim explain that “sidewalk vending is usually associated with immigrant and lower-income populations”.³⁴ Similarly Franchesca, who has lived in Washington Heights since 1991, and who was a street vendor of dulces de batata y coco (coconut and sweet potato desserts) herself, explained that in two to three hours she would sell all of her supply, because Dominicans loved buying cultural foods. Street vendors are an interesting phenomena in Washington Heights as they represent a use of *La Acera* that is very similar to Dominican traditions of having informal stands in the street. As a result *La Acera* provides a space for those who as Rosalba says “la persona tiene más medio para ganarse la vida.” The existence of street vendors not only

³³ Today Habichuela con Dulce stands are very famous in the neighborhood especially in streets like 181st in Washington Heights.

³⁴Kim, “The Mixed-Use Sidewalk,” 226.

emphasizes Portes and Manning's idea of being able to work within ethnic enclaves but they also serve as a visual reminder of individuals' connection to Dominican culture. Reminders of Dominicanidad are important as they contribute to the imagination of Washington Heights as the second home in "Little Dominican Republic."

When I asked Franchesca about a place in Washington Heights that seemed central to Dominicanidad she chose 181st street. She explains that it's due to being able to find everything a Dominican might need here:

Para una gente que no conoce la 181. Están todas las cosas que son dominicanas y consigue la habichuela dulce y el maíz caqueao. Todos los supermercados, están la farmacia que hay en la 181. Hasta tiene el nombre de Juan Pablo Duarte. Sí, de Juan Pablo Duarte, tú sabes, ahí, ahí está todo lo Dominicano, ahí tú lo encuentras. O sea que no sabe dónde está la 181 no ha venido a Nueva York, no conoce Nueva York.

As Franchesca explains, Dominicanidad is very visible in 181st through food vendors, businesses, and even and most importantly the name of the Street. Juan Pablo Duarte is one of the founding fathers of the Dominican Republic, the fact that this street was named after him is almost symbolic of *la patria* or the Dominican nation. This further emphasizes Suzanne Oboler's idea of citizenship within Washington Heights "while citizenship may be commonly construed as a legal status, it is, above all, both a political reality and a lived experience [...] Citizenship is a lived experience, grounded in the negotiated participation of all groups, of all sectors and individuals within the community."³⁵ In this case their lived experience in 181st is not only emphasizing a deep connection to Dominican citizenship, but it is also creating lived experiences

³⁵Suzanne Oboler, "Citizenship and Belonging: The Construction of US Latino Identity Today," *Iberoamericana* (2001-) 7, no. 25 (2007): 115–27.

of Dominicanidad through the continuous participation in the recreation of cultural spaces and practices like buying maíz caqueo in the street.

It is important to highlight and separate the different types of cultural reproduction that businesses have in Washington Heights depending on how formal or informal they are. For example, many big cultural restaurants like El Malecon Restaurant, while they cater to the community, have been able to gain popularity for non-residents of Washington Heights, changing the dynamics and branding of the restaurant. Whereas street vendors are more local based and cater to a Dominican audience. In recent years, restaurants like *Jalao* have opened their doors in Washington Heights, and are known for their traditional Dominican cuisine and their chic ambiance. However, given the high prices of this restaurant and the presentation of simple soul foods as exotic or eccentric, one must question if they contribute to meaning making in the same way that informal businesses like street vendors do. In terms of assimilation theories, one could argue that these high profile businesses represent a reproduction of culture that adapts to its American audience by shifting the cultural context in which these foods are consumed. Whereas, street vendors become disruptive of assimilation by reproducing culture in an informal, less surveilled way.

Memorias de la acera en RD

The cultural trait of utilizing public navigating public spaces like aceras rather than sidewalks becomes replicated in Washington Heights, where the majority of the population is Dominican. It is important to understand the ways in which aceras are used in the Dominican Republic, as someone who grew up in the Dominican Republic I can testify for the many experiences I have

had in the sidewalks that did not gain meaning until the creation of this project. I grew up seeing neighbors gather outside in las aceras in white plastic chairs, and birthday parties that took over the whole street. I grew up seeing my brother play *vitilla* and *taní* with the kids from the neighborhood. I also remember buying *pastelitos* from *páte* (who had a whole business selling from his shopping cart) at the end of my school day. I remember buying *esquimalitos* and *frío fríos*, and being able to get *manzanas de oro* at any corner or stoplight. You can find some visual examples in the collection of images below (see figure 6). Looking now from the outside of these experiences, sidewalks were and continue to be a space where cultural elements of the Dominican Republic can gain light.



Figure 6. Images were extracted from different sources. See citation in footnotes³⁶

³⁶ Figure 6. Massiel Genao, “Ciudadanos consideran innecesario militarizar barrios por toque de queda,” *Proceso.com.do*, April 1, 2020.

Belonging and Safety

As seen in sections above, there is often a replication of the Dominican traditions of using sidewalks in Washington Heights. However, one must dive deeper into the implications of this recreation. Even if spaces are not inherently Dominican or for public use, the participants in this study show how the visibility of Dominicanidad provides a sense of belonging and comfort for Dominican Immigrants. While small chain supermarkets are not inherently Dominican, given that some of these spaces are owned by non-dominicans, they often carry Dominican products and offer visual reminders of *Dominicanidad*. Maria Antonia is a participant for whom visibility and representation of Dominicanidad is key:

Bueno, a mí me gusta la tienda [...] uno se siente un poquito diferente porque sabes que cuando uno va a comprar algo, le gustaría a uno saber y decirle mira, ¿qué tú crees? ¿Cuál crees que me sale mejor? ¿Cuál se ve mejor? ¿Cuál sale más económica? Entonces uno tiene la confianza de decirle la cosa a ellos y que ellos les buscan la comodidad a uno porque son de su país. Y sí, le gustaría siempre cuando uno va a un sitio que haya dominicanos, que haya gente que uno pueda hablar y pedirle una opinión.

Maria Antonia explains that given that her hobby is shopping, she likes the ability to have someone like her in the shops because it provides her a sense of trust and familiarity. She is able

<https://proceso.com.do/2020/04/01/ciudadanos-consideran-innecesario-militarizar-barrrios-por-to-que-de-queda/> ; “Prohíben instalar piscinas improvisadas en las calles de Santo Domingo Este durante Semana Santa,” *El Veedor Digital* (blog), March 29, 2021, <https://elveedordigital.com/prohiben-instalar-piscinas-improvisadas-en-las-calles-de-santo-domingo-este-durante-semana-santa/> ; [4K] *Tour: BARRIO LOS PRADITOS, Santo Domingo, 2022*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkAb20XJ4vk> ; Tigres del Licey [@TigresdelLicey], “He Didn’t Learn with Us but He’s a Tiger,” Tweet, *Twitter*, September 12, 2020, <https://twitter.com/TigresdelLicey/status/1304785817076985856>.

to find connections with the employees. In this way, for Maria Antonia the ideal shopping experience in Washington Heights involves the participation of fellow Dominicans. At the same time, research shows that people of color often face negative experiences when shopping in places where the majority of the staff is of another race, this is due to the existing stereotypes of Black and brown people and the criminalization of their identities.³⁷ Shopping in a place where people treat you like “one of them” provides comfort and allows Dominicans to enjoy leisure activities. Later on in the interview she also mentions that she also likes being able to find Dominican food items in grocery stores and bodegas, she explains that thankfully “aquí venden muchas cosas diferentes. Ya esto casi en todo el sitio que usted va a encontrar cosas dominicanas.” She is able to find items that exist within Dominican gastronomy everywhere in Washington Heights, similar to what Rosalba and Pedro describe when they talk about the visibility of food in the neighborhood. Maria Antonia explains that even though she sometimes likes to try new stores to buy food in “uno vuelve otra vez a ir allá” (we go back once again). Stepping outside of the simple idea that she enjoys familiarity, Maria Antonia’s experience reflects Roth’s idea that Dominican Immigrants do not fully assimilate to American culture. However, Maria Antonia continues to go back to Dominicanidad through the things that she is able to see and find in the streets of Washington Heights. This action allows us to expand and challenge Roth's position by examining the ways in which the connection to *Dominicanidad* is done through the use of spaces in Washington Heights, rather than by direct communication with people in the island.

³⁷ Cassi Pittman, “‘Shopping While Black’: Black Consumers’ Management of Racial Stigma and Racial Profiling in Retail Settings,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 20, no. 1 (February 1, 2020): 3–22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540517717777>.

Yamile explains that people's use of sidewalks for non-business purposes becomes more visible during the summer months. She says that in winter months you are more likely to see people selling and transiting the streets but in the summer is the opposite "obviamente, en el verano todo va en contra, como un grupo de personas sentado al frente de una acera. Bebiendo. Sí, sentadito con su sillita, bebiendo, hablando." It is important to highlight that, as mentioned before, people in the neighborhood use the sidewalk in a very different way than it is accustomed in the United States. For example, Yamile notes that people usually drink in the streets, which is not allowed legally in the US but it is often the case, and a normal practice in the Dominican Republic. This particular activity prompts us to challenge the idea of a good citizen, as someone who follows the laws of the government. Given that in their home country, drinking in the street is a cultural practice, in this case, they are behaving in a way that honors more their cultural citizenship than their new migrant status as new citizens of the United States.

Other ways in which Dominicans participate in the recreation of this cultural citizenship or dominicanidad is through the same things that they see in the street. Mara, for example, explains that in the streets near her apartment in the north of Washington Heights (192nd Street).

Mara: Aquí se juega dominó afuera. Aquí amanecen la gente jugando, esos viciosos viejitos que ya no tienen nada que hacer y no duermen, se quedan ahí y tú lo ves, te levantas, tú te vas para tu trabajo y ellos jugando dominó.

Interviewer: ¿Y qué piensas de eso?

Mara: Yo mismo no pienso nada. Yo digo que hay que dejar a la gente que disfrute su día a día y que disfruten lo que quieren, que si ellos quieren trasnocharse y quieren jugar

dominó. A mí me gusta bastante, mucho. Ojalá yo, hasta las 03:00 me acostara jugando al dominó que me gusta.

Although she does not play dominoes she explains that many people do, specially those who are retired, and that sometimes they even stay up all night playing dominoes. Even if she does not participate in this she is able to witness it whenever she comes or leaves home, and says that this is something she wishes she could also do. While we may think that Mara does not participate in this reproduction of Dominicanidad, we must be aware that to a certain extent even by witnessing it and appreciating this activity she becomes a passive participant. If this were someone who disliked or did not understand this cultural tradition of playing dominoes and the meaning behind it for Dominicans, then they would most likely complain or look down upon this activity. This could potentially put in danger the reproduction of Dominicanidad.

One of the main reasons Mara remains a passive participant, rather than an active one is due to her own personality. She explains that she in fact does not like the summer as much because people are always outside:

Porque la gente hace mucho can. Aquí se vocea mucho. Aquí no duermen, aquí amanecen y eso es un caos. No dejan dormir a uno [...] Si nosotros nos criamos en mi casa, siempre en mi casa hubo movimiento de todo. Mi papá tumbaba conuco con mi papá. Se sembraba arroz, sembraba maíz y se cosechaba. Y siempre había gente tú ves mi casa y mi mamá decía que a ella nunca le gustaba la soledad. Ella nunca le gustaba la soledad. Entonces yo me crié así. A mí no me gustaba la soledad. Yo mejor quiero estar activa, estar así. Que no me dejen dormir, que no me dejen seguir. Y no yo estar triste en

una cosa con miedo o asustado. Yo vivía con mucho miedo y muchas cosas. Y eso me ha quedado que me ha quitado un poco el miedo.

Mara's reflections on her experiences in Washington Heights are very interesting, given that although she personally does not like "el can" (the hangouts, parties, social activities) she rather be active than lonely. She explains this by saying that this is how it was in her childhood home and that there were always people around or visiting. To a certain extent, she enjoys the fact that people are always outside in the summer and having parties and loud music in the neighborhood because it provides her with a sense of home or belonging. Mara's experience shows us the importance of the recreation of the home in Washington Heights through the use of public spaces. It also highlights the fact that while not all Dominicans use space the same way, those who reproduce culture are in charge of feeding the imagination of the home for the rest who passively participate in it. At the same time, given that Mara recognizes it as part of the Dominican culture she is able to respect and not interfere with this reproduction.

Es sacarnos de aquí que quieren

Es que a veces
no es que uno molesta,
sino que se sienten inferior.

Lo difícil es tú ver negocios nuevos.
Lo fácil es tu ver el negocio con los gates abajo.
Se han ido muchos de aquí porque no aguantan.

No.

No.

De aquí nos quieren sacar
De esta área, nos quieren sacar.

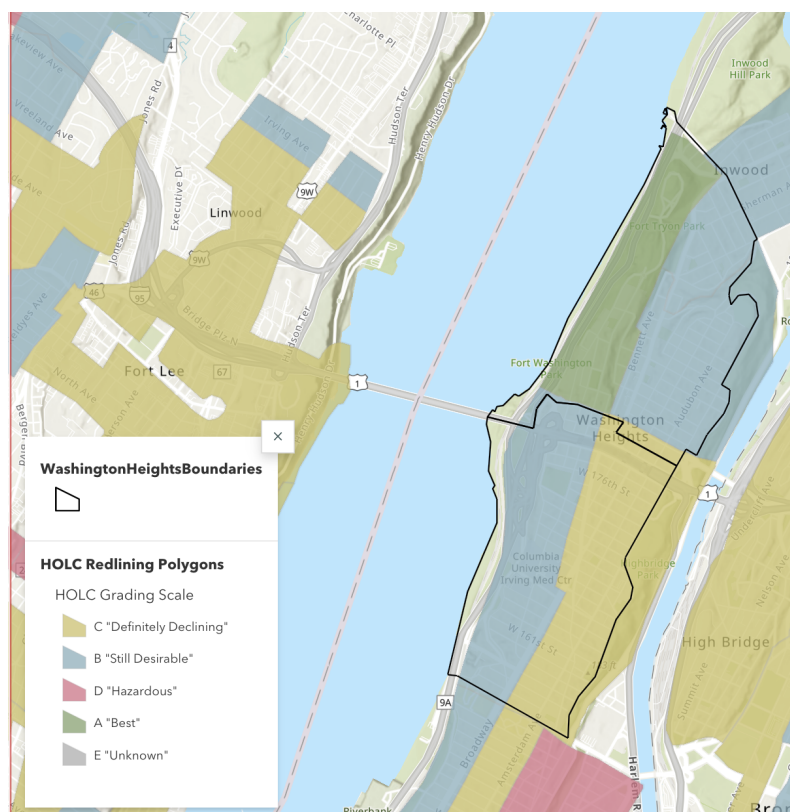
MUCHOS SE HAN IDO

Washington Heights History

In order to understand the disruption of the symbolic bubble of Dominicanidad that is Washington Heights, one must first understand the history of Washington Heights. Why wasn't Washington Heights appealing before? And, how did it become attractive to other groups? If we go back in History, Washington Heights was not always a Dominican neighborhood. In fact, the Dominican population actually increased in the late 1960's, early 1970's. For a long time, Washington Heights was often considered a White and Jewish neighborhood. Until the 1950's when the number of African Americans and Latinx people started to grow, as people moved up from Harlem.³⁸ This was particularly significant to the neighborhood's history given that since the 1930's there had been projects that aimed at identifying "the risks" that specific neighborhoods posed to banks in providing mortgage loans. In the social science, this received the name of *Redlining*, in fact, the digital projects like *Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America* that seeks to document and the many ways in which these systems implemented by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation to racially and further segregate neighborhoods, and as they reveal "HOLC assumed and insisted that the residency of African Americans and immigrants, as well as working-class whites, compromised the values of homes and the security

³⁸ Snyder, "Sounding the Powers of Place in Neighborhoods," 1298.

of mortgages.” This is particularly important in Washington Heights given that for a long time, the buildings in these neighborhoods were not invested towards. Snyder explains that: “Repairing old buildings was the best way to improve housing stock. Yet it was next to impossible for landlords to get loans because banks thought it unprofitable to lend out money in what seemed to be a declining area” (1303). As we can see in the HOLC map for Washington Heights (see figure below) ³⁹Washington Heights, especially the east side where the majority of people of color lived, was considered. It is important to note that since the earliest days of Washington Heights, the east and the west side (with the boundary being Broadway avenue) was easily recognizable due to the geographical barriers that steep hills between east and west sides



of The Heights.

Besides the lack of investment in infrastructure, one of the main concerns of Washington Heights was gang violence. Snyder explains that “Jews, who grew to be a major presence in the Heights, could be found among both the perpetrators and the victims of discrimination [...] Although officially integrated, white gangs had long harassed young people

³⁹ Figure 8. U.S. Census Bureau *American Community Survey (ACS) 2017-2021 5-year estimates*, Table(s) B03002

of color on streets leading to pool to dissuade them from swimming there”⁴⁰ This dynamic was particularly important given that it affected the way that people of color in the area used and saw public spaces like parks and swimming pools. One of the main reasons was that in addition to gang violence, in the 1980’s drugs started to play a big role in the neighborhood, due to its central location near the George Washington Bridge that now connected drug dealers with customers who lived in suburban areas like Upstate New York. Parks and other public spaces had become perfect locations for this growing business.⁴¹ This was something that many of my participants who lived in the area prior to the 2000’s mentioned during their interview. For example, when I asked Franchesca how the neighborhood was before the first thing she mentioned was that school gangs were very much present and that streets were very dangerous. As a result, those who were able to afford to leave the neighborhood started to leave Washington Heights to safer, often suburban neighborhoods. Snyder explains through what he calls collective efficacy, a “sense of cohesion” where individuals count with a group that is tasks with bettering the neighborhood, that those who stayed took on the task of changing the neighborhoods:

More effective in addressing the problem were activist Washington Heights residents, both Dominican-born and American-born, who fought for policing that was both fair and effective. This was no easy task in a neighborhood where the police seemed incapable of doing anything that would diminish the drug trade, and where aggressive police efforts—particularly frequent stops and searches— alienated residents, especially Dominicans.⁴²

⁴⁰ Snyder, “Sounding the Powers of Place in Neighborhoods,” 1298.

⁴¹ Snyder, “Sounding the Powers of Place in Neighborhoods,” 1305.

⁴² Snyder, “Sounding the Powers of Place in Neighborhoods,” 1306.

Given the role of racism in the United States it is important to understand that Dominicans have been more likely to be perceived or profiled as Black than other migrant groups in Latin America. One of the main reasons is that the Dominican Republic is predominantly Afro-descendant and Black.⁴³ In addition to that, scholars like Amada Armenta, have argued that hispanic immigrant groups are more likely to be stopped by law enforcement due to being stereotyped as unlawful or criminals.⁴⁴

Dominican's migrant status was one that not only impacted how they were treated by local authorities, but also limited their political power.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, they found ways to change their neighborhood through low scale politics and community activism that allowed them to participate without government intervention. One of these was school board elections, in which Dominican parents and residents of the area were able to vote. "In 1983, a mobilization of Dominican voters elected to the school board a Dominican teacher and activist, Guillermo Linares. This was a significant exercise in collective efficacy, this time to gain power for a relatively new ethnic group in northern Manhattan."⁴⁶ This was a significant moment in Washington Heights history for Dominicans, as it symbolized the beginning of cultural citizenship in the area. While many were not citizens of the state, they were now active citizens in their neighborhoods, attaching dominicanidad as a collective that has political power in the heights.

⁴³ Roth, *Race Migrations 2012*

⁴⁴ Armenta, "Racializing Crimmigration: Structural Racism, Colorblindness, and the Institutional Production of Immigrant Criminality." 86

⁴⁵ As only American citizens are able to vote in elections.

⁴⁶ Snyder, "Sounding the Powers of Place in Neighborhoods," 1305.

Other ways in which Dominicans started bettering the neighborhood was through non-profit organizations and alliances. One of the main concerns that residents in the area had was crime and violence, especially when it came to youth. For this reason, many of the people organizing these movements were parents and teachers of the local community. Interestingly, the main spaces that they were trying to recuperate were public spaces. Below are some of the examples of these movements:

“As murders soared in Washington Heights, residents organized efforts to reduce crime in their neighborhood. Moises Perez of the *Alianza Dominicana*, a prominent social service agency, watched meetings on the crack crisis draw ten people, then twenty-five, then finally enough to stage a march up Broadway. Protestors carried pictures of the people lost to drugs and the names of mothers who had lost a daughter or a son to the violence that surrounded the drug trade. Others marched on other days, among them the Community League of West 159th Street, *the Dominican Women’s Development Center*, and the *Asociación Comunal de Dominicanos Progresistas* [...] Around the same time, Dominican residents took on the crack trade. At the *Alianza Dominicana*, a woman who lost her grandson to drug violence helped organize a chapter of *Mothers against Violence*. In Highbridge Park, where Michael Farmer was slain in 1957, the mothers displayed collective efficacy to restore the park as a place for children to play. In a playground at 180th Street adjacent to an encampment of drug addicts, these women took control of the playground gate, permitting only people accompanied by children to enter. Here, in a new context, were mothers acting as the defenders of the neighborhood”.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Snyder, “Sounding the Powers of Place in Neighborhoods,” 1206

Residents in the area concerned about the drug and crime crisis used the influence of community organizations to make a statement and bring awareness to the neighborhood. While other groups left the neighborhood, Dominicans were doing the work that government entities were not doing. This division between local communities and the state further expands the notion of neighborhoods as micro-societies. In addition, given the fact that Dominicans were taking control of the situation, this further emphasized the connection of the neighborhood identity to Dominicanidad. On the other hand, Dominicans' use of political power through collective efficacy, was slowly making the neighborhood safer, and at the same time, they were able to gain power over public spaces that as we have seen in this study is central to the Dominican identity and culture. As the neighborhood grew safer, residents were able to use public spaces like parks, sidewalks, and plazas to further expand their cultural reproduction.

Americans as Foreigners

As Washington Heights became safer, there was a surge of incoming residents from different backgrounds. While the Dominican population remains high, some of my participants explained that they are now seeing people who are different and that as opposed to before they are now “viéndose unos con otros” (seeing one another). For many Dominicans who got to the neighborhood post Dominican migration in the 70s, having day-to-day neighborhood interactions with people who are not Dominican is a new experience. Yamile, for example, adds that when she first moved from the Dominican Republic to Washington Heights there were not as many latinx people. This is important when it comes to assimilation and their symbolic home, given that as new residents come in, businesses in the neighborhood have to satisfy their new clients.

However, another participant, Pedro, confirms Snyder's idea that Broadway was and remains a boundary that divides distinct ethnic/racial groups. He explains that there is in fact more non-Dominicans in the area:

Esto está lleno de americanos también últimamente se están poblando, pues tú caminas de la 1... bueno, Broadway y Fort Washington. Y hacen... tú subes a aquellas calles allá de acá, ya tú encuentras diferentes gente que viven. Estudiantes de la misma universidad americana, que hasta que no tienen su profesión...están ahí hasta que se mueren, así, tú no puedes nada decir.

Pedro identifies the people who are coming into the neighborhood as “americanos” or “americans”. During our interview, he signaled “acá” and “allá” to the streets south and west of Plaza las Américas and Broadway. He also connects this population to the “american university” to refer to the NewYork-Presbyterian Columbia University Irving Medical Center located on 168th Street. This hospital was formerly known as Columbia-Presbyterian, while it opened its doors in 1928, it did not begin to grow exponentially until 1998 when it merged with The New York Hospital and the Cornell Medical College. Occupying a big portion of the south sector of Washington Heights (see figure below).⁴⁸ Pedro's association of this teaching hospital with “americanidad” (of the United States), is interesting as it highlights the idea of the imagined Dominican Republic in the Heights. The fact that he highlights that it's an American university notes that it is foreign to the “dominicanidad” of the space. Pedro, is talking about this hospital through a nationality stance, while being in the same country. In a different scenario, one would

⁴⁸ Francis Dixon, “Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center | Washington Heights NYC,” February 4, 2019, <https://www.washington-heights.us/columbia-presbyterian-medical-center/>.

expect that he associates the hospital with a different characteristic like presbyterian (due to its association to the presbyterian religion) but he decides to mark the difference on a nationality basis. In this way, Pedro confirms the argument that for many Dominicans, Washington Heights is an imagined space that challenges notions of nationality and citizenship within ethnic neighborhoods in the United States.



Figure 9. Areas Surrounding New York Presbyterian Hospital. Red Shaded Areas Symbolize Hospital Owned. Google Maps. Washington Heights Neighborhood. Available at: www.google.com/maps/place/Washington+Heights,+New+York,+NY (Accessed: April 2023).

Physical Displacement of Universities and Hospitals

The role of universities in Washington Heights is crucial in understanding how they become participants in rupturing the imagined, yet physical home of Washington Heights. These universities are literally displacing the main actors who recreate Dominicanidad in the Heights, Dominicans. One of the main issues with universities in local communities that scholars have found is the fact that their catering audience are students, alumni, and their connection with academic and elite branches. In the case of Columbia and Yeshiva University (both located in the Heights) they are both universities of great renown in a space where the majority of the population is seen as a minority. Davarian Baldwin explains that: “elite universities have become an island of wealth in a sea of poverty [...] even when universities were not directly making decisions, other private entities scrambled to reshape the neighborhood to provide campus amenities.”⁴⁹ Given the needs of the students, alumni, and in the case of Columbia since it is a medical teaching hospital: doctors, big companies and real estate companies find a new market that caters to these institutions.

José was one participant who was very aware of how these universities are trying to further displace people in the area. In fact, when I asked him if there were any changes to the neighborhood, he said that Dominicans themselves have not changed, but one of the main changes were related to actions of universities:

Las universidades y los intereses. Cuando tu ves que las universidades. Un ejemplo es la Yeshiva que ella quería comprar y el estado no lo permitió. Desde la 181, San Nicolás y Ámsterdam, hasta la 189, todos esos proyectos habitacionales. Ellos lo querían comprar para la universidad y solamente le vendieron los que están en lo lado

⁴⁹ Davarian L. Baldwin, *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower: How Universities Are Plundering Our Cities*. (New York, NY: Bold Type Books, 2021), 90.

de Ámsterdam. La universidad que está aquí en por ahí, todo esos edificios casi lo ha comprado la Universidad Columbia por la Columbia, Sí, para rentar. A los hospitales no les interesa que sus médicos vivan en New Jersey ni en los campitos, porque cuando hay una operación de emergencia que ellos tienen que venir al hospital, duran hasta dos horas para llegar al hospital. A ellos les interesa que ellos vivan aquí en Washington, estén ahí en cinco minutos. Entonces por eso a ellos les interesa sacar de aquí la dominicanidad. Entonces ya tú ves que en esta zona está lleno de blanquitos.

In the case of Yeshiva University, their interests are centered in creating student-rent opportunities for their students, and growing as an institution. However, it is important to note that Yeshiva was not the one directly trying to make the purchase of these projects but rather an outside investor, Avi Dishy, with whom they were making partnerships with to get affordable rent and preference to their students. This investor ended up buying a total of 407 residential units.⁵⁰ Similarly, for the New York Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital, José recognizes that rather than the needs of the community, it is in the hospital's best interest that their doctors live in the area.

While we may think that it is to the benefit of the community that their doctors live close by, consequences of this are already occurring for the community of Washington Heights. One of the main consequences as mentioned before is rent increase. A large majority of my participants mentioned rent increase as one of the main hardships they are currently facing in the neighborhood. Inmaculada for example, says: “¿Y quién aguanta esto? Yo soy una campeona”

⁵⁰ Gus Saltonstall, “Investor Buys \$92M Worth Of Washington Heights Buildings: Report,” Washington Heights-Inwood, NY Patch, March 23, 2022, <https://patch.com/new-york/washington-heights-inwood/investor-buys-92m-worth-washington-heights-buildings-report>. Isabella Ortiz, “Gentrification in Washington Heights,” The Lexington Line, January 5, 2023, <https://www.thelexingtonline.com/blog/2022/12/27/gentrification-in-washington-heights>

highlighting the fact that many are not able to afford rent and that she has had to work harder to make ends meet. On the other hand Solly, who has nine years living in her building, expresses that many of the people who lived in the building before her have had to move. She also says that she thinks one of the reasons “american people” are moving into the building is because they are less likely to bargain with landlords and accept higher rent because it is still much cheaper than other places in Manhattan. While she does not mention the association of new residents with these institutions, she categorizes the people moving into the building as “profesionales americanos” (American professionals) and “gringos” (Americans). She also puts them as opposites of Dominicans, making note of a difference in their nationality, and socio-economic class as non-Dominicans and therefore foreigners of the neighborhood.

As a result of this rent increase as mentioned by Inmaculada, José also points out that Dominicans who cannot afford rent are now moving to cheaper places like Pennsylvania and connecticut. He also mentions that for elders in the neighborhood even with rent control housing it is hard for them to make due given the fact that retirement rates for someone who worked a low paying job most of their lives are very low. He provides this example:

José: Un ejemplo. Tú te pensionas y tú trabajaste 20 años. 40 años aquí. Pero tú trabajaste en los años 80 con un sueldo de \$9 la hora. ¿Cuál sería tu sueldo hoy en día? No mucho, que no da ni para pagar una semana de comida, mucho menos para una renta. ¿Entonces, qué tienes tú que hacer? Irte obligado.

Interviewer: Ok. Y en términos de la gente que vive aquí, ha cambiado el tipo de persona que vive en el vecindario?

José: La gente no ha cambiado, pero se han ido muchos de aquí porque no aguantan ¡No, no, de aquí nos quieren sacar de esta área! ¡Nos quieren sacar!

As José explained this to me I could sense his despair and anger towards the current situation of Dominicans in Washington. He also uses the phrase “nos quieren sacar” which translates to “They want to take us out” to represent the literal and symbolic displacement of Dominicans in the area.

Symbolic Displacement

Some of the ways in which we can see the symbolic displacement of dominicanidad in the neighborhood is through the decline in local business and the increase in big corporations around the area. Pedro highlights that near the hospital new businesses that cater to “americans” as he said, are emerging “ya están poniendo cadenas y muchos restaurantes de comida para americanos. Y van volviendo otra vez, chin a chin y te van a mirar, que tú caminas un día, sea el lunes, dejame caminar hasta el hospital. Y ve a esa zona del hospital de la 165, para abajo, hasta la 160.” Big chain businesses like Chick-fil-A, Target, Kung Fu Tea, Radio Hotel, among others are now moving into the area, as real estate media continues to promote Washington Heights for both residential and commercial “opportunities.”⁵¹ While Pedro sees this as new businesses for “los americanos” other participants answered that there were less businesses open, specially local businesses. Mara uses the example of a dominican owned hardware store in her block that had

⁵¹ Karin Lipson, “Washington Heights: The ‘Last Bastion of Affordability’ in Manhattan,” *The New York Times*, June 30, 2021, sec. Real Estate, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/30/realestate/washington-heights-last-bastion-of-affordability-manhattan.html>. Gus Saltonstall, “Chick-Fil-A Looks Set To Open Just North Of Inwood: What To Know,” Washington Heights-Inwood, NY Patch, August 15, 2022, <https://patch.com/new-york/washington-heights-inwood/chick-fil-looks-set-open-just-north-inwood-what-know>.

been there for a lot of years and all of the sudden had to close down due to rent increase and migration issues that the owner was facing after divorce. José also shares that:

José: De que hay menos negocio, hay menos negocios

Interviewer: Negocios dominicanos?

José: Dominicano de toda índole, porque no es un secreto para nadie que lamentablemente la renta aquí en Washington hoy es un problema para todo el mundo [...]

Lo difícil es tu ver negocio nuevo. Lo fácil es tú ver negocios con los gates abajo.

José presents an opposing view to what Pedro highlights, however, José presents his argument in the context of Dominican/ethnic businesses. In the article, “Changes comes to Washington Heights, Not all good” the author highlights that for many bodegueros (deli owners), and small business owners the rise of rent has made them close down and almost disappear. One of the interesting factors in this article, is that Valerio highlights that for many people the decrease in Dominican and Latinx owned bodegas is more than just having less access to Dominican products. Some of them highlight that they also miss the familiarity and ambiance they create on the street.⁵² If we think about it from the perspective of the recreation of the symbolic home, when businesses that provide a sense of familiarity close down, the imagined bubble of the home it’s at risk of rupturing.

At a more individual scale, there have also been other signs of the dangers of gentrification when it comes to cultural reproduction, when people outside of dominicanidad enter the neighborhood. As mentioned in previous sections of this project, Dominicans for a long

⁵² Johanni Valerio, “Change Comes to Washington Heights, Not All Good,” HarlemView, May 25, 2021, <https://harlemview.com/community/2021/05/change-comes-to-washington-heights-not-all-good/>.

time, have set the standards on how they choose to use public spaces in the neighborhood. It is important to highlight that while these are public spaces, they should also be seen as communal/shared spaces. This becomes complicated when new people enter the scene as they might not understand the informal rules and standards that the community has already in place. Rosalba is one of the participants who along with her friend group has already experienced the dangers of gentrification in disrupting the imagined home. During our interview, she shared an experience she had at Plaza las Americas during one of her regular routines like enjoying music at the plaza:

Lllaman a la policia. Sí, nos llama mucho la policia. En el verano, sí le molesta. Terminando el verano, la policia me quitó una bocina porque empezamos los viernes. Me dio un ticket que tuve que ir a downtown, tuve que ver un juez. Sí no, porque tú sabes, fijate una cosa, yo soy consciente yo en la noche no voy a venir a estar subiendolo, yo sé que hay personas que tienen que levantarse temprano. Pero en el día, vamos a decir, la una o la dos de la tarde. ¿Por qué no se puede poner la música un poquito alta? Pero hay personas que son así, la cosa les molesta empiezan a llamar a la policia, la policia viene. No, oye, no es que a veces uno molesta , sino que se sienten inferior.

In this case, these activities of enjoyment in public spaces can be seen by outsiders as “disturbance.” However, in the eyes of many Dominicans they are just regular interactions. For example, when I asked participants to tell me what they though symbolizes a Dominican these were some of the ways they describe it “bulloso” (loud), “alegre” (cheerful), “siempre tenemos una alegría” (We always have a happiness within), “A los dominicanos les gustan ayudar a los demás” (Dominicans like to help other), “Le gusta beber y el can” (Likes to drink and hangout).

The majority of these descriptions allow us to understand how Rosalba's interest in going to the plaza in the afternoons and playing music would be considered normal and part of the Dominican identity. Nevertheless, she says that she now gets the police called often, even within daylight hours. This leads to her not only facing legal consequences, but it also tries to police the cultural reproduction of dominicanidad in public spaces.

As seen earlier in the history of Dominican Washington Heights, Dominican Immigrants have been a national/ethnic group that has fought for change. Throughout my interviews I was able to see that while many did not have the language to explain what exactly was happening to their neighborhood, they were very aware of the changes in the neighborhood and how it was affecting them. When I asked José who seemed to be more informed about gentrification if he believed others had the same information as him, he said the following: "Quizás haya una buena parte que tenga conocimiento. Hay otra parte que es lo que vive en su mundo que no le interesa. Lo que viven es el día a día y no le interesa nada, ni lo que venga ni lo que vaya a pasar." However, I want to challenge José's point of view further. I want to question whether Dominicans Immigrants in the area choose to live as he says "en el día a día" (day-by-day) or if that is in today's society their reality? With gentrification, as Mara explains you can have the money to pay rent but if one day, they decide to kick you out of the building "tu te tienes que ir."

En lo adelante, sin proponérmelo, la literatura se convirtió en el nexo de mi presente y mi pasado. En cada línea que trazaba fui recreando ese hogar, esos rostros y esas calles que habían quedado a la deriva. Mi yo escritor me ayudó a definirme como ser humano: propició un encuentro con mi nueva realidad.

Rubén Sánchez Féliz

EN CADA LÍNEA FUERON RECREANDO EL HOGAR

El espacio flotante

Como resultado evidente del desalojamiento de los inmigrantes dominicanos en el vecindario de Washington Heights, nos vemos obligados (y me incluyo también, ya que Washington Heights forma parte de mí) a explorar nuevas maneras de recrear los espacios dominicanos que se nutren de la cultura misma. Mientras que el espacio físico de Washington Heights ha servido y continúa sirviendo cómo centro de reproducción cultural, como ya hemos explorado mediante el análisis sociológico de los espacios, esta recreación es un proceso simbólico y dependiente de la participación continua de los dominicanos y no un resultado del espacio físico en sí. De la misma manera, los escritores dominicanos de la diáspora han demostrado que la *Dominicanidad* dentro de la literatura no depende en sí del espacio físico de Washington Heights, sino de las partes simbólicas del vecindario: los elementos culturales desde los alimentos, la música, o como dicen mucho de mis participantes *del hablao dominicano*. Una de las escritoras dominicanas que demuestra esto es la escritora, poeta y psicóloga Marianela Medrano quién a través de sus relatos personales “Jamón y Queso” y “El Tao del Majarete”,

partes de la antología de Mary Ely Peña-Grateraux nos adentra en la experiencia de la imaginación y el recuerdo.

Una de las imágenes más interesantes que utiliza Medrano para hablar de la experiencia inmigrante es la idea de recitar el espacio físico como método de crear memorias y recuerdos. Esto lo incluye en su poema titulado “Jamón y Queso” en el que trata distintos temas como las tradiciones, memorias, e imágenes que se pasan entre generaciones. Medrano empieza este poema narrando las experiencias migratorias de la figura de un padre y una hija, quienes debido al contexto paratextual de “relato autobiográfico” de la antología en la que se encuentra podemos inferir que se trata de las experiencias de la autora y su padre. Una de las estrofas en las que nos invita como lectores a considerar la literatura como método de reimaginación de espacios, es a través del ejemplo de su padre, cuando afirma:

La soledad pesa en la memoria
Mi padre llega de la fábrica perdido en sudor
Viene recitando un poema
Reclamando las calles de Manhattan
Las calles de cualquier pueblo que camino
Me trae de la mano.⁵³

Medrano nos invita a cuestionar la facultad de dar sentido a sus experiencias por medio de la imaginación y la poesía. Contrasta los sentimientos de la soledad, la perdición y el cansancio de su padre, con acciones que le ayudan a “reclamar” las calles por las que camina, mientras imagina “las calles de cualquier pueblo” que su hija camina. En este poema, la voz poética nos

⁵³ Grateraux, *Voces Inmigrantes Dominicanas*, 197.

informa previamente de que su padre llega primero al extranjero (Estados Unidos) mientras que esta se encuentra aún en la isla. Además al decir que su padre la trae de la mano mientras camina y recita las calles, Medrano hace énfasis en esta habilidad de estar en dos lugares a la vez, el espacio físico y *el hogar portátil*. Más adelante y ya presentando su propia experiencia como inmigrante, incluye las maneras en que entre generaciones se repite esta invitación a crear memorias que transporten al hogar:

Encuentro mi sitio en las calles de New Jersey

Y me vuelvo a casa

—casa inventada entre la nostalgia y el perdón—

Planto memorias que mi hijo luego inventará⁵⁴

Como podemos ver la voz poética también repite las acciones de su padre en reclamar las calles y edificar la casa. Es importante notar cómo conecta “la casa” que es normalmente algo material y físico, pero la describe como inventada, es decir parte de la imaginación. Además explica cómo las nuevas generaciones continuarán participando en la recreación de la casa a través de la memoria. Esto nos invita a problematizar las maneras en las que el hogar toma forma dentro de la literatura y de cierta manera se materializa en casa. El hogar que es simbólico y parte de la imaginación, toma forma dentro por medio de la invención o creación? literaria. Esto reitera algunas de las ideas presentadas en este estudio, donde la recreación del hogar es dependiente de una participación activa por parte de los dominicanos en el espacio. Al final del poema de “Jamón y Queso” Medrano le asigna un nombre a estos actores que recrean el hogar y les llama “Viajeros con raíces” y les asigna el rol de “inventar memorias”.

⁵⁴ Gratereaux, *Voces Inmigrantes Dominicanas*, 198.

Somos voces que saben de dónde nace el silencio

Voces que se alzan a través de los tiempos

Nosotros los hijos de la memoria

Viajeros con raíces

Viajeros con raíces

Viajeros con raíces

Viajeros con raíces

Inventores de memorias⁵⁵

Por otra parte, en el relato “El Tao del Majarete”, Medrano describe su experiencia como inmigrante poniéndola en yuxtaposición con su “yo en la isla”, un yo que “imaginaba las sonrisas cruzaban veloces las aguas azules para llegar al país de nieve donde ahora yo espero por las otras fotografías, las más vivas, las que dibujo con el pincel de mi memoria”. Y es esto lo que hace Medrano en su relato autobiográfico, ya que dibuja (o escribe) la República Dominicana a través de imágenes y símbolos que le recuerdan al hogar como inmigrantes. Una de las maneras en las que Medrano “dibuja” estas experiencias es por la misma disposición visual del poema. Como podemos ver al final del poema decide utilizar el recurso literario de la anáfora y jugar con la estructura de los versos creando la imagen de una escalera. Esta escalera de “viajeros con raíces” encamina al lector hacía el oficio de estos viajeros, inventar la memoria. De esta manera, conecta la forma con el contenido del texto.

Otro símbolo importante dentro de este poema son los elementos culinarios. Medrano decide incluirlos cómo símbolo de su Dominicanidad es la mazorca de maíz para hacer majarete.

⁵⁵ Gratereaux, *Voces Inmigrantes Dominicanas*, 199.

⁵⁶ Este es incluso el título del texto. El poema toma lugar en el momento en que el esposo de la voz narrativa le trae a casa mazorcas de maíz, luego, a través de la narración Medrano nos transporta por medio de la mazorca a distintas memorias y recuerdos de su vida en la República Dominicana.

Una de las primeras instancias en que vemos esto es cuando pasa a describir las mazorcas., No obstante, no se basa simplemente en sus características físicas sino que alude también a los recuerdos que estas simbolizan para ella:

Las mazorcas se ven tan frescas. Su olor me remonta a los días lluviosos que visten de verde los campos áridos de la línea noroeste donde nací [...] Alineo con cuidado las mazorcas y comienzo a sobarlas una tras otra contra el rallador de aluminio que pongo sobre la cacerola. El jugo lechoso y frío cae en el fondo y por él se cuele la voz tenciosa de mami recordándome que cualquier emoción fuerte, el enojo o la tristeza, cortarán el majarete. Me río de la bobada y pienso que nada en el mundo va a estropear mi proyecto culinario (192)

Primero, Medrano utiliza una descripción que está arraigada a un recuerdo del espacio en el noroeste de la República Dominicana, luego dentro del mismo acto de cocinar se infiltra el recuerdo que conecta a la voz narrativa con un momento íntimo. Es interesante pensar en que realmente significa evitar “las emociones fuertes” que cortan “el majarete” ya que el majarete, como hemos visto, crea una conexión entre la voz lírica y su país natal. Las emociones que elige son enojo o tristeza, es decir que en su conexión con la isla debe sentir emociones contrarias a esto. Medrano nos invita a cuestionar si la memoria o el recuerdo debe enfocarse en aquello que nos conecta con la isla, en vez de lo que nos separa como los son la apresión, el enojo y la tristeza. Además, el enfoque en los sentidos en este poema nos ayuda a experimentar y sentir las emociones de la voz narrativa. Por ejemplo, utiliza el olor a lluvia que la conecta con su vida en el noroeste de la isla. Otro ejemplo es “el jugo lechoso y frío” que esta ligado con las emociones

⁵⁶ El majarete es un postre dominicano hecho en base de mazorca de maíz, leche y demás especias. Es similar a un pudín.

y la intimidad de la protagonista. Esto lo podemos inferir por medio de la conexión del frío con la madre y “las emociones fuertes”. Además, vale la pena indagar en las implicaciones del frío que es normalmente asociado con la soledad, la tristeza, la falta de algo. A partir de la literatura nos conecta como lectores con espacios físicos en la isla, elementos culturales, y las emociones y experiencias del dominicano en la diáspora.

Medrano incluso les cede protagonismo a los alimentos que la hacen conectar con la isla como “la lata de leche de coco Goya” que “prometen el sabor de la isla en un sorbo” dejándonos así ver cómo asigna a los alimentos roles en su recuerdo del espacio físico dominicano, que ahora cómo inmigrante se vuelve simbólico. Debemos de recordar que estos textos son parte de una colección que propone describir aquella experiencia del inmigrante y mientras que tienen elementos de ficción y creatividad para hacer sentido de la experiencia o lo inexplicable. Dentro de sus experiencias personales Medrano también nos provee con una manera de conceptualizar la experiencia de estar a distancia con aquello que llamamos hogar, a lo que en su cuento autobiográfico llama “mi país flotante” y lo describe de la siguiente manera:

Este hombre que sale al mercado a comprar la esperanza para dejarla esparcida en la meseta de la cocina donde tantas veces, entre té de jengibre y torta de maíz, ha visto deslizarse las imágenes de mi país flotante, aéreo y de mi esencia, que no vive allá ni acá porque no tiene geografía⁵⁷

Mediante estas descripciones no sólo reitera la conexión entre alimentos simbólicos e identidad dominicana, si no que los hace partícipes de este “país flotante”. Esta falta de geografía que tiene la Dominicanidad resalta las teorías sociológicas de Gieryn y su propuesta de la creación de imaginabilidad (imaginability) de los espacios por medio de la creación de lo que en sociología Gieryn llama “meaning”, que en este proyecto también llamo significado. La narrativa de

⁵⁷ Grateaux, *Voces Inmigrantes Dominicanas*, 60.

Medrano, sin embargo, nos invita a cuestionar la necesidad de un espacio físico para conectarse con la Dominicanidad, proponiendo así una manera de transportarnos a la Dominicanidad una vez estamos distanciados del espacio físico, que para los residentes de Washington Heights puede representar ambos la isla, como también aquella recreación del hogar en Washington Heights.

Recreando el hogar

En el texto autobiográfico “Eso que llamamos nuestro hogar: Reflexiones en torno a la diáspora y los libros”, Daysi Cocco de Filippis, escritora Dominicano-Americana, utiliza la prosa a fin de resaltar aquella dicotomía entre lo que identifica como su hogar. En esta narrativa no solo podemos conocer la historia de cómo llega la escritora a la ciudad Nueva York, sino que también nos transporta a ambos lugares, República Dominicana y Washington Heights, y por ende al espacio simbólico de la Dominicanidad, por medio de sus recuerdos. Por ejemplo, al describir el día en que emigra a los Estados Unidos dice “Era agosto. Un agosto caluroso y húmedo en el Santo Domingo y las calles bullían de gente, que iban y venían a tantas reuniones”.⁵⁸ Mientras que estas pudieran ser interpretadas como descripciones básicas en una historia, para aquellos como yo *dominicanos lectores* este es uno de los elementos que caracterizan el espacio físico de la capital del país, Santo Domingo: el calor insoportable y el bullicio. Estas características reflejan el imaginario compartido de la ciudad, uno que es evidente y significativo para el público dominicano. Lejos de ser vistas como un elemento negativo, Cocco de Filippis evoca estas características como una sensación casi física del cuerpo en respuesta al hogar. Además presenta a la literatura como un espacio privilegiado para cultivar este tipo de emociones.

⁵⁸ Gratereaux, *Voces Inmigrantes Dominicanas*, 60..

He aquí otra escena en que Cocco de Filippis incluye su experiencia extrañando elementos de su vida pasada: “Había pasado una semana cuando Mamá Biela comenzó a hacerme falta, me duele admitirlo ahora. Había pasado más de un mes cuando noté la falta de plátanos, mangos y piña en mi dieta diaria”⁵⁹ Al yuxtaponer un miembro familiar y alimentos típicos de República Dominicana como parte del recuerdo, la narradora nos invita como lectores a preguntarnos el rol integral de los “alimentos culturales” en su construcción identitaria. Es decir, los elementos materiales y físicos como la comida se vuelven ahora en símbolos del ser que habitaba en la isla. Este ser que es dejado atrás junto con aquellos elementos del día a día pero que ahora forma parte de la imaginación y los sentimientos del dominicano. Así como hay conexiones emocionales con los familiares, existe un vínculo en lo material y cultural de la isla que la memoria ahora se encarga de mantener vivo.

De manera similar y casi más explícita, la escritora Miriam Mejía utiliza la prosa para recrear el hogar por medio de imágenes en su ensayo autobiográfico “Razones”. Al inicio, nos informa del porqué de escribir cuentos:

Analizando retrospectivamente ese proceso totalizador, resbaladizo y seguro, ignoto y tan cercano; destellante y transformador como es la creación literaria, en mi pensamiento rutilan y se entremezclan imágenes pasadas y presentes. Exploro de manera puntual hechos y/o personajes de mi cotidianidad que pudiesen haber fraguado un proceso de sensibilización estética⁶⁰

A través de este razonamiento, Mejía explica cómo para ella la escritura es un proceso personal donde conecta recuerdos de su pasado y presente. Al utilizar en conjunto los “hechos” y “los personajes” nos invita a cuestionar cómo se mezclan la realidad y la ficción. Esto es debido a que

⁵⁹ Gratereaux, *Voces Inmigrantes Dominicanas*, 61.

⁶⁰ Gratereaux, *Voces Inmigrantes Dominicanas*, 171..

el término *hechos* es asociado con lo que es real y sucede, mientras que normalmente se utiliza el concepto de un personaje en el contexto de la ficción o lo que es la creación.

Podemos ver esta mezcla entre el recuerdo y la recreación del hogar en esta colección mientras personifica elementos de su pasado como “su pueblo”, “el río”, “las mujeres de su pueblo”, “los hombres”, “el ingenio azucarero”, y las facetas de su vida. No obstante, me gustaría enfocarme particularmente en la sección llamada “Destellos de una comunidad” en la que Mejía confunde los elementos del pasado (representado por el espacio físico de la República Dominicana y todo lo que este trae consigo) y su presente en Washington Heights (un espacio físico al que le asigna significado a través de su conexión con la isla). En esta sección, Mejía provee a su público con una descripción visual de elementos que conectan el espacio de Washington Heights con el sentimiento de hogar para los inmigrantes dominicanos.

Además de abrir la posibilidad de grabar aquellas experiencias de los dominicanos inmigrantes en Washington Heights que cada vez se ven en peligro por la gentrificación y el desplazamiento de los dominicanos en el área, establece aquellas cosas que literalmente conectan al dominicano con la isla como son las agencias de viaje y remesas, y las tarjetas de llamada. A la misma vez resalta los nombres de estas que conectan directamente con espacios físicos en la República Dominicana, por ejemplo, *La Cibaeñita* (referente al Cibao, región norte del país), *La Sanjuanera* (referente a la provincia de San Juan), *La Cigua* (refiriéndose a un personaje místico en la cultura dominicana), *Merengue Ripiao* (*música típica del país*), *Plátano* (alimento cultural), *Tiriquito* y *No me jodas phone card* (expresiones dominicanas). Al incluir estos elementos resalta el rol de Washington Heights en la creación del hogar para los dominicanos.

Luego de resaltar los elementos que crean un puente de comunicación entre el dominicano que vive en los Estados Unidos y aquel que vive en la isla, Mejía procede a incluir los elementos que crean un *hogar portátil* para aquellos que viven en Washington Heights. Esto lo hace por medio de la comida y la música. Mejía enumera bodegas que suplen productos dominicanos “Villa Jaragua Deli ” y “Villa Duarte Delicatessen. y que cuentan con nombres de espacios físicos en la

República Dominicana como Villa Jaragua y Villa Duarte. También incluye vendedores ambulantes como “El chicharrón de Elsa” y “ Doña Nena con sus habichuelas con dulce, maíz caquío y arroz con leche,” camiones de longaniza frita, orejitas, morcilla, mondongo, mangu, etc. De la misma manera, incorpora espacios en los que los dominicanos logran replicar interacciones e incluso narra escenarios en los que estos interactúan, como son las bases de taxi, los salones de belleza, las lavanderías, los juegos de dominó en la acera. Esta larga pero necesaria enumeración resalta la abundancia de Dominicanidad que existe en el vecindario de Washington Heights. De esta manera, la autora aporta cierto nivel de credibilidad y conexión con la isla. La autora nos explica cómo estos lugares no son solo elementos de un vecindario sino que sirven como puente para “solidaridades espontáneas en espacios creados desde la necesidad misma” una necesidad que proviene de aquella distancia física con el hogar. Además, Mejía llega hasta a decir de manera implícita el rol de la gentrificación en Washington Heights y como la replicación de la cultura es recibida aquellos que no son dominicanos cuando dice: “Merengues y bachatas para exorcizar los crudos inviernos mientras se resiste la presión del vecino que conmina a irse con la música al lugar de donde vinieron”⁶¹. Esta última resalta el problema presente que describen los participantes de este estudio, ya que refleja la idea de aquellos que tratan de cambiar las normas y costumbres de los dominicanos que viven en Washington Heights. Cabe destacar que la mayoría de referencias en esta narrativas de verdad existen y pueden ser vistos si el lector visitara Washington Heights: la autora crea un mapa literario de este vecindario. Dependiendo de quien lea, el texto puede llegar a causar un impacto distinto. Para

⁶¹ Gratereaux, *Voces Inmigrantes Dominicanas*, 185.

mí, lectora y participante como residente de este vecindario, estos espacios toman vida mientras leo.

El texto de Miriam ha inspirado las partes creativas y literarias de este proyecto, ya que refleja las maneras en las que podemos grabar y mantener las historias de aquellos que viven en Washington Heights. La literatura abre un espacio para que aquellos que se vean forzados a irse de este vecindario, que como hemos visto se han dado la tarea de reinventar, para que puedan seguir contando y viviendo sus historias. Historias que no tienen como público predilecto a aquellos que están fuera de la burbuja de la Dominicanidad, sino que revitaliza las experiencias para aquellos que son dominicanos en la diáspora, para que aún cuando su hogar físico se encuentre en riesgo, puede arraigarse a aquellos recuerdos en los que la Dominicanidad se mantiene viva. La Dominicanidad referida, resulta evidente tras este análisis, no depende del espacio físico, el cual no necesita asimilar, adaptarse, ni cambiar. Al contrario, existe y se pervive en aquel *hogar portátil*, aquel país flotante, así como en la memoria inventada de los dominicanos que habitan la diáspora y desde ella ejercen su facultad de imaginar.

CONCLUSION

“The Creation of the Home” is a study that puts in conversation theories within sociology of immigration, culture, nationality, urban studies, gentrification, and literature. These realms of study allow us to capture the trajectories of *meaning making* by Dominican Immigrants in New York City. It shows that even when the physical home is endangered by larger structural forces such as economic precarity, gentrification, and displacement, Dominican immigrants continue to center their identity and cultural markers through symbolic recreations of the home. Dominican literature of the Diaspora has already shown us that the recreation symbolic home o *hogar portátil* through writing is successful at describing the experiences of the immigrant as well as showcasing *Dominicanidad* in and outside of the island.

In uncovering how Dominican immigrants’ use of public space that enables them to maintain their Dominicanidad, my findings indicate that sociological theories of gentrification and urban studies must account for the fact that many Dominican immigrants have already been displaced through similar pushing forces that required them to migrate to the United States in the first place. Despite this displacement, previous studies have shown how Dominican immigrants still carry their Dominican identity with them, maintaining their Dominicanidad even as they build new communities in the United States. “The Creation of the Home” furthers these

understandings by demonstrating that gentrification does not change existing dynamics of assimilation and cultural reproduction among immigrants. In fact, I find that Dominicans have found ways to stay in community and take their symbolic home with them, even as they move to the Bronx, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey.⁶²

I argue that maintaining Dominicanidad alive is more than just a way to pass down culture through generations, it is a part of people's identity that pushes back notions of conforming to Americanness. Dominicanidad shows that there is more than one way of existing in the United States. Gentrification and displacement threaten to strip away ethnic enclaves that are the ultimate expression of culture. Stripping away culture signifies taking away identity and life, stripping Dominican livelihood.

Future Studies

Future studies should consider how these dynamics play out in some findings that other researchers might look at in semi-private spaces like local community organizations. Specifically, informal community clubs that were mentioned by some of my participants as centers where they feel *Dominicanidad* alive. Some of these meetings take place in informal places like building basements, or more formal ones like rented locals. They are often themed like: members of a specific Dominican sports team or a selected city or *barrio* (i.e Club Los Joyeros Unidos).

Future studies might also consider leveraging literature or creative writing as a method of data collection. In this study, I use literature as a *punto de partida* and a door of opportunity to

⁶² Phillip Granberry and Krizia Valentino, "Latinos in Massachusetts: Dominicans," *Gastón Institute Publications*, April 1, 2020, https://scholarworks.umb.edu/gaston_pubs/250. Sebastián Villamizar-Santamaría, "The Dominican Population of the New York Metro Region, 1970-2019" (Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies at The Graduate Center, April 7, 2021), <https://clacls.gc.cuny.edu/2021/03/30/dominican-population-in-nyc-after-1980/>.

explain the sociological. Before beginning my research, I wanted to open the space for my participants to reproduce *Dominicanidad* and make literary production part of their interview process. However, I found myself limited by current structures of sociological research, which is one of the main reasons I included poems made from my participants' collective voices as part of this project. As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, sociologists often disregard literature as a very important component of finding solutions and creating ways in which participants and people can express themselves. By using literature and literary expression as a point of departure for social research, social scientists will be able to provide a voice that allows immigrant groups to have a say in the narratives that are portrayed about them and a door to seeing the world the way they see it. The poems and literary pieces in this text allow readers to connect with participants and see them as more than subjects of study.

EPÍLOGO

Llego a la conclusión de este proyecto eternamente agradecida con mis participantes quienes más que yo son expertos en lo que vivir en el alto Manhattan. Escribo este proyecto cómo una dominicana de la diáspora que se ha alejado de ambos la isla y Washington Heights, y es por medio de mis participantes que logro darle sentido a aquellas observaciones ambiguas en cada visita al vecindario. Mediante este proyecto le doy sentido a aquel sentimiento de familiaridad que me brinda el vecindario cada vez que retorno a él. Este proyecto me ha brindado la oportunidad de conectarme conmigo misma y con mis recuerdos de la vida en la isla y fuera de ella como nada que haya escrito antes.

Uno de los mayores retos al escribir esta tesis fue discernir cuando era propicio introducirme a mí misma como participante en la recreación de la Dominicanidad ya que al igual que mis participantes continúo recreando mi hogar imaginario y llevándolo conmigo a todos lados. A través de mis estudios universitarios me parecía casi imposible no utilizar mi identidad como Dominicana Inmigrante como punto de partida a la hora de escribir. Mediante la creación del hogar se me hizo inevitable despertar a la Madoris de la isla. Y es que para mí, la sociología y la literatura hispana se convirtieron en fuentes en las que poco a poco iba descubriendo y dando sentido a partes de mí.

En este proyecto, la sociología se convierte en una herramienta de análisis del ser dominicana dentro y fuera de la isla, mientras que la literatura poco a poco se convierte en

profesora y guía para expresar las interrupciones de identidad que enfrentaba y la necesidad de aferrarme a mi identidad dominicana a toda costa. Mediante la poesía y literatura logré conectar con sus experiencias y sanar aquel vacío que conlleva dejarlo todo y empezar de nuevo. A través de esta tesis, poco a poco fui recreando yo misma mi hogar portátil mediante esta colección de experiencias.

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