

## Metamorphosing Identities: Dominicans in New Jersey\*

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### ABSTRACT

This essay engages Dominicans in New Jersey to explore and highlight areas that remain obscure and neglected in the study of the transnational experience of this population in general. In particular, the essay pays attention to the experience of young Dominican immigrants and Dominican Americans, whose live relation to Dominican identity is markedly different from that of their immigrant parents and older generations of immigrants. After providing an initial overview of Dominicans in New Jersey through a discussion of statistical data and press coverage, the essay uses interview materials with young men and women of this population to highlight where they locate and feel dominicanidad: in language use and its affective dimensions as well as in other expressive and cultural practices (eating, dancing) that take place within family and other kin networks. These locations for feeling and identification with Dominican identity challenge us to appreciate better just how different being Dominican looks when seen by some of the young people with whom I spoke.

Keywords: Dominican identity, college students, New Jersey, diaspora, transnational, identity, dominicanidad, language.

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## RESUMEN

Este ensayo desarrolla la categoría de “Dominicanos en Nueva Jersey” para explorar y enfocar áreas que todavía quedan opacas y descuidadas en el estudio sobre la experiencia transnacional de esta población. En particular, este ensayo presta atención a la experiencia de los jóvenes inmigrantes dominicanos y los dominico-americanos, cuya relación vivida con la identidad dominicana es marcadamente diferente de la de sus padres inmigrantes y de la de generaciones anteriores de inmigrantes. Tras proveer un resumen de la condición de los dominicanos en Nueva Jersey a través de datos estadísticos y de cobertura en la prensa, este ensayo utiliza entrevistas con jóvenes de esta población para enfocar dónde ellos/as localizan y sienten la dominicanidad: en las prácticas lingüísticas y sus dimensiones afectivas, al igual que en otras prácticas expresivas y culturales (la comida, el baile) que tienen lugar en un ambiente familiar y de otros parentescos. Estos locales para el sentir y la identificación con la identidad dominicana nos retan a apreciar mejor lo diferente que los jóvenes con los que los que hablé sienten el ser dominicano.

Palabras clave: Identidad dominicana, estudiantes universitarios, Nueva Jersey, diáspora, transnacional, identidad, dominicanidad, lenguaje.

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When celebrations of dates important to Dominicans rear their heads, I am always struck by how observers invoke the term *dominicanidad*. Statements like “la dominicanidad estará en despliegue” used to make me rush out of my apartment to Fifth Avenue in midtown New York City to find *dominicanidad*. What was it? Who was it? Where was it? Maybe one of the boys or girls who wrapped the Dominican flag around their heads, the Mexican vendors who wore and sold the Dominican flag in mid-February or mid-August to help sales — maybe one of them could tell me what *dominicanidad* was. Maybe it would spring forth like a perforated vein, spewing out of a *carroza* and drenching the consciousness of all of us with *hambre de patria* as we watched personalities and politicians smile, get their pictures taken, talk to *El Pachá*, and continue walking. “Despliegues of dominicanidad” in the United States are often about the suits, the flags, the politicians, the *chercha*, that longing to celebrate a homeland somewhere in the geography of our minds, a carnivalesque transformation of antagonistic localities into spaces where we indulge the *joie de vivre* of what is far and near, *aquí y*

*allá*, somewhere behind the tears of our departures and the knowing smile sketched in our faces after hearing a *cuento colora'ò*, the latest bachata, or the latest bemoaning of the state of electricity in the barrios where we grew up.

That longing to uphold, to reach out, to display and to exalt nationalist pride copes with a reality of ongoing connection and displacement with and from the homeland and from the traditional geopolitical and psychic moorings of *dominicanidad*. The traces of these communal encounters with something we might call “Dominican identity” in the United States take place at specific times during the calendar year, but they also manifest themselves in signs of the concentration of Dominicans in specific parts of cities and towns where one might see a flag, hear merengue or bachata, or eat *mangú*. Yet Dominicans abroad have increasingly shared their cultural artifacts, practices, and traditions with other groups with whom they cohabit, alerting even casual observers to the fact that whatever *dominicanidad* is supposed to be is not settled but negotiated. Earlier models of cultural or nationalistic insularity have been buckling under the pressure of continued contact and interaction with others inside and outside the geopolitical boundaries of the Dominican Republic (D.R.). Thus, one challenge before us is to point and document Dominican presence, and that is part of what I will do (for the state of New Jersey) throughout this essay. However, the more important contribution this essay will make is to point to how some young people (some Dominican-born, some of Dominican descent) talk about their heritage, their present, and future. To be more specific, some of the young people with whom I spoke located *dominicanidad* not so much in signs of collective pride as they did in the meanings they attached to language use. What emerge, I will contend, are glimpses of a slight alteration, and evolution, of how young Dominicans (immigrant as well as US-born) imagine their relationships to that homeland and to their families.

The essay will begin by offering a general (though far from exhaustive) discussion of Dominican presence in New Jersey, which will then be followed by a brief engagement with the lives and educational trajectories of a few young Dominicans and Dominican-Americans. Although the picture that will emerge is partial, that partiality presents a counterpoint to the perspective one would associate with older populations and with these young people’s parents in scholarly and popular writings about Dominican immigrants. I am interested in highlighting these perspectives because they are neglected and because they add something crucial to any discussion of Dominican identity by virtue of illustrating how much we are changing. Although my invocation of a “we” thus far may appear to flatten differences, part of what Dominicans everywhere (myself included) must grapple with is our dizzying heterogeneity. My contribution aims

not only to add “age” to the variables we must consider when thinking *dominicanidad*, but to appreciate better just how different Dominican identity looks when seen by some of the young people with whom I spoke.

## 1. IN THE GARDEN STATE

Pulitzer-prize winner Junot Díaz is perhaps one of the better-known Dominican Americans who hail from New Jersey, but he is only one of the most visible examples of Dominican success in the United States. Recent milestones for Dominicans in New Jersey include the election of Alex Blanco as Passaic’s Mayor. Blanco is the first *elected* Mayor of Dominican descent but not the first person with such a background to serve in this capacity in the United States. Marcos Devers was the first interim Mayor with a similar national / ethnic background in Lawrence, Massachusetts (Llorente 2009a). Bronx-born Camelia M. Valdes, nominated by then Governor Corzine towards the end of his term as state governor, was elected as first county prosecutor of Dominican descent in Passaic County in 2009, after serving as federal prosecutor in the U.S. attorney’s office in the city of Newark (Cowen). According to journalist Elizabeth Llorente, there are about 20 elected officials of Dominican descent in the state of New Jersey, making the state (along with New York and Massachusetts) another site of growing political representation by and for Dominicans (Llorente 2009a).

New York has been and continues to be an important point of arrival and settlement to Dominican immigrants to the United States. Nevertheless, the state of New Jersey has ranked second among US states of destinations for these populations at least for the last two decades (See Table 1, Geographical Distribution of Dominicans by State). New Jersey has also experienced extraordinary growth in Dominican presence since 1990: an increase of 158.54% between 1990 and 2000 (from 52,807 to 136,529 persons) and of 43.21% between 2000 and 2007, making Dominican population growth (at 195,528 persons in 2007) second only to that of Mexicans in New Jersey (See Graph 1, Dominican Population in N.J. and Table 2, Selected Latino Population Groups in N.J.). It is also significant that Dominican population growth between 1990 and 2000 outpaced overall growth of Dominican populations in the United States (89%) for that decade (Migration Policy Institute). Five cities in the state (Paterson, Jersey City, Passaic City, Perth Amboy and Union City) have figured among the top 11 cities of Dominican concentration in the United States since 1990 (Table 3, Top Cities of Dominican Concentration). While the geographical distribution of Dominicans in the US veered strongly in the direction of New York State in 1990 (69.9%) of the total, by 2007 that number had gone down to 50.1% of the total while the distribution of Dominicans in

states such as New Jersey (from 10.4% in 1990 to 13.7% in 2007) and Florida (with 6.7% in 1990 to 12.6% in 2007) increased and suggest both direct migration to these states and also secondary displacement from Dominicans after living in New York State for some years.

The arrival and settlement of Dominicans in New Jersey follows patterns recognizable in better-studied sites of Dominican presence and growth in the United States. Although families have been settling in the state since the 1940s,<sup>1</sup> the earlier settlements began to experience some growth in the aftermath of the passing of the Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 and the loosening of US immigration restrictions. Unlike the early settlement of political dissidents that characterized NY-based Dominican communities, immigrants in New Jersey were likely to have been made up of small numbers of political dissidents but also of a sizable number of persons looking for economic opportunities unavailable in the D.R. as well as in the manufacturing sectors of New York City, which began to experience downsizing after the fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s (Brustein). Consistent with trends observed in New York State, for instance, the migration and settlement of Dominicans in New Jersey tends to be organized around the pooling of resources of biological families, with pioneering members learning of a specific site, developing the requisite networks to identify work possibilities there, and then establishing themselves until they are able to sponsor and support their relatives. Despite the fact that migration to New Jersey probably often takes place directly from the Dominican Republic (especially to cities with high concentrations of compatriots), it is also the case that Dominican settlement and concentration throughout the state also often follows the search for affordable housing, viable work options (including the ethnic economy), and environments more amenable to raising children than the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City.

Even when talking about “economic opportunity,” we may need to be cognizant that it may mean something different in New Jersey for Dominicans. The majority of Dominicans currently residing in the state arrived after 1990, as can be gleaned from the fact that in 1990, at 52,807 persons, that number constitute less than one third of the overall 195,528 persons counted in 2007. The extraordinary growth of Dominican presence in the state throughout the 1990s is consistent with national trends in US-bound migration by those populations, which peaked between 1990 and 1994 (Migration Policy Institute 11). In particular, this settlement took place during a decade when most of the existing manufacturing sector in the state of New Jersey had already declined considerably following the 1970s recession and the massive loss of factory jobs

in the Northeast of the United States. This growth despite the lack of jobs in sectors traditionally associated with immigration suggests that the role of economic considerations as “pull” factors in Dominican immigration and settlement in the state needs to be investigated further.

The gendered dimension of the working lives of Dominican populations in the state also needs specific consideration, especially when set against indicators of educational advancement and English language ability. In 2007, women made up more than half of the population (52.7%) versus 47.3% of men (Graph 2, Dominican Population in N.J. by Sex). However, young Dominican women were more likely to be active in the labor force than men. Out of the 35.01% of members of the population under 25 years of age and tabulated as either “Not Active” or “Active” in 2007, Dominican women represented a higher percentage (at 19.07%) of Dominicans active in the labor market (versus 15.39% of men) for that age group (Table 4, Labor Force Tabulation of Dominicans in N.J. by Sex). It is reasonable to expect these relatively small percentages of labor force activity (over 60% “Not applicable” within this age group for both males and females) are partly related to the fact that many young people cannot work formally until they reach the age of 16 and that many may be in school. Nevertheless, the higher percentage of female participation in the job market changes after the threshold age of 25 is reached. Three out of every four Dominicans older than 25 years of age and living in New Jersey were active in the labor market, with a rate of male active participation almost fifteen percent above female active participation in the labor market among members of that age group (82.95% male vs. 66.91% female) (See Table 4).

Thus, Dominican women appear to lead the way in becoming active participants in the labor market, only to become less likely to be involved in it after the age of 25. One might speculate about the scarcity of jobs that might be attractive to women, but chances are that Dominican women juggle their insertion within the job market in New Jersey with the likelihood of having other obligations in the domestic sphere, as can be gleaned by the fact that slightly over forty percent of Dominican families in the state were headed by women in 2007 (Graph 3, Female Headed Families in the U.S. and N.J.). That percentage of female headed households in the state is above the mean percentage for Dominicans in the US (at about 36%) and all of the other available percentages of such family leadership for the state and the country (by comparison, for instance, female headed families among Hispanic / Latinos are slightly above 20% for the state, which is higher than the national mean of about 18%; the percentages are also substantially lower for Non-Hispanic Black populations, with 28% female headed households in New Jersey and about 29% for all of the United States) (See Graph 3).

Women are also represented in higher percentages than men among Dominican students enrolled throughout the state from the earliest stages of school (0-5 years of age) to students over the age of 21 (Table 5, Dominican Student Enrollment in N.J.). As might be expected, the highest percentages in school enrollment appear in the groups of 12-14 and 15-17 years of age for males and females, and this is also where the largest percentage of gender discrepancies can be seen among public school students: 92.75% females in comparison to 88.47% males in the 12-14 age group; 98.24% females in comparison to 85.59% males in the 15-17 age group (See Table 5). One interesting and unexpected variation from this tendency is the percentages among students enrolled in private institutions. For both the 12-14 as well as the 15-17 age groups, male enrollments are higher than those of females: 5.19% males vs. 3.98% females for 12-14 year olds; 6.59% males versus 1.76% females among the 15-17 age group (See Table 5). The precipitous decline of school enrollment among students in the 18-21 age range (a drop from upwards of 80% in males and females to enrollment figures hovering between 33 and 43 percent in the 18-21 group) is most marked among women also, for they go from public school enrollment of more than ten percent above that of males among 15-17 year olds (98.24% vs. 85.59% males) to ten percent *below* males among 18-21 year olds (33.82% women versus 43.40% males). It is possible that the decline in female school enrollment coincides with their early integration and activity in the labor market, but the shifts in some of these population dynamics around school enrolment leave many questions unanswered. The numbers may be small, but why are the percentages of Dominican males higher for private school enrollment between the ages of 12-18? Why do the percentages of Dominican women *not* enrolled in school go from 0% between 15-17 years of age to 91.27% in the over 21 years of age category?

A traditional script of challenges could be ascribed to the gender discrepancies discussed above: young Dominican women in New Jersey may be enrolled in schools in higher percentages because being educated is seen as a value that is not incompatible with traditional Dominican femininity. Like young men, they face increased responsibilities in their households, especially after they turn eighteen years of age, which may account for why they enroll less in the pursuit of their educations and participate more actively in the job market. Their drop in participation in the labor market after they turn 25 may be ascribed to an increase in responsibilities in their families — due to marriage / pregnancy, becoming single parents, job scarcity, or having to play a larger role in the support of their parents and other members of the biological family. There are reasons to want to understand better to what degree or not these somewhat clichéd characterizations may apply here, but the truth of the matter is that 31.3% of all

Dominicans in the state have less than a high school diploma and only 33.5% had graduated from high school in 2007 (Table 6, Educational Attainment of Dominicans in N.J.). While it is clear that some college and the completion of Associate's Degree are something these populations pursue in sizable numbers (21.4% in 2007) only 9.9% of Dominicans reported achieving a Bachelor's Degree and 3.9% reported graduate or professional degrees in 2007 (See Table 6).

The high proportion of Dominican youth dropping out of school may be due to factors consistently associated with the high rates of high school dropout among Hispanics in New Jersey. Some of the issues associated with indicators for the Hispanic populations include 1) language barriers, which impact students in their performance and parents in their communication with instructors; 2) financial demands, which may force young women and men to work and contribute to the pooling of resources with their parents and which may force young men, in particular, to drop out, find work, and assist in the sustenance of female-headed households where an additional income is needed; 3) limited resources (structural in the form of curriculum as well as human) are available for students who need assistance in acquiring English language competence; and 4) "issues all teens may face, such as peer pressure, low self-esteem and a lack of family support and positive role models" (Needham).

The gendered dimensions of Dominican integration and participation in their receiving communities might also be appreciated in available indicators of English language ability. Among Dominicans who were 25 years of age or older, more women than men reported that they did not speak English "at all" or that they spoke it "Not Well," and fewer women than men reported that they spoke the language "Well" or "Very well" (Graph 4, English Language Ability of Dominicans in N.J.). The number of women and men who only spoke English was similar, about 6%. Although it is important to keep in mind that these are self-reported measures of English language ability, there may be a correlation between male higher participation in the labor market for that age group and language ability. In other words, one possible hypothesis is that higher male reports of English language ability stem from their larger participation in labor sectors that involve interactions with English-speaking employers and/or customers, which might force them to acquire the requisite language skills and competence for daily transactions. Yet this is another link that needs further investigation.

In the five cities in New Jersey with significant Dominican presence, more than half of the population reported having high school diplomas in 2000. Paterson, Jersey City, Passaic, Perth Amboy and Union are predominantly immigrant cities, with foreign-born residents ranging from 32.8% in Paterson to 58.7% in Union City — all much



higher than the percentage of foreign-born residents in the state, at 17.58%. These five cities are also strongly Hispanic: Jersey City is the only of the five where Hispanics make up a third of the population (28.3%) but in all other cases, this population made up at least half of all residents (from 50.1% in Paterson to as much as 82.3% in Union City).<sup>2</sup>

In a state where homeownership is very important (at 65.6%), these five cities are characterized by homeownership percentages well below the state average (the lowest being Union City at 18.2% and the highest being Perth Amboy at 40.5%). Finally, these five cities also have percentages of persons living below the poverty line that are at least twice the state average of 8.5% for 2000 (at the lowest end was Perth Amboy with 17.6% of persons living below poverty line and at the high end was Union with 21.4%).

Clearly, entrepreneurial economic activities in the cities where Latino/as and Dominicans predominate may help begin to explain the attractiveness of these locations to immigrants. Of the five cities with high concentrations of Dominicans, only in Jersey City are Latino-owned firms at a low 17.1% (still high compared to the state mean of 7% firms owned by “Hispanics”). In the other cities among the five destinations for Dominicans in the state, the percentages of “Hispanic-owned firms” are impressive: 40.8% for Paterson City; 44.0% for Passaic City; 51.0% for Perth Amboy; and 53.5% for Union City.<sup>3</sup> Dominican contributions to the development and growth of vital local economies have been notable enough for the president of the Dominican American National Roundtable, Nestor Montilla, to argue that “Dominicans own and operate a significant percentage of small businesses in communities where we live and work, and are thus the backbone of their economy.”<sup>4</sup> As in the case of elected officials, Dominicans business leaders have begun to organize in the state and to link up with entrepreneurs in New York, Florida, and Massachusetts. The Dominican American National Roundtable has also begun to work in providing technical assistance in accounting, business practices, and small start-up loans to encourage the development of a vibrant ethnic economy.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, initial hypotheses of what has fueled Dominican population growth in the state of New Jersey would point to the geographical proximity to New York City of the northern counties where Dominicans have settled, the availability of cheaper housing options, the accessibility and mobility between New Jersey and the broader New York Metropolitan Area, and the opportunities to start up and sustain small businesses. Important ways to enrich these initial hunches would engage the broader contours of Latino/a settlement in New Jersey, particularly in the case of Cubans and Puerto Ricans, whose demographic and political presence and influence may have contributed in specific local contexts to early collaborations and coalitions with Dominicans. Clearly, having

twenty or more elected officials as well as playing a crucial part of the local economies where they have been settling in largest numbers for only the last two decades are impressive accomplishments. Nevertheless, the various indicators discussed thus far offer a much more complex picture of the status of Dominicans in the state, one that demands the attention of those invested in the advancement and success of these populations. The challenges Dominicans have and will continue to face in the labor market, especially after the recession of 2009, are only likely to increase in light of a slow-recovering economy. In this sense, they share the plight of many other national / ethnic groups in the United States.

At the same time, it is clear to community politicians and advocates that existing data are incomplete, and some efforts in the state point to the relevance of documentation and knowledge-building in the making of Dominicans as important players in state politics. The Paterson-based Institute for Latino Studies, Research & Development, Inc., for example, took the initiative of undertaking what they called “The Dominican Census” in 2009, in part to complement U.S. Census as well as American Community Survey data, which clearly cannot capture fully Dominican presence and its impact locally and at the state level (Llorente 2009). In addition, community members, activists, politicians, service providers, and allies of Dominicans have been sharing knowledge, strategizing, and organizing in New Jersey through the “Conference on Dominican Affairs of New Jersey,” an organization formed in 2000 and that has the mission of “to provide a forum by which Dominicans residing in New Jersey can evaluate and assess their role in the New Jersey community and create a proactive agenda to improve their economic, educational, social / cultural, and political well-being.”<sup>6</sup> Their 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on Dominican Affairs took place in February 2010, but their organizing activities over the last decade have resulted in a series of initiatives to address the challenges Dominicans face in the state such as the need for the development of community leaders and initiatives to encourage young men and women to continue the pursuit of their educations at the college level.<sup>7</sup>

Until now, this account of Dominican presence in the state of New Jersey has relied on somewhat traditional definitions of what makes someone “Dominican.” A Migration Policy Institute report on this population puts forward a functional definition of the basic unit of analysis used in this essay thus far:

The Dominican population includes all those who were born in the Dominican Republic as well as those who define themselves as Dominican through origin or ancestry. This includes immigrants who were born in countries other than the Dominican Republic who reported their origin or ancestry as Dominican (Migration Policy Institute 34).

Conceptually, this definition of “Dominican” performs a lot of important work: it enables individuals and collectivities to trace their connections to one another, connections linked to the Dominican nation-state through blood, nativity, or a combination of the two. As a category of identity, “Dominican” is largely mobilized for the coding and aggregation of information that allows politicians, advocates, and service providers to make claims of the U.S. and Dominican states regarding rights and entitlements, in addition to pushing forward the project of documenting the presence and dispersion of this population throughout the world. Finally, as the category that helps direct the first part of the inquiry this essay pursues, “Dominican” allows the observer / writer the possibility of developing an initial map of a collective in a specific locality, a map driven by the collation of aggregates of data, a labor of interpretation with and across tables, graphs, journalistic reports, etc. — in short, a project of knowledge not too far removed from the operations of surveillance.

But “Dominican”, in all of the glorious functionality of the definition I offered above, effects identitarian, affective, and conceptual closures that I will now seek to disrupt through writing more interested in stretching than in limiting how we think about this identity. The task at hand is to offer some initial hints of how thinking of “Dominicans in New Jersey” might contribute much more than the traditional picture of these populations — a picture that, no doubt, still needs sketching and reproduction, though that is not my central preoccupation in what follows. Through the discussion of some of the young people with whom I spoke, I want to suggest some of the ways in which we might think *dominicanidad* differently.

## 2. FROM THE GARDEN STATE

“My subject: / how to explain to you that I / don’t belong to English / though I belong nowhere else.” These are the last four verses of a poem by Cuban-American critic and poet Gustavo Pérez Firmat that open Junot Díaz’s collection of short stories, *Drown*.<sup>8</sup> It is clear that apart from garnering enormous acclaim for the now Pulitzer-prize winner Díaz, this important collection of short stories innovated in writings by and about Dominicans in the United States by putting New Jersey at its center and demonstrating how the Dominican American experience stretched well beyond better-known locations such as Washington Heights in New York City. For the first time, English-language readers became acquainted with characters mediating the immigrant experience of their parents and their own transnational lives, which were often lived moving back and forth between New Jersey and the Dominican Republic, back and

forth between English and Spanish, developing a sense of themselves as young people precisely in that shuttling back and forth, knowing that one may not belong completely, but that there is something to that incompleteness of belonging that produces alternative ways of being in the world.

In opening his collection of short stories with this poem by Pérez Firmat, Díaz situates the geographies of his undertaking within the now familiar waters of the US-Latino experience — his is a citation that pays homage as much as it promises to wrestle with its “subject”: the makings of subjectivities in a somewhere that is geographic and linguistic. But maybe “homage” is not what Díaz is after; perhaps this poem as opening operates more like a theme while his stories will be his “variations.” The important point remains that the landscapes of the lives he sets out to narrate, while strongly shaped by the specificities of the Dominican immigrant experience, are linked to historical and literary precedents he highlights.

*Dominicanidad* becomes something else when lived in quotidian dialogue to other forms of belonging, and many Dominicans living in New Jersey recognize these points of connection regardless of whether they walk down Market Street in Paterson or sit at the Juan Pablo Duarte Park in Union City. Some early arguments about the importance and urgency of activism around pan-Latino labels stressed that Latino groups often find themselves in structurally similar conditions where they settle, and that these structural parallels could be mobilized effectively to build coalitions. However, one thing that has become clear as these dialogues have aged among students of US Latino populations is that different Latino groups may find themselves in roughly equivalent structural positions, but their orientations in the labor market will still be markedly different depending of the local resources they are able to mobilize. In the case of many of the Dominicans I have met in New Jersey, the experiences and knowledge of those who came before them have been instrumental in negotiating the system, finding a job, pooling resources for childcare, etc. I have met traditional families struggling to survive, just as I have met male-headed and female-headed single-parent households who are managing well on their own with a job, children, and financial commitments.

The diversity of experiences I have noticed among Dominicans in New Jersey also suggests the importance of paying attention to the impact that education, race, and class will have in immigrant incorporation as well as in the class formation of children of Dominican descent. Some of the Dominicans with professional backgrounds (acquired before or after arriving in the United States) devote themselves to the community if and when they are able to validate the educations through further

training and / or job acquisition. But this is far from the experiences of others, whose connection to fellow Dominicans in New Jersey may be structured in specifically classed ways. Although the experience of professional Dominicans who move to the United States, like that of many immigrants, is characterized by an initial loss of class status, what upward mobility will mean for them is shaped by their own investment in their family's *progreso* and the specific expression that social advancement acquires in New Jersey – a state that has some of the poorest cities and the wealthiest suburbs in the United States.

For immigrant children or children of Dominican descent, the single most important factor shaping their education in the state of New Jersey is the school district to which they belong. New Jersey has some of the highest property taxes in all of the United States, and an important destination of those tax dollars paid by homeowners are the sustenance of local infrastructures, services, and school districts. In New Jersey, as in other parts of the country, there are cases of townships where one might pay very high taxes for lousy schooling of children and inefficient local services, but high property values are correlated strongly with the highest -ranked school districts. Even if one does not have children and does not really care about the quality of local school districts, this concern is crucial aspect in decisions to purchase a home (or not) in a given destination: one must think of resale value, as professionals in real estate might put it.

Apart from an orientation towards financial investment in the homeland, Dominicans might be discouraged in the pursuit of homeownership in New Jersey precisely because of the relatively high property tax rates with which they may contend. But being educated in high quality school districts was mostly far removed from the experience of most of the young people with whom I spoke.

For some of these young Dominicans, adjusting to living in the U.S. was about grappling with the experience of downward class mobility directly: whereas they attended high-quality schools in their towns of origin, living in the US required their adjustment to school districts that did not offer similar quality of education. Sonia S.,<sup>9</sup> for instance, was one of three children in her family. She grew up in Bonao. The daughter of a chemist and an accountant, Sonia told me about growing up among her uncle's in the aftermath of her parents' divorce, which took place when she was seven years of age. Her mother came to live and work in the Bronx in 1986, and the children joined her three years later. The family then moved from the Bronx to Paterson, NJ, where they settled. Eventually, Sonia's mother married a man from Perú.

The contrast was quite stark, as Sonia recalled in our interview. While in Bonao, she and her siblings (a brother and a sister) attended a private school catering to the

children of parents working for a U.S. corporation. As a young student in Paterson, the children in this family began their adjustments to public education in the N.J. school system. Her district, as Sonia recalled, was not only poorly funded; eventually, the local government took it over because its standards were so low. She also talked about the attrition rates: only one in every five students who entered her school actually graduated. Sonia talked about teen pregnancy and other factors influencing high student dropout rates; but she also suggested that many of the students who went to high school with her were discouraged by “bad *consejería*.”

Sonia learned to speak English faster than her brother and sister, which transformed her into an advocate for herself as well as for her siblings. The children also made the point of speaking English at home to help their mother, who began to take language lessons and benefitted from the practice. After the first year, her brother transferred to a technical school in neighboring Passaic, while Sonia continued taking courses in English as a Second Language. She transitioned into regular English-language courses a year and a half after beginning her studies and after complaining that she needed more challenging classroom work. She took English, Algebra, and Home Economics, but realized that she still was missing out on subjects that would prepare her adequately. More protest added Biology and Advanced Placement English into her school roster.

At the time she started school in Paterson, Sonia noted that there were not many other Dominican students. Most of the Latina/os there were either Puerto Rican or “South American girls” from Colombia, Perú, and Ecuador. There were also students from countries in the Middle East, South Asia, as well as African Americans. As she began taking Advanced Placement courses, Sonia saw the numbers of African American and Latino/a students dwindle. Not many of her peers aspired to go to college, but having been placed in AP courses gave Sonia access to a mentoring program started by one of her teachers, which put students in her school in contact with “mostly white people from North Jersey” who talked to them about pursuing higher education and who sponsored college recruitment trips. Her college application process yielded acceptances to two in-state public universities and one private school outside of the state. Sonia moved out of the home to attend the university, but she stayed in New Jersey.

Despite her successes in high school, the first year of college at a big public university was difficult for Sonia. Without counseling and after failing courses that fulfilled curricular requirements, she was put on academic probation pending her successful performance in summer coursework. She did well in these and eventually finished a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and Latino Studies. She now serves as

program coordinator of a university-based Latino arts and culture center, and she continues to be a strong advocate of Latino and African American students attending this school.

Sonia's mother has twelve siblings in the Dominican Republic, and the daughter remembered visiting the country every summer. It was during these trips that she began to grapple with others' changing perception of her. To her cousins and friends, something fundamentally different had happened to Sonia: she had become "la Americana." Sonia's own perspective of her and her family's prospects in the United States were strongly shaped by that movement back and forth, that growing recognition that she was changing into someone her cousins recognized as different but that much of the responsibility of advocating for her and others was work that her mother could not take on. At the same time, it may have been that lingering sense of the difference in quality of the education she once received and the one to which she was entitled but did not receive what made Sonia a strong advocate for herself and her siblings as they adjusted to school in New Jersey. It is of consequence here that, as in many immigrant households, traditional child-parental roles were reversed because of the children's ease of adjustment to English: the siblings helped their mother learn the language but forcing her and themselves to speak the language. Clearly, it was probably also the case that children played a larger role in the administration of the household than can probably be captured by data on job participation by young Dominicans and Dominican Americans. They probably may not have contributed financially, but speaking with landlords, addressing and explaining utility problems, or translating in communications between parents and people outside of the household gave Sonia and her siblings added responsibilities, particularly given that the domestic unit was led by a single parent.

Sonia S. understood early on that speaking English was important but not enough to obtain a good education, and the glimpses of her family and individual history that she shared give us glimpses of the function of language as both means of quotidian communication and as mechanism for young, ambitious students to lobby for themselves. In this sense, Sonia may be an exception in that she did not let the absence of counseling, the poor quality of the education she was receiving, or negative academic experiences stop her from her project to better herself through education.

The experience of Eugenio D. offers a contrast with that of Sonia and underlines the importance of the quality of education students receive in a given school district. Born in San Cristóbal and living with his mother (who was then separated from the father), Eugenio arrived to live with his father in New York at the age of four. After divorcing his mother, Eugenio's father had remarried and lived with Eugenio's

stepmother. Eugenio's father had a total of nine children. Only two of these children were Eugenio's full siblings; five were half brothers and one half-sister, and some of these children had moved out and lived on their own. He did not see his mother for a long time after moving to New York.

When Eugenio was a sophomore in high school, his father was deported. Since returning to live with his mother was not an option, Eugenio had no choice but to move with one of his siblings who had a house in Bloomfield, N.J., where he went to school. While in New York, Eugenio remembered all of his neighbors to have been Dominican, but he began to interact with other Latino groups in Bloomfield (Puerto Ricans and Colombians, in particular). As an honors student and track athlete, he remembered being "forced to be around white people." Though he got along with all of the other kids, he avoided "bad influences," while explaining that his education was of a high quality and compared favorably to what he had experienced in New York before moving: smaller classes and a better connection with his guidance counselor. Eugenio remembered still having to struggle and fight to get himself into the right classes. Overall, however, he mentioned that he got a lot of help and that his attitude was different from that of most of the Dominican young people he knew, who were not planning to go to college.

Eugenio remembered that his dad spoke mostly in Spanish at home. Although he continued to speak it while living in New Jersey, he is most comfortable using the language to talk to his mother or speak with his aunts. And though he has returned to visit the Dominican Republic, Eugenio does not feel like a typical Dominican and has even been told by his relatives that "tú eres un blanquito." This feeling of not being "typical" has to do, in his view, with the fact that he does not know well the culture or how to participate in it. At the same time, however, Eugenio found during his first college years that there were other Dominican - and Latino -identified youth who, like him, were linked to one another by that sense of not quite belonging to specific Latino cultures yet belonging nowhere else. That basis for connection has enabled Eugenio to connect with others and to engage Dominican identity in his own way.

Several of the young men and women with whom I spoke mentioned feeling that the Spanish they spoke was "inadequate." While pointing to a sense of inadequacy and even shame in some instances, respondents like Eugenio D. also talked about the emotional and intellectual work and engagements they are able to activate through one language or the other. For instance, Eugenio mentioned that saying certain things in Spanish gives them "a lot more meaning" than doing so in English. And like others, Eugenio made a connection between Spanish and expressions of extreme emotion like anger or love; by contrast, English was a language Eugenio saw as connected with daily transactions.



Eugenio D.'s educational trajectory is distinct from that of Sonia S. because he had access to higher quality education during high school, which was coupled in his case with strong mentoring. Still, in both cases it is clear that young Dominicans end up having to do a bit of pushing themselves: to ensure that teachers and mentors understand that these students have more potential than might be expected; to ensure that they take the right courses and access as many opportunities as may be available to them.

In both cases, accessing spaces where “white” people were (presumably, other students and / or teachers) meant gaining access to the possibility of stronger educations. In as diverse a state as New Jersey, these brief glimpses of the trajectories of these students point to a connection of race, class, and upward mobility: both of these students entered honors programs and began to see fewer students of color in them; both of these students also began to be “forced” to be around people who did not look like themselves. Part of what becomes evident in these narratives is the tenacity of these young people; but a second layer of this involves their increasing understanding that being distant from people like themselves is precisely what allows them to move forward in their own educations. Finally, both Sonia S. and Eugenio D. find their way to sustain a connection with other Latinos and with their families, but this is something they both end up having to do themselves through the networks they cultivate and (in the case of Sonia) the work they take up.

Language use becomes an important variable in the way these young people understand their entrance and adaptation to the worlds they lived in. For Sonia, it was clear that learning English and pursuing advanced courses in it would be a benefit to her and to her family. Eugenio's narrative begins to offer a glimpse of what it means to grow up in family and school contexts where Spanish is not regularly spoken, and where language competency in either (or both) language has specific meanings not just at the level of content but, importantly, at the level of affect.

A third narrative will help develop further the way some young Dominicans think of the movement between English and Spanish as one that is emotionally charged and meaningful. Ricardo M. was born in Brooklyn in the mid-1980s by a father who came to the United States in the 1960s and who worked first as a janitor and then as bodega entrepreneur. His mother, who eventually moved back to the Dominican Republic, was a seamstress while they lived in New York. Although he is one of several children and he lived in the D.R. for short periods while growing up, Ricardo recalled his siblings as being very invested in things Dominican (a combination of practices they learned to associate with *dominicanidad* through their parents and other relatives in the United States and in the towns they visited); as the youngest, he was supposed to be

proud of his heritage and speak Spanish. But that is not how things went for Ricardo, as most of his friends were West Indian, African American, and white. Once the family moved to Queens, there were more Dominicans there than in Brooklyn, but Ricardo found his difficulty in communicating in Spanish to be a factor that inhibited him from developing friendships with other Dominican youth.

Unlike Sonia and Eugenio, both of whom had come to New Jersey with their families, Ricardo M. moved to the state to attend the university. He explained that he did speak Spanish, but that he began to develop a strong sense of the spaces and interactions that made Spanish or English his language of choice. While English was the language to communicate with his siblings, for example, Ricardo uses Spanish to “speak to people I love.” Because he was so insecure in his use of Spanish, Ricardo stressed that he spoke it to people whom he trusted: partly because he felt inadequate and partly because he needed to trust his interlocutor and ask that person for help in oral expression. English, he explained, was the language he used to express complex ideas, the language he felt comfortable using when addressing his siblings because he can explain himself better, because his goal in communicating with them is “to be understood.” Speaking Spanish, on the other hand, exposed him both at the level of knowledge and at the level of emotions. It was not a language he could have arguments in.

Ricardo M. offered a rich and poignant explanation of the affective dimensions of language use. He began to talk about his use of Spanish with his girlfriend. It was one thing to say “I love you,” but to say “*te amo*” conjured something on a different dimension for Ricardo. For him, saying “*te amo*” suggests future, a future perhaps like that of his parents, of growing up next to one another. “It is not easy to take back,” he suggested. Actual usage and personal history aside, it is important to pay attention to the emotional work people like Ricardo M. make of a language that they often feel inadequate in. By pointing to “*te amo*” as an expression that he cannot take back easily, Ricardo suggests both the depth of the feelings expressed by those words and the intimacies that they signal.

Shuttling between English and Spanish also helps Ricardo wrestle and negotiate family pressures. As he explained, his parents did not know “who I am.” They did not know his interests, what he majored in at the university, and what his values were. Ricardo often found himself to be in disagreement with the “traditional ideas” of people in his family, particularly with his parents. But having disagreements was something he tended to do with his siblings, with whom he could communicate in English. With his parents, it was clear to Ricardo that explaining “who he was” was not necessary for them to provide support and love.

Ricardo explained that while growing up in Brooklyn, he thought of himself as a Dominican — something which remained the case even after the family moved to Queens. But he was surprised to find as many Dominicans as he did when he began to attend a public university in New Jersey. Where he now studies he has come to realize that he is a Dominican American, an identification which has allowed him to connect and network with others at this school and to become more comfortable speaking English around persons of similar background.

Like the examples discussed earlier, Ricardo M. is a product of an US educational system that does not value the bilingual and bicultural backgrounds of students like him. Nevertheless, his reality and identity as a young Dominican American, like those of Eugenio and Sonia, are anchored in specific local histories and individual educational trajectories that juggle the values of home and homeland with the exigencies of life in the United States.

We have before us three young Dominican Americans whose connection to that identification, “Dominican”, is not reducible to naïve nationalistic pride. And it has been my contention throughout this essay that together with the work of interpreting survey and census data, our inquiry into what *dominicanidad* is in the United States might depart significantly from existing clichés when we put the perspectives of these young people in front of our intellectual and political agendas.

How might *dominicanidad* feel differently to a second generation that experiences the Dominican Republic and Dominican identity through New Jersey, through specific family practices and through signs they learn to mobilize when they interact with relatives and other Dominicans in their daily lives as they circulate between New Jersey and specific locations in the D.R.? What if that *dominicanidad* is something located in that language (Spanish) that makes them feel most deficient and most vulnerable? These are some of the questions we might raise, and it has been far from my goal in this essay to argue that this is the only or best way to grapple with Dominican identity in New Jersey. However, the direction of my analysis and inquiry is driven by a desire to think through practices of *dominicanidad* that exceed official traditions, emergent quotidian expressions (such as language use) that point to where we have been, the languages of and in which we realize our subjectivities, and who we might all become if we start to listen.

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## NOTES

First, thanks to the young women and men who spoke to me about their experiences as Dominican Americans in New Jersey. I am grateful to Professor Ramona Hernández and Iban Campo for commissioning me to write this paper, for their understanding and patience. Thank you to Sandra Rocio Castro and Silismar Suriel, of the Rutgers Center for Latino Arts and Culture, for their assistance in contacting the young people and providing space for my interviews. Finally, Noraida Martinez assisted me by undertaking a very useful search of newspaper articles on this topic. Thank you.

<sup>1</sup> See the description for the Newark Public Library 2003 exhibit *Dominicans in New Jersey: A Community on the Move*.

<sup>2</sup> *New Jersey QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau*, see <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/34000.html>.

<sup>3</sup> The data for this section and the basic demographic profiles of cities with a strong Dominican presence in NJ are drawn from the *New Jersey QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau*.

<sup>4</sup> "Montilla Delivers 'State of Dominicans in the US' Address."

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> <http://thelatinoinstitute.org/coda/> (Accessed 21 January 2010).

<sup>7</sup> For more information on CODA, see <http://thelatinoinstitute.org/coda/history-of-coda/>.

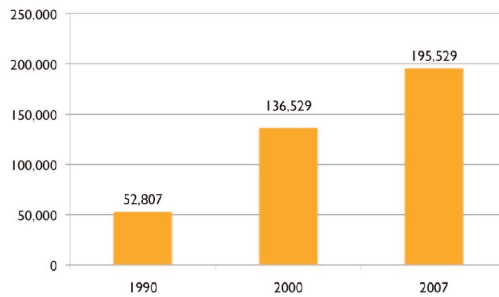
<sup>8</sup> Junot Díaz, *Drown*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> A pseudonym. In the interest of protecting their identities, I will use pseudonyms for all interviewees mentioned in this part of the essay.

APPENDIX  
GRAPHS

Graph 1  
Dominican Population in New Jersey

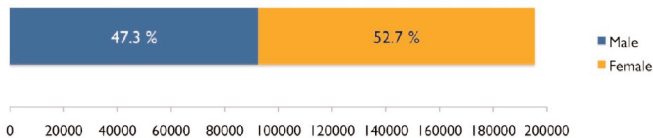
Dominican Population in New Jersey  
1990, 2000 & 2007



Source: The CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 2009.

Graph 2  
Dominican Population in New Jersey by Sex

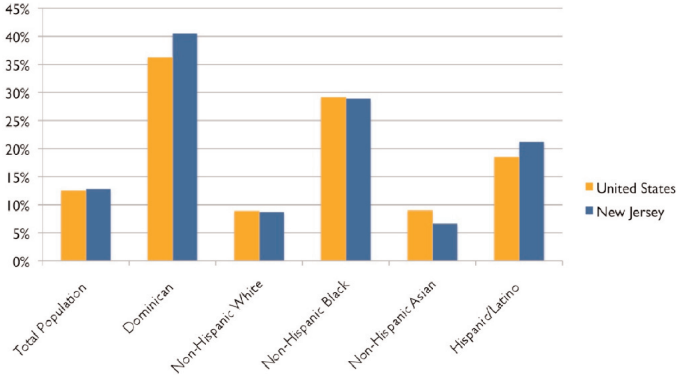
Dominican Population in New Jersey  
by Sex 2007



Source: The CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 2009.

Graph 3  
Female Headed Families in the U.S. and New Jersey

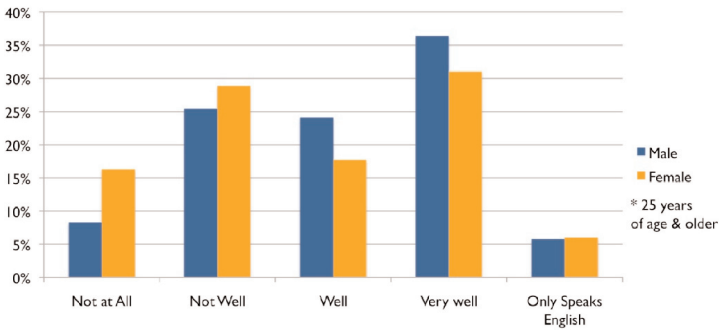
Female Headed Families in the U.S. & New Jersey  
2007



Source: The CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 2009.

Graph 4  
English Language Ability of Dominicans in New Jersey by Sex

English Language Ability of Dominicans\*  
in New Jersey by Sex – 2007



Source: The CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 2009.

## TABLES

Table 1  
Geographical Distribution of Dominicans by State

Geographical Distribution of Dominicans by State  
1990, 2000 & 2007

	1990	% of total	2000	% of total	2007	% of total
New York	357,868	69.9	617,901	59.3	717,553	50.1
New Jersey	52,807	10.4	136,529	13.1	195,528	13.7
Florida	34,268	6.7	98,410	9.4	179,789	12.6
Massachusetts	30,177	5.9	69,502	6.7	96,115	6.7
Rhode Island	9,374	1.8	24,588	2.4	36,274	2.5
Pennsylvania	3,687	0.7	13,667	1.3	50,274	3.5
Connecticut	3,946	0.8	12,830	1.2	11,370	0.8
Other States	19,170	3.8	68,483	6.6	144,980	10.1
Total	511,297	100	1,041,910	100	1,431,883	100

Source: The CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 2009.

Table 2  
Selected Latino Population Groups in New Jersey

Selected Latino Population Groups in New Jersey  
with Growth Rate – 1990, 2000 & 2007

	1990	2000	Rate of Growth 1990–2000	2007	Rate of Growth 2000–2007
Cubans	85,378	78,544	-8%	85,378	9.18%
Puerto Ricans	320,133	373,630	16.71%	320,133	7.39%
Mexican	28,759	94,286	227.85%	28,759	93.88%
Dominican	52,807	136,529	158.54%	52,807	43.21%

Source: The CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 2009.

Table 3  
Top Cities of Dominican Concentration

Top Cities of Dominican Concentration  
1990, 2000 & 2007

	1990	2000	2007
New York City, NY	332,713	554,638	622,492
Lawrence City, MA	11,095	22,111	29,318
Paterson City, NJ	8,750	19,977	28,467
Providence City, RI	8,138	19,915	25,273
Boston City, MA	8,102	19,061	23,949
Jersey City, NJ	5,779	12,598	12,022
Passaic City, NJ	6,422	12,481	11,883
Yonkers City, NY	5,272	11,431	16,311
Perth Amboy City, NJ	3,788	10,223	Unavailable
Union City, NJ	5,390	10,205	10,154
Miami City, FL	5,786	9,473	9,551

Source: The CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 2009.

Table 4  
Labor Force Tabulation of Dominicans in New Jersey by Sex

Labor Force Tabulation of Dominicans in  
New Jersey by Sex – 2007

	Labor Force Status	Male	Female	Total
Under 25 years of age	Not Applicable	66.33%	63.44%	64.99%
	Not Active	18.28%	17.49%	17.91%
	Active	15.39%	19.07%	17.10%
25 years of age or Older	Not Active	17.05%	33.09%	26.35%
	Active	82.95%	66.91%	73.65%

Source: The CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 2009.



Table 5  
Dominican Student Enrollment in New Jersey

Dominican Student Enrollment in  
New Jersey by Type & Sex – 2007

School Age Group		Male	Female
0-5	N/A	58.01%	42.12%
	Not enrolled	14.15%	15.99%
	Public school	26.51%	36.12%
	Private school	1.34%	5.72%
6-11	Not enrolled	5.91%	3.99%
	Public school	82.34%	80.88%
	Private school	11.24%	15.13%
12-14	Not enrolled	6.33%	3.28%
	Public school	88.47%	92.75%
	Private school	5.19%	3.98%
15-17	Not enrolled	7.85%	0%
	Public school	85.59%	98.24%
	Private school	6.59%	1.76%
18-21	Not enrolled	54.32%	56.38%
	Public school	43.40%	33.82%
	Private school	2.28%	9.80%
Over 21	Not enrolled	94.44%	91.27%
	Public school	3.68%	5.46%
	Private school	1.88%	3.27%

Source: The CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 2009.

Table 6  
Educational Attainment of Dominicans in New Jersey

Educational Attainment of Dominicans\*  
in New Jersey – 2007

Less than High School Diploma	31.3%
High School Graduate (includes equivalency)	33.5%
Some College or Associate's Degree	21.4%
Bachelor's Degree	9.9%
Graduate or Professional Degree	3.9%
Master's Degree	2.4%
Professional Degree	1.4%
Doctorate Degree	.1%

\* 25 years of  
age or older

Source: The CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 2009.