

SOY AMERICANA. SOY LATINA. SOY NEGRA.:  
AFRO-DOMINICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY IN THE U.S.

By

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## **Abstract**

Latinidad, or the idea of a shared solidarity among Latinxs of all ethnicities in the United States, is as diverse in reality as it is homogenized in mainstream culture. Under the wave of a fairly unidimensional representation of Latinxs lies a vibrant undercurrent of literature and media created by Afro-Latinx scholars. “Afro-Latinx”<sup>1</sup> works to challenge the hegemony of Latinidad as a direct acknowledgment of the African diaspora and blackness. Even within the plethora of textual production on Afro-Latinxs, there are gaps. Specifically, there appears to be a gap of stories of second and third generation Afro-Latinxs who have always lived in the United States and grew up in largely white suburban areas. In an effort to address this gap, I will provide a history of race relations in the Dominican Republic to put my personal positioning in context and celebrate my first chance in academia to learn about my culture, as well as include my own personal narratives of interactions with race as a Dominican American in the United States. Within this thesis, I will challenge the completely unnecessary feeling of dueling I have felt between being black and Latina and explore why blackness and Latinidad should not be mutually exclusive.

## **Introduction**

Latino. Hispanic. Nonwhite Hispanic. Nonblack Hispanic. Black/African American. White/Caucasian. Other. These ethnicities/races are the options that are available for Dominican Americans to choose from on surveys, the national census<sup>2</sup> and job applications. These options validate the notion that being Latinx and being black are mutually exclusive.

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<sup>1</sup> The x symbol in Latinx aims to be gender inclusive and disregard the male/female binary.

<sup>2</sup> See Jane H. Hill’s “The Persistence of White Racism” in her book *The everyday language of white racism* for a summary of the changes made in the 1990 and 2000 census and the advances and continued pitfalls the racial categories present for black Latinxs in accurately identifying themselves.

The lack of diversity in these options shows the perpetual misunderstanding and whitewashing of Dominican American culture. These options do not allow room for a recognition of African descendancy and when one does want to acknowledge this part of her identity, she is forced to choose “Other,” a term too often associated with “less than”. The tendency towards an elision of African roots within Dominican identity has only been further complicated for Dominican Americans when confronted with U.S. racial discourse that continually deems blackness as inferior. Both of these political and social dialogues have an effect on how Dominican Americans choose to identify themselves.

Whereas in Dominican history, African descendancy has been largely erased from public discourse, U.S. history and the current status quo also fail to provide a space for articulating the possibility of black and Latinx identities coinciding. This creates a double-bind for Dominican Americans who want to acknowledge the multi-faceted cloth of their ethnic identity both within the Dominican Republic and the United States. The entrenchment of negritude denial is a product of a series of historical traumas that continue to affect the way Dominican Americans consciously, and possibly more importantly, unconsciously experience the world around them.

From the want and need for a more accurate racial descriptor that does not ignore a significant part of Latinxs with African ancestry, the term Afro-Latinx was born. As several Latin American countries have a plethora of races and ethnicities represented, this term is broad and applicable for many different groups of Latinxs in the United States. In addition to countering the homogenous space Latinxs are given in United States and Latin American mass media outlets (as lighter skinned with straight or wavy hair and more European-esque

facial features), Afro-Latinx has grown to mean an active acceptance of African heritage and, simultaneously, a vehement refusal of racism within various U.S.-Latinx cultures, encompassing national discourses and mainstream dominant cultures in both the U.S. and Latin America. Though this term is still garnering acceptance from the general population, more and more Latinxs in the United States of all nationalities are proudly and consciously adopting the “afro-” prefix, self-affirming their existence and demanding a unique space for their identity in the vague space demarcated by the term “Latinx”. Additionally, in general, Afro-Latinx intellectuals have utilized this term to recognize a shared history of African descendency as well as similarities in experiences among Afro-Latinxs in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Academic and creative works have documented this phenomenon and its implications on Latinxs’ sense of identity and their journey to self-awareness and self-acceptance as they forge paths in the United States with some interaction with their ancestors’ homelands. From this growth in literature in recent years geared to the Afro-Latinx experience, readers have been offered literary work that generally falls into the category of coming of age stories of Afro-Latinx teens who are born abroad and move between there and an inner city location (more often than not a borough in New York City) and academic texts that analyze the diversity of Afro-Latinx experiences. These literary texts generally feature teens who suffers an identity crisis (that is only amplified by the disconnect between them and their parents and/or peer group) and who attempts to navigate what it means to be Latinx in the United States where their features are not considered to be Latinx to the general public. Some work is set in the 1960s, directly analyzing the aftermath of Jim Crow laws and the interaction

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<sup>3</sup> See *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* (edited by Miriam Jimenez Roman and Juan Flores) for a broad and condensed history of the term Afro-Latinx in the United States through references to both academic and fictitious literature.

between Afro-Latinxs and U.S. Blacks.<sup>4</sup> Since then, the atmosphere to creatively discuss and respond to this experience has only grown, yet has still remained fairly singular to the notion of a teen born elsewhere and now growing up in certain urban centers, frequently New York City and Miami, where there are large concentrations not only of Latinxs but also of other minority populations, such as African Americans.<sup>5</sup>

Due to its unique history as the hub of many historically impactful events, the erasure of African descendency in the Dominican Republic and among Dominican Americans has been widely commented. Similarly to the themes mentioned above, texts have focused on the Dominican American experience with an emphasis on migration to New York City.<sup>6</sup> Scholarship on Dominican American culture and experiences tends to specifically refer to life on the island through the analysis of themes such as anti-Haitianism and the denial of Afro-descendency. Scholarship also tends to contrast the history of life in the Caribbean with the history of the United States and explore how racial and nationalistic discourses overtly and subtly shape the lives of U.S.-Latinxs.<sup>7</sup>

In an attempt to widen the breadth of this conversation, I would like to fill a gap I have identified during my research. Though a variety of both academic and imaginative literature

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<sup>4</sup> See Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets*, starring a young Afro-Cuban and Afro-Puerto Rican teen who wants to understand the full extent of Jim Crow racism in the south and is not complacent in identifying solely as Latino (and not also as black). He lives in a barrio in New York City and journeys into the deep south in his quest to understand who he is and the world he is a part of.

<sup>5</sup> See Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa's *Daughters of the Stone*, a text that mixes historical fiction with mysticity in a story that follows an Afro-Puerto Rican woman's lineage from life on a plantation to life navigating the streets of New York City.

<sup>6</sup> See Junot Díaz' *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Drown, Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints*, and Raquel Cepeda's *Bird of Paradise: How I Became Latina*.

<sup>7</sup> See Blas R. Jiménez' *Afrodominicano por elección, negro por nacimiento: pseudoensayos* [Afro-Dominican by choice, black by birth], Kimberly Eison Simmons' *Reconstructing Racial Identity and the African Past in the Dominican Republic*, Ernesto Sagás' *Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic*, Juan R. Valdéz' *Tracing Dominican Identity: The Writings of Pedro Henriquez Ureña* and Silvio Torres-Saillant's *The Dominican Americans* and *The Tribulations of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Identity*.

exists today, one trend I have seen is the common adhesion to a narrative that focuses on navigating an identity crisis that is localized to urban centers as well as a scarcity of work written by second or third generation Dominican Americans who have never set foot in the Dominican Republic. In response, in this project, I will tread away from this general inclination to focus on the Afro-Latinx experience in urban communities with large Spanish-speaking populations written by scholars who have lived in both countries. There is a lack of representation of Afro-Dominican identities and the experiences of individuals like myself who grew up in predominantly white neighborhoods and have never visited the Dominican Republic. This conversation is important not necessarily inherently because it has not been presented in mainstream white culture and Latinx culture, but because it constructively challenges ideas about Afro-Latinidad in the United States.

I grew up somewhat shielded from the extent of racism living in a middle-class white neighborhood in a suburb of Manchester, New Hampshire. I rarely faced overt racism in my community and was oblivious until recently of the silent racism<sup>8</sup> (shared perceptions a dominant group has about a subordinate group that create and maintain systematic structures of oppression), in the forms of microaggressions and colorblind racism, that I endured until entering college. Microaggressions consist of blatant expressions of racism in the forms of racial epithets and slurs, as well as more subtle forms of racism such as invalidations and insults that nullify a person of color's lived experiences. Colorblind racism falls under the umbrella of silent racism and is the concept of "not seeing color" and ignoring racial differences as an attempt to end discrimination, which actually ends up maintaining whiteness

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<sup>8</sup> See Barbara Trepanier's *Silent Racism: How Well-Meaning White People Perpetuate the Racial Divide*.

as the social norm.<sup>9</sup> When I moved onto campus at the University of Arizona, I had the opportunity to interact with many other people of color and had people who did not know me ask the slew of questions I now am so used to answering. Questions that are equal part curiosity and equal part ignorance, as if I am here to educate others about my hair, my skin, and my dual American and Dominican cultures. Questions that make me wonder if accepting my race and ethnicity so vehemently somehow challenges my nationality as a U.S. citizen. Recognizing my Latinidad always came at the expense of not recognizing the intersection in experience of my movement in the world as black and Latina, of saying countless times “I’m Latina, not black” and never knowing why the idea of being both was unfathomable.

Unlike the characters presented in the books I read with relish over the course of several months in preparation for writing this thesis, I was raised separately from other Dominican Americans and was not confronted with having to choose between black and Latina in my interactions with my peers and my immediate family. I can relate to struggles of navigating Afro-Latinidad when there is meager representation of curly haired, darker skinned Latinxs but also wonder what differences my upbringing brings to the table as far as racial discourses in the U.S. and abroad. As soon as I found out that a whole piece of my life had been (unbeknownst to me) silenced, I felt an intense urge to share my story and find others with similar experiences.

By creating a text that draws from personal, historical and academic references, I will construct a reflection that seeks to shed light on this intrinsic and intangible experience as well as add a narrative to the social media context in the United States that provides a fairly

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<sup>9</sup> See Tori DeAngelis’ “Unmasking ‘racial micro aggressions’” and Barbara Trepagnier’s *Silent Racism : How Well-Meaning White People Perpetuate the Racial Divide* for more information on microaggressions and silent racism respectively.

homogenous guideline to a Latinx's lifestyle. I have grown passionate about raising awareness of this identity to help stem intercultural racism and break down oversimplified stereotypes of Latinxs and the strict walls that exist around the notion of blackness in the United States. My hope is to create the space for a discussion of solidarity between African Americans and Afro-Latinxs and the recognition of the existence of Afro-Latinxs in mass media and U.S. Latinx culture. Though it may be sub-conscious and premeditated, I do not want to feel the need any longer to state that I am black and Latina and fear some sort of repercussion (whether it be a reproach or disbelief or confusion). It is only through an increased knowledge that true understanding can take place. However, in order to better situate my intervention, it is first necessary to address the history of African migration to Latin America, and specifically the history of race relations in the Dominican Republic.

### **The African Diaspora in Latin America and the Dominican Republic**

Contrary to popular belief abroad and in the United States, virtually all Latin American countries have significant populations with ancestry in Sub-Saharan Africa (an estimated 25% of the total population of Latin America) (Andrews 3). These voices have been largely silenced in the national discourses of Colombia, México, Venezuela, Perú, Ecuador, Panamá, the Dominican Republic and in virtually all Spanish-Speaking countries in the Caribbean, Central America and South America. Evidence of this silencing is shown through media (news coverage, music, literature and film industries) and the lack of history dedicated to telling the stories of Afro-Latin Americans. Although people of African ancestry are not the only people living in Latin America, their presence reveals a unifying bond shared across the countries of the new world forged primarily by the Spanish and Portuguese, a bond



of “experience of plantation agriculture and African slavery” (Andrews 4). This bond has left remnants in the social structure of these countries and in one way or another coalesces in disturbing displays of racial inequality and whitening in the discourses of the various national identities of Afro-Latin America. Although by the late 1800s, slavery had been abolished in most of Latin America with both black and white peoples working together to overcome the oppressive systems of which they were ruled by the Spanish, French and other European countries, it was at the cost of removing the identity of African-descendancy. For example, in the case of the Dominican Republic, there was also a sense of solidarity between Dominicans who were more obviously of African descent and white Dominicans during the Dominican Restoration War against Spain, but the acknowledgment of African ancestry was rarely present in the former, instead opting for terms such as *trigueño*, *mulato*, *canelo*, *moreno*, or *indio*.

Historian George Reid Andrews noticed the lack of a historical text defining the parameters of the African diaspora in Latin America and used a comparison of this diaspora with the more fully fleshed out history of the African diaspora that exists in the United States as an analytic. His book *Afro-Latin America: 1800-2000* shines light on the existence of a significantly large and vibrant population of African descendants in Latin America and this spotlight leaves ample room to begin to talk about Afro-Latinxs in the United States. Racial discourses abroad overlapping with the histories of Latinxs in the United States creates another dimension of understanding the African diaspora and the effects of racism across different Latinx ethnic groups. There are a plethora of academic texts documenting the current

state of affairs and the slowly developing attitude of an acceptance of African-ancestry by U.S.-Latinxs, Latinxs abroad, and African Americans in the U.S.<sup>10</sup>

As mentioned previously, the island of Hispaniola is the hub of a trifecta of pivotal historical events. The first soil that Christopher Columbus touched in the Americas, the first location where Africans were shipped to and made into slaves, and the first ever successful slave revolt and creation of a free Black country. Understanding this dramatic past is essential to the current way that Dominicans abroad and in the United States view blackness in themselves and others.

An article by Silvio Torres-Saillant, “The Tribulations of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Racial Identity,” delves into the concept of Dominican blackness from the standpoint of their consciousness on the matter. He touches on the social, historical and political events that have led to the consciousness, or lack thereof, of their Afro-descendancy. Through a general overview of major historical events, Torres-Saillant provides a broad wealth of information as to how Dominicans view and define race, and the implications their ideas of race have on acknowledging blackness and relationships with their neighboring country on the island of Hispaniola: Haiti. To understand race relations, the history of how the Dominican Republic came to be will be examined below.

The arrival of Christopher Columbus and the Spaniards in 1492 shifted the trajectory of this island located in the middle of the Caribbean Sea. Their arrival birthed the slave trade, with the first ship of free people made slaves docking in 1494. In the mid-1600s, the French

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<sup>10</sup> See *Neither Enemies or Friends: Latinos, blacks, Afro-Latinos* (edited by Anani Dzidzienyo and Suzanne Oboler) which seeks to answer the questions: ‘What is the impact of the growing presence of Afro-Latinos in the United States on the dynamics of racial relations in the U.S.?’ and ‘What goals and obstacles exist in the attempt to collate a bond between racialized minorities in the U.S.?’.

settled the western side of the island. It was not until the late 1700s and early 1800s that Haiti gained its freedom from the French and started to live as the first free black republic in the Americas. This upheaval created a major threat to white nations everywhere. Not only did former slaves completely overturn a European civilization, but they also massacred a large white population and proved to the world that they could be successful in running a nation. This truth was warped by the rest of the hemisphere, with many countries turning their backs on Haiti for political reasons. Their successful fight for freedom was directly equated to “chaos, violence, and black savagery” as opposed to bravery and adeptness in strategic planning and execution (Sagás 4).

In 1822, Haitian nationals overthrew the Spanish reign over the eastern side of the island as well and maintained that control for the next 22 years. This period of unification of the island did not strengthen bonds between Haitians and Dominicans. It actually had the opposite effect of strengthening Dominicans’ current view of themselves as separate from Haiti. When they gained independence from Haiti in 1844, a slew of negative perceptions of Haitians surfaced and still persist. As Torres-Saillant points out, in the history of Dominican nationality, race became synonymous with nationhood during the fight for independence against black Haitians and in the fight for restoration against white Spaniards.

Struck with an uncertain future, the Dominican Republic became a battleground for multiple civil wars, upheavals of constitutions and revolts against political leaders. The country underwent a U.S. occupation from 1916 until 1924 and was left very vulnerable and malleable for a former student of the U.S. trained Dominican national guard, Rafael Trujillo, to overturn the democracy that had been in place, albeit briefly. Trujillo, a fascist dictator that

ruled steadily without opposition from 1930 until 1961, is arguably the main forger of the overarching mainstream modern Dominican identity due to various efforts to define what being a “true” Dominican looked like. During the Trujillato, the Dominican populace was defined through anti-Haitianism and a discourse of whitening as a means to becoming superior. His dictatorship further strengthened racism against Haitians and validated the incongruity of denying African ancestry. In fact, Trujillo is responsible for the genocide of anywhere from nearly 500 to 12,200 Haitians and Haitian Dominicans in the span of a week in 1937 during what has been termed “el corte” and also actively encouraged the migration of Jewish<sup>11</sup>, and other oppressed groups in Europe, to the island with the intentions of “whitening” the population (Stinchcomb 63).

During his regime, Trujillo championed a “color-blind” society free of racial inequity as a nation, yet undertook secretive measures to further perpetuate the negative attitude against Haitians and those with dark skin (Sagás 12). For example, the accomplishments of Haitian Dominicans were all but erased from the written history of the Dominican Republic and spiritual expressions such as voodoo were banned in 1943 with Law 391. The *cédula* or a national identification card was created to differentiate Afro-Dominicans from Black Haitians and institutionalized the term *indio* as a racial descriptor (Stinchcomb 78). This ideology surrounding proving citizenship has persisted today tragically.<sup>12</sup> Hundreds of songs and stories were written to praise Trujillo and research funds were allotted that “stressed the Hispanic roots of Dominican music, while minimizing its African and Haitian influences”

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<sup>11</sup> See the Jewish Virtual Library’s article “The Holocaust: Dominican Republic as Haven for Jewish Refugees” by Lauren Levy for more on Jewish migration to the Dominican Republic under the Trujillo dictatorship.

<sup>12</sup> See New York Times article “In Exile” by Jonathan M. Katz for a detailed account of the mass deportations of Dominicans of Haitian descent that has taken place since February of 2015 and continues to this day.

(Sagás 64). Although aspects of Dominican culture such as cuisine and language intonations still suggested retention from African slaves, Dominicans in Trujillo's modern nation-state did not have the choice of recognizing themselves as *negro*. They could "lighten" themselves by adopting the use of terms more deflecting of African-descendancy, such as *moreno* and *indio*, or "be ostracized and excluded from the national mainstream" (Sagás 66).<sup>13</sup>

As a result of this history, though white Dominicans<sup>14</sup> make up less than 10% of the Dominican population, "Afro-Dominicans have traditionally failed to flaunt their blackness as a collective banner to advance economic, cultural, or political causes" (Torres-Saillant 126). Instead of acknowledging African ancestry, Dominicans may choose to identify and claim Dominican-ness above any racial claims. According to Torres-Saillant, if forced, they may acknowledge they are not white or black, and instead use terms such as *mulato*, *prieto*, *moreno*, *trigueño* and *indio* because of the deracialized consciousness that was created through concepts surrounding true patriotism (134).<sup>15</sup> There are a multitude of racial identifiers used by Dominican nationals today, which do not always include *afro* or *negro*.

While forging their own history as an independent nation, Afro-Dominicans would set aside an active recognition of their African heritage due to a stream of social conditioning against blackness. As detailed in Dawn F. Stinchcomb's *The Development of Literary Blackness in the Dominican Republic*, in the fight to become independent from Haiti and overcome potential invasions, the Dominican Republic whitewashed its heritage (18). In

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<sup>13</sup> See Ernesto Sagás' *Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic* for a more complete history and analysis of the distinct racism that exists on the island of Hispaniola.

<sup>14</sup> White Dominicans are considered any Dominican who would not be categorized as black or mulatto based off of societal standards of skin tone in the Dominican Republic.

<sup>15</sup> Also see Sarah Lawrence College's article "To Be Dominican is to Not Be Haitian: Development of Dominican Racial Identity through Antihaitianismo and the Indio Myth" by Lissette Hazoury published in the *Sobremesa* journal for more on the creation of the racial category of *Indio* among Dominicans.

essence, whiteness was redefined to include Dominicans of darker skin tones and blackness was redefined to mean Haitian and was attached to slavery, subordination and savagery. This created the illusion necessary to garner support from economically stronger partners such as Spain, the United States and France (Stinchcomb 5). It also created an environment where “pigmentation ceased to shape political action” and the boundaries between blackness and whiteness in a societal context expanded past perceptions based solely on physical appearance (Torres-Saillant 135).

Additionally, Dominican nationality was defined as strictly European and indigenous in nature, completely erasing African leaders and people from the conversation about Dominican sovereignty. This helped convince the majority of Dominicans who were of African descent to lean towards accepting Spain’s help again when the country became bankrupt after its first 20 years of independence, despite the risk of being colonized once more. It worked to remind them of their Spanish roots so that they would feel more connected to Spain than to Haiti and Africa. Although the Dominican Republic was trying to create a new nation, Spanish neocolonialism was still internalized possibly because of a “perceived need to achieve respectability in the eyes of the white colonials, to conform to their values and engage in appropriate conduct, [which] served as an element of hegemonic control” (Greenbaum 180) . It would also help the Dominican Republic look more favorable to the United States and Western Europe, who were wary of Haiti’s Revolution and its dismantling of white supremacy.

*Antihaitianismo* is a powerful political tool and ideology waged against Haitians and dark-skinned Dominicans. Haitians are maintained as inferior as the archetype of “have-nots”

and subsequently, dark-skinned Dominicans form the subordinate class and have little political prowess, but are pacified and empowered by a sense of superiority over Haitians (Sagás 12-13). The continued segregation of social classes based on race and the oppression of darker skinned individuals is justified and maintained through Anti-Haitianism (Stinchcomb 34). Then and even now, there is a “silencing of discourse for the sake of patriotic unity” as will be evidenced later on in this thesis (Greenbaum 66).

Torres-Saillant’s article highlights another issue many Dominicans face today in the United States and in looking back at the history of immigration of Dominicans to the United States (there was a boom of Dominicans moving to the U.S. after the assassination of Trujillo in 1961, a time that happens to be practically exactly in the middle of the U.S. Civil Rights movement, thus creating another relevant and dynamic lens through which to view the beginning stages of Dominican American identity formation).<sup>16</sup> In the Dominican Republic, black citizens may somewhat peacefully ignore the true origins of their phenotype. However, upon entry into the United States, confusion is eminent as a result of the white or black “glasses” worn by mass media. This “white or black” phenomena adds to the racial identity confusion where Dominicans might accept that their Dominican identity includes African descendancy, yet are “forced” to choose between being Black or being Dominican in social settings and on paper. At times, Dominicans may, with varying success, outwardly display one identity and mask another. This article does not provide a solution to this denial of blackness. It acknowledges that it took hundreds of years to create and changes every day.

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<sup>16</sup> See Migration Policy Institute’s July 2014 spotlight article that documents “Immigrants from the Dominican Republic in the United States” by Chiamaka Nwosu and Jeanne Batalova.

However, it does create a space for further analysis into why Dominicans think the way they do in regards to race.

### **Contemporary Literature by Afro-Latinx Scholars**

This is not to say that there are no Dominican writers who challenge this dominant discourse. Literature written by Afro-Dominican authors, whether they claim this identity or not, can be found dating back as far as the Trujillato. Writers such as Pedro Mir and Ramón Marrero Arísty in the early 1930s did not personally identify themselves as Afro-Dominicans but did sympathize with Black workers who had previously only been ridiculed and caricatured in writing. Both rejected writing literature that praised Trujillo. Though Black Dominicans were still presented as the subject of the writing and not represented with personal autonomy, Mir and Arísty helped broaden the definition of Dominican-ness to include an albeit disconnected semblance of blackness (Stinchcomb 52, 55). Unfortunately, generally the writings of Afro-Dominicans who more openly claim their African ancestry have either been buried under decades of hegemonic propaganda or discredited and excluded from the body of literature recognized as Dominican by the national populace, much like their very existence has been branded foreign and unpatriotic.

Writers like Juan Sánchez Lamouth, Aída Cartagena Portalatín, Blas Jiménez and Junot Díaz openly critique the status quo of racial inequity in the Dominican Republic. Sánchez Lamouth wrote and distributed his poetry on the streets of Santo Domingo (the capital of the Dominican Republic) in the later years of the Trujillato. He was the son of a Black Dominican father and a migrant worker mother, giving him an adequate understanding of the complexities of citizenship versus foreignness and how these two identities interact



with race in how one is treated. His poems largely mourn the inescapable cycle of Black Dominicans: reaping benefits for white consumerism while conserving a depressing existence in extreme squalor.

Aída Cartagena Portalatín is credited as the first Afro-Dominican woman writer who rejected terms created to hypersexualize and pigeonhole women of African descent (such as *mulata*), but still recognized her racial background. A struggle unique to Afro-Dominican women in celebrating African descent is overcoming the prolific sexualization and fetish-esque representation of dark skinned Dominican women in virtually all literature produced in the early 20th century in contrast to white women being represented as virginal and marriage worthy. Cartagena Portalatín challenges these ideals by revamping literary tradition and combating the misrepresentation and exploitation of Afro-Dominican women in her poems and essays. Though she discusses the implications of the intersections of race, gender, and class, she does so in a way that makes the notion of Blackness *inherent* to Dominican identity. Blas Jiménez is another prominent writer exploring themes of Dominican identity and intersectionality. His essays and poems are largely ostracized in the Dominican Republic, but are highly acclaimed in the United States. His works undermine the ideals of white supremacy that exist in the Dominican Republic and harshly condemn all the individuals who remain complacent in the maintenance of a status quo that mercilessly clings to anti-Blackness. Further references to his work will be explored later on in this thesis.<sup>17</sup>

As a result of efforts to maintain anti-Black narratives, mainstream scholarly literature has not always accurately depicted the situation in the Dominican Republic. Research was too

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<sup>17</sup> See Dawn F. Stinchcomb's *The Development of Literary Blackness in the Dominican Republic* for a more detailed analysis of these authors' roles in recording and influencing Dominican identity through their literature.

often Eurocentric and compared race relations in the Dominican Republic to other nations where the divide between race and nation were more clearly defined. The Dominican Republic is a very unique case and requires a research method that recognizes the multifaceted nature of its creation as a nation. Racial lines are blurred in the Dominican Republic as opposed to the United States. A strict white/black binary was not plausible in a society with so many phenotypical differences among Dominicans and similarities to Haitians. Dominican elites had to be more creative in their expressions of racism and creation and control of racial conflicts in order to secure the dominance of whites in all aspects of society, while not alienating black Dominicans despite affording them the lowest class and least political power. The anthropology of Dominicans and racialization only becomes further complicated when they travel to the United States.

The idea of navigating these, at times, contradicting and different racial situations in the Dominican Republic and the United States is a popular theme of Afro-Latinx authors. Junot Díaz is a prominent Dominican American author whose writings explore themes of race, identity, class, gender, and the intersectionalities of various forms of oppressions. Although formerly acclaimed in the Dominican Republic, Díaz no longer has the country's approval after he spoke out against the treatment of Haitian immigrants and undocumented Dominican citizens. He was stripped of an Order of Merit medal bestowed on him by the Dominican Republic because the Dominican consul has dubbed him "anti-Dominican", revealing the still present anti-Haitian sentiment and a vehement refusal to recognize it as such.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See The Washington Post's article by Soraya Nadia McDonald titled "Dominican Republic calls Junot Díaz unpatriotic and strips him of award".

One of his works is a series of short stories centered around the coming of age of a Dominican American named Yunior. Interwoven within the vignettes of *Drown*, Yunior's conflicting instances of experiencing solidarity with his African American peers and subconsciously asserting superiority over them by demonstrating differences are revealed. The pitfalls of this acceptance and differentiation come to a head when readers learn about the extreme racism Yunior's father endures when he stumbles outside of his Latinx community in New York City and works for a company with a majority of white workers. In that case, his identity as Dominican does not defeat or differentiate himself from others' perception of him as a black man. Another novel by Díaz reinforces never being able to feel a sense of belonging. *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* goes further than *Drown* in that it directly causes the reader to feel like an outsider through the use of code switching between Dominican slang and English and examples drawn from history and science fiction, references whose significances are not divulged in footnotes or a glossary. Yunior in this novel is an individual that society itself uncouthly ostracizes on both physical and intellectual accounts, and Díaz unapologetically gives the readers an idea of what it feels like to be left in the dark without knowing why.

Another prominent American writer of Dominican descent who deals with similar issues of identity crisis is Raquel Cepeda. Her memoir *Bird of Paradise: How I Became Latina* is at once an homage to the importance of the intersections between race, gender, sexuality, economic class, and nationality as well as a powerful tribute to a turbulent journey to self-awareness and visceral, organic "success". Where her quest for knowledge of her ancestry was met by her father with verbal, physical and psychological violence, Cepeda

fought to become the resource she is today for young Latinas. Though her story is diverse enough to be relatable to many individuals, she recognizes that her experiences are distinctly hers and not necessarily those of every Dominican American or even every Latinx in the United States. Ideas that resonate from this novel include feeling foreign in the United States *despite* being raised here and foreign in the Dominican Republic *because* of not being raised there, feelings of anger over not understanding one's identity and the inseparable nature of identities with which one is constantly confronted, such as being Latina and being a woman.

Also focusing on the intersection between being a person of color and being a woman is author Nelly Rosario. Her breakout novel *Song of the Water Saints* highlights the lives of three generations of women. Starting from a woman who lives during the U.S. occupation of the Dominican Republic, followed by her daughter who survives the Trujillato and saves enough money to immigrate to New York City and ending with the final woman of the family who is raised in New York City, her story interweaves multiple narratives across generations, showing the shifting generational and cultural attitudes towards gender roles and the nonexistent threshold for the diversity of what a woman can dream.

### **An Addition to the Current U.S.-Afro-Dominican Narrative**

While researching the history of the Dominican Republic and reflecting on my personal experience as a Dominican American, I noted the unique space the Dominican Republic inhabits that makes it an interesting case study for race relations. Additionally, its history in concurrence with that of the United States has orientated the Dominican Republic and individuals who identify as Dominican American with a novel identity within the U.S.-constructed identity of Latinidad and Blackness. I was left with more questions and the

realization of a gap in the information and experiences that have been shared. Why did the term Afro-Latinidad emerge? Why do texts deal so much with the experience of youth growing up in inner city environments who visit the Dominican Republic with some frequency? What does this focus mean for Afro-Latinxs in the United States? How will this expanding conversation hinder or improve an understanding between African Americans and Latinxs?

Though I recognize the self-agency we all have in choosing how we identify, I would argue that a significant piece of our identity is the result of how we are perceived (this could not have been proven to me more than my experience freshman year shows). Our day to day movements through the world are tinged with how others react and interact with us. In noting the low visibility of Afro-Latinxs in a societal context<sup>19</sup> (many Afro-Latinxs in popular culture are typecasted in “African American” roles whereas roles more easily recognizable as Latinx are given to individuals with more European facial features, including straighter hair and lighter skin in support of the homogenization of both Blackness and Latinidad), I seek to provide a new narrative that will introduce the story of one Afro-Dominican who was raised in New Hampshire in a largely white suburban area where her race was not usually at the forefront of her identity sphere and who has yet to visit the Dominican Republic.

### **“What Are You?”**

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<sup>19</sup> See the Huffington Post article “This Is What It Means To Be Afro-Latino” by Carolina Moreno for short anecdotes of many different U.S.-Afro-Latinxs’ experiences and their thoughts about the Afro-Latinx identity and its general invisibility in the U.S. as well as HuffPost Latino Voices’ video “6 Afro-Latinos Open Up About What It Means To Be Black and Latino”. Also see Sophia and Victoria Arzu’s video titled “What Am I? (Afro-Latino)” and their awareness campaign Proyecto Más Color (PMC) that promotes the representation of Afro-Latinxs and other minorities in Latinx media, calling on the media “to educate and not discriminate”. Also see MonicaStyleMuse’s video “I am too Dark To Be Dominican” that challenges the backlash she received for her video titled “Latina Tag” that spoke about her Dominican culture when some viewers thought she should have titled the video “Afro-Latina Tag”. This last video is a tribute to a con of creating a term like Afro-Latinx to increase visibility and specificity within a big umbrella term of Latinx.

It is my freshman year of college and I am living in one of the newest dorms on campus specifically designated for students admitted to the Honors college: Arbol de la vida (aptly named “Tree of Life”, this dorm had the best and latest of *everything!*). Though I have always had a more racially diverse group of friends, it is my first time living in the same space as many people with different backgrounds from me as far as where they grew up and the atmosphere of their home lives. It is noteworthy to include that among the group of students living in my hall, less than half were white and over half were people of color. I quickly became acclimated to living “on my own” and enjoyed having a fresh slate on which to establish myself. Everything about being from New Hampshire seemed shiny and novel to my new friends, and it was the first time in a while that I began to realize just how much people were interested in knowing my major and my age, and, sometimes, most importantly, “what I was”. At first, this question floored me. *What was I?*

As I mentioned before, I hardly remember ever having to provide an explanation of my racial/ethnic identity past the hastily spoken phrase, “My parents were both born in the Dominican Republic, but I was born in the Bronx”. Everyone generally accepted this explanation at face value in a colorblind explanation of my tan skin. Additionally, I was raised by my white Dominican mother and her Caucasian partner with minimal influence by my Afro-Dominican father. My stable position in a middle class family, my natural adherence to speaking with a standard American English accent that did not automatically denote me as different and the lack of any idea of the availability of a black identity also helped me remain racially neutral throughout my childhood. There were subtle instances where blackness was considered as separate from who I was though. For example, statements that associated my

brother as “trying to be black” by my mothers when he exhibited negative behavior were fairly common. I did not yet know the pervasive nature of stereotypes and I did not realize I may have been conditioned to not see my own race because of this negative connotation surrounding blackness and placing Latinidad in a separate orbit. Overall, my ethnic, gender and class identities superceded my racial identity. I easily assumed the privilege my white peers had of not having to make race a central part of my life.<sup>20</sup>

This lack of overt confrontation growing up only made my first weeks in college that much more jarring. Here, “My parents were both born in the Dominican Republic, but I was born in the Bronx” with the addition of “and I was raised in New Hampshire” did not always suffice. Instead, I was bombarded with questions the owners of the words already seemed to have their own answers to. The questions “What are you?” and others like “Are you mixed?” became rhetorical under the expectant tongues of my curious new peers. All of my Freshman, Sophomore and Junior years, I actively denied being black or mixed. I still had not gleaned an understanding of the difference between race and ethnicity and had been conditioned to claim my Dominican-ness above all else despite never having been to the Dominican Republic and no recollections of any family members explicitly telling me this information. Reflecting on just the last few years, I am still not sure whether my continued denial came from a sense of feeling like a fraud/being called out if I claimed Blackness or a fear of people misunderstanding my cultural clothe if I self-identified as black (but why did it matter so

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<sup>20</sup> See France Winddance Twine’s *Brown Skinned White Girls: Class, culture and the construction of white identity in suburban communities* for more information on how a White identity is constructed as the result of racial neutrality and colorblindness in daughters with African ancestry raised in middle class, White suburban areas.

much for me to make the distinction of not being African American to a complete stranger I would most likely not interact with much at all again?).

Whereas many cliques in middle and high school were cast due to similar interests, college made me realize my racial marginalization very quickly. In middle and high school, I was free to weave through the “orchestra players”, the “track athletes” and the “AP class students.” My racial identity, again, was rarely at the forefront of my consciousness. Even though I was always obviously the racial minority, it was not a deterrent in my unmuddled happy and proud emergence into the spotlight as a first violinist, 4 by 1 track star, president of the National English Honors Society and third in my high school graduating class. I give these examples just to show how despite being in positions of increased visibility, I was not discouraged or singled out on the basis of my race, except for one instance on the track field. I was killing it in the 400M dash and a preteen voice yelled out “Black girl, trip!”. Even then, I acknowledged this girl was talking about me although I can’t specifically remember if in my head I was like, “Oh, she’s talking about me, but she’s wrong. I’m not Black” or just “I’ll show you tripping” and sprinted even harder. If my fellow classmates ever had a question about my race it was not mentioned within earshot of me and I felt happily and securely understood in my main friend group throughout middle school and high school; a friend group that consisted of two White girls, one Jamaican American girl and one Cuban American girl.

In college, this changed drastically. I looked around campus and marveled at the diversity I did see while conversely feeling deep in my bones my stark otherness in classes of hundreds where I only had one or two other visibly black companions. I do not have many regrets in my life, but two instances I sincerely regret during my freshman experience are my



refusal to understand the knowledge of my second closest friend freshman year and my lack of vocal participation in a class titled “Intergroup Dialogue on Race”. James Bartley, who I affectionately renamed “Cuz” within the first few weeks of college, was the person who most often challenged me on the limited range of words I chose to use to identify myself. He himself identifies as mixed-race; one of his parents is African American and the other is Caucasian. When I would tell people I was Latina, he would (halfheartedly by the end of the semester after my consistently stubborn rebuttals) say, “But Cuz, you’re black”. I guess the one word missing from his declaration that may have made me open up to the idea was the word *also*, but even today I question the hidden implications and motivations behind saying black *and* Latina or even saying “I’m both” as opposed to just saying I am a black Latina (things like an idea of superiority of not being “just” black come to mind). James talked to me about not being black enough for the black kids and not being white enough for the white kids. This struggle is one I now realize has resonated within me most of my life despite my rigid parameter of “only” being Latina because I did not always fit in with other Latinxs or my white peers (and their ideas of Latinxs and blackness) or, more recently, the African American community.<sup>21</sup>

The course I applied for and was accepted into titled “Intergroup Dialogue on Race” was my first academic introduction to things I already knew about from experience but for which I did not necessarily have names. Definitions and terms such as white privilege, microaggressions and institutionalized racism validated a slew of experiences I had witnessed

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<sup>21</sup> See the Huffington Post article titled “Does Being Latina Exclude Me From Being Black?” by Icess Fernandez Rojas for another perspective on the feeling of having to adjust culturally in order to “pass” in different social circles. Also see CNN’s video interview “What’s it like to be Latino- and black?”, Elizabeth Acevedo’s spoken word poem titled “Afro-Latina”, and *Huffpost Latino Voices* article “Too Latina To Be Black, Too Black To Be Latina” by Aleichia Williams for more experiences of U.S.-Afro-Latinxs.

and lived in just my first semester of college. Ideas took form and critical reflection became easier to do when I had academia to help me explain what I could not always articulate previously. Through this course, I learned a quality of myself that I always knew, but did not ever view as a negative thing. I have a tendency to remain silent even when I feel like something is wrong or when my opinion could provide a different perspective to the conversation. I prefer to listen and avoid conflict. Towards the end of what were, at times, *too* jovial conversations about race, our facilitators called on us to engage more critically, to not shy away from confrontation, to be less coddling in the deliverance of all of our sprouting thoughts. On that day, I cried. In front of everyone (my worst nightmare). But I cried tears of remorse that the realization hit me so late in the process of the course and tears of frustration with myself for touting a self-love and healthy confidence while not valuing my experiences and who I am enough to think that what I had to say was important enough to make any surmountable impact. I am better for this realization that being the quiet one is not acceptable when I want to be an ally and when I want to show love of myself through a refusal of discrimination in any overt or more hidden form. I am still working on it daily, but I am happy that I have grown more comfortable stating my opinion whether it's against the grain or in adherence to whatever setting I am in. Though I appreciate my hypersensitivity to how much space anyone is taking up in general, never taking up any space at all is not beneficial to ending the proliferation of -isms.

### **“Cocoa Puffs”**

One of my earliest recollections that evidences the convoluted battleground of fitting in within the Dominican and Latinx community as well as into White cultural spheres and

conflicts with radical self-love revolves around my hair. I cannot remember my mom ever saying that I had *pelo malo*, or bad hair. She would maneuver my curls into various buns, half up half down styles, braids and twists every day of my elementary school education without complaint (even when I cried and fussed for her not to comb it). I mercifully was not seriously bullied in elementary school. In middle school I was not as lucky. Though I was never physically hurt, my emotional strength was challenged by the same individuals I had loved with a child's endearment only one academic year prior. My poor eyesight always sat me at the front of the class, the perfect location for kids to throw little balled up paper remnants of the fringes of ripped out notebook pages into my hair, completely unbeknownst to me. When I wore my hair in two puffs on either side of my head, a sneered remark reduced them to "Cocoa Puffs", the chocolate ball cereal that I actually really disliked and only further hated after that comment. Repeated in my mind are the voices of two different peers, "Your skin is the color of diarrhea" and "At least my eyes aren't the color of dirt." On the few days I wore my hair straightened to school, I received resoundingly positive attention. It was not long at all into the sixth grade that I asked my mom if I could "chemically relax" my hair. My hair was a physical attribute I had control over. I could morph it to look more like "everyone else" (or more accurately, more like the only image of everyone else I was presented with) and stick out less.

I can accurately assume that to this day, hair salons that specialize in very curly hair are few and far between in Manchester, New Hampshire. But, probably amidst tear-felt insinuations, my mom found a Dominican beautician that was prideful in her ability to convert the curliest of heads into a pin straight masterpiece of acquiescence to European beauty

standards and the “Indo-Hispanic norm of Dominican-ness” (Candelario 240). As Elizabeth Acevedo says in her spoken word poem “Hair”, “*And they say Dominicans do the best hair. They can wash, set, flatten the spring in any lock, but what they mean is we’re the best at swallowing amnesia*”.<sup>22</sup> My coarse hair (synonymous to cheap, obscene and gross) could look fine (synonymous to enjoyable, elegant and beautiful) if I just went in monthly for touch ups of my roots and sat without crying amidst the burning ammonia smell of the baby blue colored paste that only Vaseline smeared around my hairline and ears saved from skin burns and the intense heat of the salon dryer chair. Despite my mom never telling me my hair was “bad,” my craving to draw less attention in school and mimic older cousins and peers and mass media, I believed I was more beautiful if I fried my hair and burned my scalp into an unhealthy and unnatural submission.<sup>23</sup>

**“It’ll be so easy for you to get into med school because you’re Latina”**

Yet, as obviously racist as my idea of beauty was as well as some comments by my peers, I can still say with confidence that my experience growing up was not riddled with a constant stream of racial discrimination. I can only pinpoint a handful of instances where I was made to feel different because of my race and even in those instances I do not think that my access to opportunities was shunted. This realization makes me recognize the importance of geography in determining identity and also reveals to me just how socially constructed race is. I also recognize that my memories are, more likely than not, heavily influenced by my ignorance of my race, my complacency in how others perceived me and the ideals of white

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<sup>22</sup> Watch the full version Elizabeth Acevedo’s spoken word poem “Hair” to garner another perspective of reclaimed self-love amidst an expectation of compliance to Eurocentric beauty standard pressure by family and mass media.

<sup>23</sup> See Ginetta E. B. Candelario’s *Black Behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops* for a lengthy ethnography of Dominican women’s sentiments towards and treatments of their hair.

culture and hegemony. Even when I was confronted with ideas that I knew were wrong, I did not have the academic treasure chest that I now possess to question, combat and attempt to offer an alternative viewpoint not doused in racism.

For example, around the time of college applications I was thrilled to find out I was a National Hispanic Merit recipient, an award that would offer me distinction among my peers and ended up earning me a full academic scholarship to colleges such as the University of Arizona and the University of Texas-Austin. When my peers said that I and some of my peers only got into certain schools because we were Latinxs or African Americans, the words stung, but I thought that they must be true even though I knew in

my heart of hearts that they did not sit well with me. Now, as graduate school talk rolls around, I have been told I will get into medical school easily because they have to let Latinas in. Derald Wing Sue defines this type of microaggression as a microinsult. It discredits a person's racial identity and leaves the receiver feeling offended and the giver ignorant to the comment being offensive. I have not figured out how to address this issue other than pointing out that it is rooted in racism and to bring up the true definition and reasoning behind affirmative action. I also like to admonish that when they say that they make me feel like all of my accomplishments mean nothing. It's all I've got for now.

### **“You Speak Spanish, You Aren’t black!”**

Now that I finally recognize my black identity, I feel a need to make up for lost time and defend this newfound facet of myself with vehemence. As Blas Jiménez writes in his poem “Tengo”<sup>24</sup>:

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<sup>24</sup> See Blas Jiménez' novel *Aquí...otro Español* for this poem in its entirety. English translations of Jiménez' poems were created by Dawn F. Stinchcomb.

Tengo que sentirme negro	I have to feel black
por las tantas veces que fui blanco	because of the many times I was white
tengo que sentirme negro	I have to feel black
por las tantas veces que fui indio	because of the many times I was Indian
tengo que sentirme negro	I have to feel black
porque soy negro	because I am black
soy la contradicción de mi historia	I am the contradiction of my history
soy el llamado para re-escribirla	I am the one who will rewrite it
re-escribir la historia de esta tierra	Rewrite the history of this land

I feel whole in a way that is so unique because my blackness has filled in a missing piece of myself that I was unaware of but that nonetheless lay throbbing, patiently and lovingly waiting for a reversal of my callow dismissal of it. As scholar Myriam J. A. Chancy postulates when talking about her own exile as an Afro-Caribbean woman writer and as Dawn F. Stinchcomb equates to racial identity formation, I went through four stages: “alienation, self-identification, recuperation, and repatriation” (Stinchcomb 90). Alienation from my peers and family members who do not understand. Affirmation of my new self-identification. Recuperation of a whole history and place in society that had previously alluded me. And repatriation of my landscape that defines what it means to be American, what it means to be Dominican American, what it means to be Latina.

This acceptance does not come without struggles. I naively assumed that once the light bulb clicked with me, it would turn on a universal switch with everyone I encounter. Instead, I precariously maneuver myself around the various expectations and stereotypes associating

blackness as separate from Latinidad <sup>25</sup> (I still do not always experience them as inherently linked). I've been told I'm not really black because I speak Spanish. I'm not really black because I grew up in New Hampshire, and because I go to school in Arizona. I'm not really black because my hair is not very nappy. I'm not really black because I sometimes refer to myself as brown. I'm not really black because I'm light-skinned. These comments strongly remind me of another Blas Jiménez' poem titled "Discriminación a la dominicana" (Discrimination Dominican style):

tú	you
tú no eres negro	you are not black
tú tienes educación	you have an education
tú	you
tú no eres negro	you are not black
tú tienes dinero	you have money
tú	you
tú no eres negro	you are not black
tú eres un negro blanco.	you are a white black.

As Jiménez writes about subtle phrases that denote blackness not being associated with having an education and money, people who deny my blackness in a way are also validating notions that blackness is confined to certain geographical areas and certain characteristics such as the way someone speaks/how they dress and even things like what movies they watch or what

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<sup>25</sup> See the Huffington Post article and accompanying video titled "Why You Should Never Assume That A Black Person Can't Be Latino" by Zeba Blay that highlights a video series titled #DefineBlack for more on how the assumption that blackness is separate from Latinidad "can have harmful consequences on a person's sense of identity".

they eat. This argument in general is reminiscent of a written exchange between the U.S. Secretary of State and a Commissioner stationed in Santo Domingo in 1849. The Commissioner writes that if a black Dominican was taunted for her race, it was conceivable for her to say, “I am black, but white black” as an acceptable rebuke and expression of white praising all wrapped into one (Torres-Saillant 128). Perpetuating a stereotypical lens through which to view blackness is detrimental and I think the term Afro-Latinidad challenges this constriction.

A prominent example of this effort to include the African Diaspora in U.S. national discourses, but slightly missing the mark perhaps is the “Our Black Mosaic” exhibit in the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum in Washington D.C. that opened in 1994. The exhibit aimed to highlight the diversity of black identity through the examination of perceptions and realities of race, nationality and ethnicity colliding during a period of time when there were surges of populations of immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin American to the D.C. metro area. One of the main successes that I see in the exhibit is an effort to recognize an African diaspora and also the wealth of information and personal stories gathered from black immigrants of various ethnicities through audio, video, pictures and written words. These stories have been recorded and preserved and are invaluable in understanding black identity in the 1990s in D.C. I appreciate reading through stories that evidence solidarity among African Americans and Latinxs. A critique of this exhibit is the frustration some African Americans felt with black immigrants who did not seem to accept black as their sole identifier.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See Ginetta E. B. Candelario’s *Black Behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops* for a detailed analysis of the “Our Black Mosaic” exhibit and its pitfalls and successes.



I see remnants of this frustration as most of these comments have come from other black people (I am not 100% sure if this is because white people do not tend to ask me “What I am” as often as black people do). For a community that I have been shut out of for so long (possibly mainly because of myself), it is not the best feeling to be shunned by the very people I expected a sense of solidarity from. I can understand their trepidation though. The fact that I spent so long having the privilege of not making race a prominent part of my existence already separates me from the oppressions some of my peers have faced their entire lives. The fact that some Afro-Latinxs used Spanish as “a means of affirming a Latin[x] identity, and [...] a shield against anti-black racism” during Jim Crow is a history I will not overlook (Candelario 159). My lighter skin tone within the black community also affords me certain privileges and the slight ambiguity regarding my race can work to my benefit whether I like it or not.

I do not want to overstep what belongs to me. African American is a term that reflects U.S. essentialism; a term that has been created to isolate and describe a group of people of African descent whose ancestors were born within the geographical boundaries of the United States. African American can be expanded to describe all people with African ancestry who live in the Americas, but currently that is not how it is generally understood. In this constricted context, I cannot identify as African American because it does not relate to my experiences or even as Black with a capital B if that is what is synonymous with the general way in which the term African American is conceived (which is demonstrated through survey options that pair Black and African American together with an irrevocable slash time and time

again). Regardless, I *will* identify as black and try to expand the boundaries of blackness in the United States, explaining as necessary as I go.

Making a conscious decision to adopt this identity is not clear cut though. I problematize it by wondering if adhering to the strict black/white and “one drop rule” of the United States only serves to further propagate a system that should be dismantled. Since race is socially constructed and not at all founded in biology, yet still has important and real impacts on daily experiences, I consolidate the problem I just mentioned by seeing the value in people who have been racialized reclaiming the identity as a point of pride and community. I see my denial of being stripped of my Afro-Latinidad as a form of resistance and although I cannot always influence how I am perceived, I will actively work against homogenizing attitudes about race and prejudices within the black community that give me unearned privilege and power.

### **Conclusion**

Creating a space to explore my black Latina identity has been an invaluable experience. Though I still do not always know how I *should* answer or how I am *supposed* to answer questions posed to me like “What are you?” and “Are you mixed?” and surveys and censuses that have “Black/African American” as opposed to “black” are still problematic in my journey of self-identification, I do see the progress that has been made through interactions I have with peers and discussions I have participated in that include acknowledgment of the African diaspora throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. I have been able to reevaluate moments in my life that have made me question. This is a continual

process though. I still have some of the same inquisitions that I had at the start of this thesis project:

What does it mean to be black and Latinx in a society where being black is arguably oversimplified? How do I navigate a world where my appearance allows the world to reflect an image of myself back at me that does not necessarily equate with my own view of myself? Where do I fit in if I don't feel black enough in some communities or Latinx enough in others? How do I incorporate my new understanding of myself in interactions with my family members and peers who may not understand? What continues to be lost if I am expected to claim only one part of my identity? How can more people understanding how I identify be beneficial to all? What I know for sure is that just because I am a black Latina doesn't mean I am less of either.

In making this resolution, I want to remain cognizant of my own privilege not only in accessing this information and having the time and resources allotted to expound on this topic of interest for me, but also in having even minute control over my racial identity. I am glad that through this thesis I have gleaned more confidence in who I am and interacted, albeit virtually, with other U.S.-born black Latinxs to feel connected to the pulse of Afro-Latinidad. Soy americana. Soy latina. Soy negra.

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