



**Navigating the African Diaspora through the Dominican Parade:
(Re) construction of Identities of
Afro Dominican Immigrants in Santurce, Puerto Rico**

“Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (Hall, 1994, p. 402).

In the 1960’s and 70’s, a migratory movement of Dominicans from the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico was at its peak in history, especially after the assassination of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo in 1961. Throughout the years, this flow of immigrants that came to Puerto Rico, whether legally or illegally, has continued. Although they are established in the West and East coasts of the Island, particularly in Aguadilla (a lot of them arrive in wooden boats on this side of the Island) and Fajardo, a great concentration exists in Santurce, a sector of San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico. There the Dominicans work in low wage employment as laborers, vendors, and the women as housemaids.

The general perception of Puerto Ricans toward these immigrants is negative, stereotyped and pejorative. Also, the image that the media portrays of Dominicans reveals the racism (discrimination and prejudice) against them as both Black and as foreigners. Furthermore, according to Duany, Hernández and Rey (1995), the media and public opinion tend to exaggerate the relation between the undocumented and the illegal aspects of the subterranean economy: crimes, prostitution and drug trafficking. They arrange many festivals and maintain civic, religious, and political organizations¹ to preserve their national identity².

¹ “... transnational migrants arrive in their new country of residence with certain practices and concepts constructed at home” (Glick, et. al., 1992, p. 29).

² According to Akhil Gupta (1992), “National identity appears to be firmly spatialized and seemingly immutable, becoming almost a “natural” marker of cultural and social differences” (p.

The majority of this population is evidently Black by their phenotype. Primarily, their skin color, hair, lips and nose are characteristics of the African heritage. However, it is important to notice the process of interpellation (I'm not sure what you mean. Interpellation stands for how they're identified by others, not themselves.), and how they self-identify themselves racially. According to Grosfoguel & Georas (1996) the racial similarities between both Afro-diasporic communities are evident: "Similar to Puerto Ricans, Dominicans are racially mixed, probably with more people of African descent than Puerto Ricans" (p. 196). With their arrival to Puerto Rico, the problem of the color line (W.E.B. DuBois, 1899) acquires more relevance, and the ethnic, political, and economic inequalities in Puerto Rico among the Dominicans become more evident.

Afro Dominicans consider themselves as "indios" in the Dominican Republic. For them, Haitians are Blacks. However, in Puerto Rico, Afro Dominicans are considered as Black. But how do Afro Dominicans consider themselves in the host country? Through this proposed research I also would be able to discuss how Puerto Rican identities are reconstructed as well. Gordon and Anderson (1999) comment: "Like any sense of peoplehood, Black identities are formed and transformed in relation to other identity constructions" (289). To study the reconstruction of identities³ in the diaspora⁴, specifically the case of the Afro Dominicans in

63).

³ Gordon and Anderson (1999) also stress the following: "... racial identities are not given in nature but are constructed, ascribed, affirmed, and denied" (p. 294). As a matter of fact, I am adopting Hall's (1994) notion of identity: "... production which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (p. 392). He also discusses how through cultural practices and cultural production of societies we can explore the cultural identities of certain population; in this case, the diasporic communities. Hall enumerates two ways of reflecting cultural identity: first, as a collective, shared history among individuals affiliated by race or ethnicity (fixed or stable); second, as unstable, metamorphic, and even contradictory (similarities as well as differences).

⁴ Brown (2005) argues that diaspora attends to the production of affinities and the negotiation of antagonisms among differently racialized Blacks subjects. Precisely, this is the particular conjuncture that I want to explore in this research.

Puerto Rico, I choose an event that brings me a first approach in my intention to understand how Dominicaness and Blackness operate within this community.

Since 2001, the Dominican community has been celebrating the Dominican Parade in Santurce, Puerto Rico. According to Williams (1991), some communities arrange ritual and other performances in an attempt to establish, to delimit, and to legitimate criteria for the evaluation of different dimensions of their personal and group identities in which researchers can also explore the transformation of previous identities.

This practice begins with the triumph of Hon. Jorge Santini Padilla as Mayor of the capital city of San Juan. He received the support of the Dominican community to win the elections in November of 2000. As a matter of fact, this is not the only practice that points out how Afro Dominicans reconstruct their national, racial and ethnic identities as immigrants in the diaspora, but the Dominican Parade can serve as a reflection of the dynamics they play against the marginalization.

“The notion of transcendence is also entailed in questions of how national identities are imagined in light of the diaspora experience” (Yelvington, 2001, p. 249).

Navigating the African Diaspora

The study of diaspora, specifically the African diaspora, constitutes a fertile terrain to discuss the social, political and cultural dynamics of people from Africa and African descendants around the World. Above all, it is a concept that produces multiple questions, and generates provocative debates and discussions. Precisely, because the term continues without a concrete definition, we can find different meanings of diaspora extrapolated from its origins based on the Jewish diaspora. However, there is an apparent consensus throughout diaspora studies on which we can study *global blackness* (Gordon and Anderson, 1999) from different perspectives beyond

racism, differences and discontinuities. This would be one of the biggest challenges ever since “...anthropology has a continuing role in the struggle against racism” (Drake, p. 89).

The term diaspora itself was probably not used to refer to peoples of African descents until the mid-1950s, when it began to be employed by intellectuals involved in pan-Africanism and the effort to raise consciousness and create solidarity among Blacks across the globe (Gordon & Anderson, 1999, p. 284).

Also, this kind of ambiguity and/or plurality allows researchers to explore the ‘roots and routes’ that converge historically among theories of Africanism and Europeanism; the relation between culture and diaspora, and also we can debunk the idea of Whiteness as normal (Fanon, p. 209 & 216). Furthermore, it is important to point out the debate about the term diaspora by starting to define it in its more common notion. James Clifford (1994) makes reference to Safran’s notion of “expatriate minority communities” (p. 304). Moreover, these communities should be:

1. ...dispersed from an original “center” to at least two “peripheral” places...
2. ... maintain a “memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland”...
3. ... “believe they are not- and perhaps cannot be- fully accepted by their host country”...
4. ... that see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return, when the time is right...
5. ... that are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland...
6. ... which the group’s consciousness and solidarity are “importantly defined” by this continuing relationship with the homeland...

Gordon and Anderson utilize the figure of Paul Gilroy to frame their arguments about the African diaspora in the Black Atlantic scenario:

The work of Paul Gilroy represents a middle ground between the ontological essentialism of afrocentrism and the antiessentialism of diaspora as hybridity... he refers to as an “anti-anti-essentialist” perspective on these issues, he addresses the question of the unity and commonality of the African Diaspora as a theoretical and political problem... diaspora refers to the (historical) dispersal of African peoples through enslavement, the creation of similar yet different Black cultures in the New World, and the (contemporary) effort to imagine a shared sense of peoplehood in confrontation with persistent systems of racialized terror” (1999, p. 287).

One major conflict arises because of the differentiation of diasporic populations with immigrants. According to Clifford:

Diasporic populations do not come from elsewhere in the same way that “immigrants” do. In assimilationist national ideologies such as those of The United States, immigrants may experience loss and nostalgia, but only en route to a whole new home in a new place (1994, p. 307).

Colin Palmer (2001) adds:

Diasporic communities are often the products of several migratory streams and that they are never carbon copies of each other but are shaped by their individual contexts. They share, however, an emotional bond with their ancestral homelands and with their dispersed kin... the diasporic communities formed by peoples of African descent share a history of racial oppression and a history of struggle against it... we must also underscore dramatic differences in the historical trajectory of the diverse peoples of the modern African diaspora (p. 58).

This sentence is unclear: In describing diaspora as a condition permeates the prejudices and stereotypes related to the context of global race and gender hierarchies we can exclude immigrants communities? Instead of establishing differences between diasporic communities and immigrant people, it seems to me that we can designate communities to both processes because they fit in both of them. More than differences, I can find similarities. Without a doubt, this is a problem of objectivity: “... ‘objective’ knowledge is always partial, positioned in some specific social location, and engaged in ‘webs of connections’ and ‘shared conversations’ with other differentially ‘situated knowledges’” (Harrison & Harrison, p. 4). In this work, I want to contrast two communities, the Afro Dominican immigrants in Santurce, Puerto Rico and New York, U.S. Both Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic are part of the Black Atlantic (according to Paul Gilroy), and also we can call them African diasporas in the Caribbean. The relations between these two African diasporic communities anchored in the Black Atlantic became full of tensions.

Hence, we can accept or deny hypothesis about the homeland and the host country, what kind of movement is forced or voluntary, and discuss if the immigration movement differs from the diasporic one. For example, Yelvington says: “... the African diaspora in Latin America and the Caribbean has been defined in various theoretical terms and not always explicitly as

“diaspora” (2001, p. 233). According to Safran’s definition of diaspora discussed before, Dominicans immigrants in Puerto Rico are undoubtedly a diasporic population. This diasporic community preserves an ethnicity of the black culture that we can compare with Puerto Rican in terms of the roots.

Everybody knows that there is absolutely no difference between the native African and the American and West Indian Negroes, in that we are descendants from one common family stock. It is only a matter of accident that we have been divided and kept apart for over three hundred years, but is felt that when the time has come for us to get back together, we shall do so in the spirit of brotherly love (Garvey, p. 70-71).

In summary, the study of diaspora offers to anthropologists new ways to improve and to develop research with African and African descendant people. Also, it allows researchers to study new areas as the Caribbean and Latin America where black population is a huge presence, and show us that the African heritage strongly persist in the cultural and social manifestations they carry out daily. However, it is necessary to avoid the ambiguities and subjectivities of the concept. Also, it is imperative to define it concretely in order to synchronize the hypothesis about blackness without essentialisms ,(I agree with this statement, but from what you've written above - especially your reference to Garvey's quote - it seems you're taking the race essentialism road.) continuing framing the discourse, and discovering the foundations.

Exploring identities

During a preliminary literature review and news clippings from two principal Puerto Rican newspapers (El Nuevo Día and El Vocero) that I consulted to collect data about Dominican immigrants in Puerto Rico, I realized that the same authors recurrently appear as references in each bibliographical entry. On the one hand, the majority of the literature about Dominican migration refers to Dominicans in New York. On the other hand, Jorge Duany symbolizes the expertise of Dominican migration in Puerto Rico, and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel arrived recently with a book (2003) about culture of migration in the Caribbean. However, the lack of studies about the African diaspora in Latin America and the Caribbean as Yelvington (2001)

describes represents an advantage to me to improve the old research done, and to provide new contested knowledge in this field.

The principal objective of my proposed research is to consider how through a cultural festival, like the Dominican Parade celebration, the national, racial and ethnic identities of Afro Dominicans in Puerto Rico are reconstructed. According to the Puerto Rican scholar Jorge Duany: “The case of Dominicans in Puerto Rico exemplifies how contemporary migrants can reconstruct their cultural identities based on ethnicity, race, and nationality across geopolitical borders- identifications that are exactly what the transnational approach aims to describe and explain” (2005, p. 3). To analyze the reconstructions of identities of Afro Dominicans in Puerto Rico allows me as a researcher to understand multiple processes of identity formation amongst Afro Dominicans and Puerto Ricans. For example, through this research, I can explore how notions of Blackness and foreignism come together in Puerto Rican’s understanding of the Afro Dominicans.

The increase of the Dominican population in Puerto Rico and the innumerable effects of their presence in the Puerto Rican society represent a fertile terrain for both to improve and to expand the knowledge about those African diasporic communities. The proposed investigation can serve as the ground for broader studies about the historical relation of both communities, their back and forth flows of the past, and the historical use of Puerto Rico as a connection to emigrate to U.S. For example, this proposed research should be the first step to compare the reconstruction of identities of Afro Dominicans in U.S. through the Dominican Parade in New York. My goal is to be the bridge of new knowledge, to reconstruct their history as minorities and to debunk the myths of the diametrically opposed differences between two similar populations of African descents. In summary, the specific objectives that I want to achieve are the following:

1. Analyze how through the Dominican Parade celebration the national, racial and ethnic identities of Afro Dominicans in Puerto Rico are reconstructed.
2. Explore the racial identification of Afro Dominicans in Puerto Rico, and if this identification differs from the perception about themselves in Dominican Republic.
3. Identify how the relationship between Blackness and Dominicaness is emerging.
4. Explain how Blackness is represented in the Dominican Parade and the figure of the Afro Dominicans.
5. Describe how Afro Dominicans perceive the link amongst phenomenons of exclusion and marginalization through the Dominican Parade.
6. Explain racialization as vector to describe the national, racial and ethnical map of Afro Dominicans in Puerto Rico.

The main question of my proposed research is: how Afro Dominicans reconstruct their national, racial and ethnic identities in the host country (Puerto Rico)? To answer this question, I want to explore how these reconstruction processes takes place in the manifestations they produce in the Island, for example the Dominican Parade. To achieve this goal, and accomplish with the proposed objectives, I ask the following secondary questions:

1. How Afro Dominicans are discursively constructed through the Dominican Parade?
2. How racialized is the Dominican population through this cultural and folkloric manifestation?

Although the Dominican Parade represents just one of the multiple activities that Dominicans carry out in Puerto Rico, this celebration reflects the necessity of Dominicans to establish who's they are as immigrants and as Black in the diaspora. Without a doubt, in Puerto Rico their national, racial and ethnic identities became an issue in Dominicans discourses against the marginalization, and sometimes to assume assimilation in the host country.

My preferred approach consists in the use of an anthropological theoretical framework about identity formation that allows me to explore the social, cultural, racial, ethnical, ideological, and economical issues behind the Dominican Parade in Puerto Rico through two processes: interpellation and self-making (Wade, 1993). To complement the data collection through biographical and archival resources, to accomplish with my objectives and to answer my

questions, I am going to use three ethnographical methods and content and discourse analysis of mass communication media (newspapers and television programs).

1. Participant observation
 - a. during the Dominican Parade (celebrated in the month of October)
 - b. around the area of Santurce in other activities and daily life of the community
2. Open and semi-structured interviews
 - a. parade organizers
 - b. Dr. Jorge Duany
 - c. Dominican artists
 - d. community members in Santurce, Puerto Rico
3. Focus groups
 - a. with Afro Dominicans in Santurce, Puerto Rico to explore the group identities, collective organizing, and the dynamics of a collaborative political projects
4. Media coverage analysis (Puerto Rican and Dominican newspapers from 2001 to 2007 and currently Dominican TV programs in Puerto Rico)

Through ethnography in Santurce, Puerto Rico, participant observation, interviews with the Parade organizers and with Afro Dominicans residents on the Island, focus groups and the analysis of news coverage and TV programs, I want to understand processes of identity formation in the contemporary world, but with a particular attention to the Afro Dominican community in Puerto Rico. It is necessary to discover the positions that assume the people at home, the hosts, and the exiles themselves in a debate to return to the homeland as a returnee or stay in the host country (Skinner, 1993).

Furthermore, I plan to pay particular attention to the ways in which spaces and places are made, imagined, contested, and enforced in the Dominican diaspora. Also, follow Williams (1991) in her attempt to investigate individuals and their self-identification; at other times my attention is directed to ethnic groups and their competitive positions, to how persons and groups fit into the local community, or to the relation between the local community and the broader society. Without a doubt, anthropological investigation is helpful as an alternative to quantitative researches because the ethnographic studies serve to identify characteristics, aptitudes, and conduct patterns of a certain population.

Bibliography:

- Brown, J. (2005). *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool*.
- Clifford, J. (1994), "Diasporas." In Clifford, James, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Drake, St. Clair (1993), "Diaspora Studies and Pan-Africanism." In Harris, Joseph, ed. *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press.
- Duany, J. (2005). Dominican Migration to Puerto Rico: A Transnational Perspective. *Centro Journal*, XVII, 001, pp. 242-269.
- Duany, J. (1998). Reconstructing Racial Identity: Ethnicity, Color, and Class among Dominicans in the United States and Puerto Rico. *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 25, No. 3, *Race and National Identity in the Americas*, pp. 147-172.
- Duany, J., Hernández, L. & Rey, C. (1995). *El Barrio Gandul: economía subterránea y migración indocumentada en Puerto Rico*. San Juan, Puerto Rico: Editorial Nueva Sociedad.
- Duany, J. (1992). Caribbean Migration to Puerto Rico: A Comparison of Cubans and Dominicans. *International Migration Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 46-66.
- Duany, J. (1990). *Los dominicanos en Puerto Rico: Migración en la semi-periferia*. San Juan, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán.
- Duany, J. y Rey, C. (1989). Los dominicanos indocumentados de Santurce: su inserción a la sociedad puertorriqueña. En J. Hernández Cruz (Ed.) *Los inmigrantes indocumentados Dominicanos en Puerto Rico: Realidad y Mitos* (pp. 63-76). San Germán: Universidad Interamericana.
- Fanon, Frantz (1988), "Racisme and Culture." In Fanon, Frantz, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*, New York: Grove Press.

- Garvey, A. & Garvey, M. (1986), *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, Majority Press.
- Glick, S. et. al. (1992). Transnationalism: A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration. *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*, pp. 27-49.
- Gordon, E. T. (n. d.). Conceptualizing the African Diaspora.
- Gordon, E. & Anderson, M. (1999). The African Diaspora: Toward an Ethnography of Diasporic Identification. *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 112, No. 445, Theorizing the Hybrid, (pp. 282-296).
- Grosfoguel, R. & Georas, C. (1996). The Racialization of Latino Caribbean Migrants in the New York Metropolitan Area. *Centro Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1&2, pp.191-201.
- Gupta A. (February, 1992). The Song of the Nonaligned World: Transnational Identities and the Reinscription of Space in Late Capitalism. *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 63-79.
- Gupta A. & Ferguson, J. (February, 1992). Beyond “Culture”: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference. In F. Myers (Ed.). *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 6-23.
- Hall, S. (1994). Cultural Identity and Diaspora
- Harrison, F. and I. Harrison (1999), “Introduction: Anthropology, African Americans, and the Emancipation of a Subjugated Knowledge.” In Harrison, Faye and Ira Harrison, eds., *African American Pioneers in Anthropology*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Martínez-San Miguel, Y. (2003). *Caribe Two Ways: Cultura de la migración en el Caribe insular hispánico*. San Juan, P.R.: Ediciones Callejón.
- Patterson, T. & R. Kelley (2001), *Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World*.
- Skinner, E. (1993). The Dialectic between Diasporas and Homelands
- Wade, P. (1993). *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Williams, B. (1991). *Stains on My Name, war in My Veins: Guyana and the Politics of Cultural Struggle*. Duke University Press.
- Yelvington, K. (2001). The Anthropology of Afro-Latin America and the Caribbean: Diasporic Dimensions

Appendix:

Collection of news about Dominican Parade published in two principals newspapers of Puerto Rico: El Vocero* and El Nuevo Día**

NEWSPAPER	DATE	TITLE
El Vocero	October 6, 2001	Add: "1er Festival Parada Dominicana en Puerto Rico"
El Vocero	October 11, 2001	"Gran fiesta dominicana"
El Vocero	October 12, 2001	"DTOP deniega permiso a Parada Dominicana"
El Vocero	October 12, 2001	"1er Festival Parada Dominicana en Puerto Rico"
El Vocero	October 13, 2001	"Ayuda para prevenir desembarco ilegales" and "Pidieron tarde permiso para la Parada de RD"
El Vocero	October 15, 2001	"Fervor dominicano en la Isla"
El Vocero	October 11, 2002	"Baile oficial de la Parada Dominicana en Puerto Rico" and "Segundo Festival de la Parada Dominicana en Puerto Rico"
El Vocero	October 12, 2002	"Tony Dandrades... orgulloso de sus raíces"
El Vocero	October 14, 2002	"Rítmica fiesta dominicana"
El Vocero	October 9, 2003	"Por Univisión Parada Dominicana"
El Vocero	October 13, 2003	"Concurrida tercera Parada Dominicana"
El Vocero	October 8, 2004	"4to. Festival Internacional de la Hispanidad & Parada Dominicana"
El Vocero	October 11, 2004	"Eufóricos con Félix Sánchez"
El Vocero	October 11, 2004	"Reclaman Igros con ciudadanos extranjeros"
El Vocero	October 9, 2006	"Comunidad dominicana dice presente en su día" (cover)
El Vocero	October 9, 2006	"Fiesta dominicana"
El Nuevo Día	October 15, 2001	"¡Que viva Quisqueya!"
El Nuevo Día	October 9, 2003	"Exaltación al orgullo dominicano"
El Nuevo Día	October 11, 2004	"Fiesta dominicana en suelo boricua"
El Nuevo Día	October 9, 2005	"Dominicanos celebran en Santurce la hispanidad"
El Nuevo Día	October 10, 2005	"Se apodera el sabor dominicano de la Ponce de León"
El Nuevo Día	October 11, 2005	"Sin tregua la música de Johnny Pacheco"
El Nuevo Día	October 4, 2006	"Fiesta dominicana para conmemorar el Día de la Raza"
El Nuevo Día	October 9, 2006	"Sabor dominicano llena a Santurce"
El Nuevo Día	October 9, 2006	"Rumba quisqueyana en Santurce"

*El Vocero does not have a printed edition on Sundays. Also, on October 2005 they do not publish anything about the 5th Dominican Parade in Puerto Rico.

**The collection of news from El Nuevo Día is from the digital version of adendi.com (archive). During the year 2002, I can't find any news related to the Dominican Parade.