

BEING BLACK AIN'T SO BAD... DOMINICAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN NEGOTIATING RACE IN CONTEMPORARY ITALY

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ABSTRACT

This article explores questions of racial identity and national belonging through the experience of Dominican women immigrant in contemporary Italy. By means of empirical examination that includes oral interviews of women living in Italy as well as in the Dominican Republic, the author considers the racialization of Dominican identity in relation to Italian national identity. Through the stories of two high-profile Dominican women immigrants in Italy, Denny Méndez (Miss Italy 1996) and Mercedes Frías (Parliament Representative 2006), this article explores how blackness permits Dominicans to be represented within the Italian nation, allowing them to belong, although in an often-conflicting border. This essay facilitates an original transatlantic and multi-disciplinary dialogue that engages discourse analysis of oral interviews as well as various theories on gender, race, ethnicity and migration. Some of the main questions explored in this article are: (1) Why do Dominican women embrace blackness in Italy? (2) How does this new ethnicity, to borrow Stuart Hall's term, facilitate (trans) migration and dual citizenship for these women? (3) Can they go back as black to the Dominican Republic or must they negotiate a dual yet separate identity?

Keywords: blackness, transnationalism, migration, Dominican diaspora, colonialism, racial identity, trans-national feminism

RESUMEN

Este ensayo explora temas relacionados con la identidad racial y el sentido de pertenecer a una nación, partiendo de la experiencia de mujeres dominicanas que emigran a Italia. A través del análisis empírico de entrevistas orales realizadas a mujeres residentes tanto en Italia como en la República Dominicana, la autora presenta la relación entre la nacionalidad italiana y la identidad dominicana en proceso de racialización. A partir de las historias de dos mujeres dominicanas inmigrantes de alto perfil público en Italia, Denny Méndez (Miss Italia 1996) y Mercedes Frías (Representante al Parlamento 2006), este artículo facilita un diálogo trasatlántico y multi-disciplinario que incluye el análisis discursivo de entrevistas orales y las teorías de

género, raza, etnia y migración. Algunas de las preguntas que el artículo propone son: (1) ¿Por qué las dominicanas acogen la identidad “negra” en Italia? (2) ¿Cómo facilita esta “nueva etnia”, para citar el término de Stuart Hall, la trans-migración y la doble nacionalidad de estas mujeres? (3) ¿Pueden ellas volver a la República Dominicana como mujeres negras o deben negociar una identidad doble y separada en ambos espacios geográficos?

Palabras clave: negritud, transnacionalidad, migración, diáspora dominicana, colonialismo, identidad racial, feminismo transnacional

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore les questions d'identité raciale et le sentiment d'appartenance à une nation à partir de l'expérience des femmes dominicaines immigrantes en Italie. A travers d'une analyse empirique d'entretiens oraux réalisés avec des femmes résidées en Italie et en République dominicaine, l'auteure présente la relation entre la nationalité italienne et l'identité dominicaine, dans un contexte de situation raciale. Inspiré par l'histoire de deux grandes figures dominicaines dans la société italienne Denny Mendez (Miss Italia 1996) et Mercedes Frias (Représentant du Parlement 2006), cet article entreprend un dialogue transatlantique et pluridisciplinaire qui comprend l'analyse du discours des entretiens oraux et des théories sur le genre, la race, l'ethnicité et la migration. Voilà quelques questions qui sont abordées dans l'article : (1) Pourquoi les femmes dominicaines adoptent l'identité « noir » en Italie ? (2) Comment va cette nouvelle ethnie, pour reprendre le terme de Stuart Hall, facilite la (trans) migration et la double nationalité de ces femmes ? (3) Peuvent-elles retourner en République dominicaine et exprimer cette identité ou doivent-elles négocier une double identité de façon séparée au niveau de deux milieux-géographiques ?

Mots-clés : négritude, transnationalité, migration, diaspora dominicaine, colonialisme, identité raciale, féminisme transnational

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“A black girl cannot be Miss Italia... It is not in the rules” were the words that began the scandal surrounding the 1996 crowning of Denny Méndez as the first black Miss Italia during the 50th celebration of the annual beauty contest. “The rules” alluded to by Alba Parietti, a judge in the Miss Italia pageant and a former holder of that title herself, shed light on the anxiety that the question of race and multi-ethnicity produced among many Italians at the closing of the 20th

century, as the nation struggled with becoming the recipient, rather than the sender, of migrants.¹ Denny Méndez, an 18-year old naturalized Italian citizen from the Dominican Republic, was “a beautiful girl” in the eyes of photographer and pageant judge Bob Krieger, but she simply was not an “adequate representative” of the Italian nation.²

Denny Méndez’s “inadequacy” was explained not in racial but in cultural terms, a practice that, as Heather Merrill argues, has allowed Italy to justify racism under the “veil of difference that postulates absolute group identities and splits the human species into self-contained territorial and culturally fixed totalities.”³ Despite her “difference,” Méndez won, was crowned and went on to represent Italy in front of the world. So, why and how did Méndez win? And more importantly, what consequences did her victory have for the Italian nation and specifically for its new citizens of color?

Méndez’s coronation, I would argue, allowed for the growth of a public dialogue regarding an Italy that needed to be more inclusive of its new citizens of color because, as Afia Ofori-Mensa has argued, the national beauty queen can serve as a unique “and exceptional repository for ideals of citizenship and national identity” where notions of race, class, and gender can be negotiated or at the very least, imagined.⁴ The beauty queen’s victory therefore crowned the public debate that emerged in the late 1980s regarding the immigrant’s place within the Italian nation, particularly after a series of hate crimes dismantled the country’s national narrative that had perpetuated a myth of Italy as an inclusive society that embraced multi-culturalism and that lived “beyond race.”⁵ It was now clear that the face of Italy could be an Other, despite the protest and concerns of the likes of Parietti and Krieger.

Debates surrounding the consequences of the 1996 Miss Italia Pageant on the Italian nation have continued as the Mediterranean country becomes more concerned with its role as an immigrant-receiving nation. However, a question that has yet to be explored is the importance that Méndez’s victory had on Dominicans residing in Italy and elsewhere. Of particular concern is the significance of Méndez’s international portrayal as black, a label rarely used in the Dominican Republic to describe a person of Méndez’s light brown complexion. The use and embracing of Méndez’s “blackness” and, more importantly, the deployment of the label “black” as an international category representing a common experience, is intriguing, particularly in the context of Dominican racial imagination through which Méndez has become both black and other-than-black.

The beauty queen’s story could be read as a significant example of Dominican contra/diction. The term contra/diction, as I have defined it elsewhere, refers to the complex social-political processes that have

shaped the various attempts to narrate *dominicanidad*.⁶ I argue that contra/diction finds its origins in the narratives of the intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century who struggled with their desire for freedom, their imagined *mestizaje* (Indian and white), and the need to insert the nation in the modern world by gaining recognition from the imperial and colonial powers. Contra/diction, however, takes various forms throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, as other narrations of *dominicanidad* emerge, particularly in the diaspora, de-stabilizing the official national narrative. Dominican racial and ethnic representations of blackness in Italy are part of the contra/dictions of Dominican identity that allow citizens to simultaneously navigate multiple racial systems.

This article thus presents a case example of the experience of trans-racial identification through which simultaneous significations can be acquired, allowing the subject to assert his or her own identity(ies) in contra/diction with the hegemonic and oppressive discourses of the nation(s). What follows is an interdisciplinary approach to aforementioned interrogations, setting off from the experience of Dominican blackness, through the study of oral interviews, cultural analysis, history, and critical works. The fragments of interviews that appear in this article correspond to two periods and locations: the first set of interviews took place in the Dominican Republic in 2006;⁷ the second set of interviews is part of ongoing research on Dominican migration to Italy and corresponds to individual interviews of domestic and sex workers living in the Tuscany area in 2008.⁸

But She Is Not Black, She is India.⁹

The victory of Denny Méndez, and the scandal that followed, created a lively debate among Dominicans on the island, particularly among women who were confronted with the contra/diction of Dominican racial identity. Local newspapers such as *El Nacional* and *Listín Diario* published a series of articles and caricatures that went from intense pride over the victory of the *dominicana ausente* to ridiculing the idea of Denny Méndez's blackness. The reactions from individuals were also varied. Some believed that Méndez was a "pretty india, not black" and that Italians were simply being racist or silly by using such a term to define her. Others thought that Méndez's victory represented a victory for all Dominican women everywhere because, as one woman, Ramona, explained to me: "*dominicanas* have been going to the U.S. for a much longer period of time, yet you do not see a Miss USA from the Dominican Republic. There is a Miss Universe, but not a Miss USA."¹⁰

The Miss Universe my interviewee referred to was Amelia Vega, a European-looking woman from Santiago who many Dominicans



Denny Méndez bursts to tears after being elected Miss Italia 1996, Saturday, September 7, 1996, in Salsomaggiore, northern Italy. (AP Photo/Domenico Stinellis)

regarded as being the adequate representative of the nation. When asked what made Vega such a good representative of *dominicanidad* as opposed to Denny Méndez, for instance, another interviewee, Mariana, explained to me that Vega's coronation was appropriate because "you don't want them foreigners thinking this is a country of blacks, like Haiti. Everyone always thinks Dominicans are all black, but we actually come in different shades, like *indias*, *morenas*, *rubias*. I mean, look at me, I'm not black, yet I am a true Dominican (*de pura cepa*)."¹¹ The previously cited reactions to Méndez's coronation highlight the contra/diction of *dominicanidad* that allows for definitions such as "india" to substitute for black and mulatto.¹² In addition, they bring attention, as seen in Ramona's reaction, to the role of the U.S. in defining Dominican identity, particularly in the context of Dominican representation in the U.S. diaspora, while shedding light on questions of aesthetic and national representations of women that insist on perpetuating European notions of beauty as symbols of the national body. Both women's reactions express concern with the foreign view of *dominicanidad*. For Ramona, Méndez's victory was a good thing. She felt validated and appreciated because "Denny is like anyone of us, you know, she could be my niece."¹³ Mariana, on the other hand, seemed to be more concerned with the idea that foreigners can only imagine Dominicans as blacks, simplifying Dominican racial diversity into a Eurocentric-gaze black/white racial binary. Ramona's and Mariana's comments illuminate the central questions of racial identity in the Dominican Republic, particularly as it concerns the everyday life of its citizens. From their reactions, we can conclude that both women understood that (a) racial identity in the Dominican Republic is a complicated matter; and (b) Dominicans are aware that foreigners (be it scholars or beauty pageant judges) cannot understand Dominican race or, for that matter, all the labels for Dominican blackness.¹⁴

The reactions of Ramona and Mariana thus summarize the complexity of Dominican racial identity that has been at the center of Dominican Studies on the island and in the United States for the last two decades. Scholars have been concerned with how race, gender, and ideas of border crossing and migration shape the way Dominicans view themselves in relation to their nation(s). Over the last few years, however, this topic has transcended the academic sphere, gaining significant visibility in the mainstream media. In the summer of 2007, for instance, important U.S.-Dominican scholars found themselves in the middle of a major controversy after being misquoted in an article entitled "Black Denial" published in the *Miami Herald*. The article, which was part of the series "Afro-Latin Americans," argued that the practice of hair-straightening, which is popular among Dominican women, was proof of the population's "historical rejection of all things black which makes the one-drop



Miss Dominican Republic Amelia Vega celebrates as she won the Miss Universe 2003 pageant at the Figali Convention Center in Panama City Tuesday, June 2003. (AP Photo/Victor Ruiz Caballero)

rule work backwards, so that to have one drop of white blood makes even the darkest Dominican feel like she or he is other-than-black.”¹⁵ A couple of weeks after the publication of “Black Denial” another controversy emerged when a flyer with a picture of Juan Pablo Duarte (the most celebrated Dominican independence leader), with the words “Padre del Racismo” (Father of Racism) written across the page, appeared posted all over the #1 train, which goes from downtown Manhattan to Washington Heights, the largest Dominican neighborhood in the United States. The flyer was part of a publicity campaign for the upcoming release of a film about Dominican independence from Haiti. The producer, Taína Mirabal, stated that her film was seeking to open eyes and make people understand that “nuestra historia ha sido escrita por las mismas personas que cometieron genocidio en contra de los indios y que esclavizaron a los africanos [our history has been written by the same people who committed genocide against the native peoples and who enslaved the Africans].”¹⁶ The flyer, as well as the film, created a heated debate among Dominicans and Dominican-Americans in which even the heirs of the founding fathers stepped into the public light to defend the image of the nation. Many Dominicans protested and some even demanded that the U.S. conduct an investigation as they considered the flyer to represent: “a critical offense to the Dominican people.”¹⁷

The Herald article and the Duarte flyer raised concerns regarding how scholars, writers and cultural producers understand and disseminate information regarding socio-political and historical processes and their effects on communities. The outcry that arose in the wake of the aforementioned publications, as well as after other public critiques regarding the question of race in the Dominican Republic, serves as evidence of the difficulty that Dominicans experience in establishing a process of democratic, critical self-assessment. In addition, it points to the fact that scholarly, cultural, and journalistic attempts to incite a dialogue in which public concerns can be evaluated and changed may backfire, creating a conflicting situation in which all such attempts could be fruitless. In order to avoid these harms, the need for an inclusive, multi-disciplinary dialogue that respects the specificity of the Dominican historical and cultural experiences and that does not reproduce the very structures of power, which many of us are seeking to de-construct, becomes urgent.

The Dominican Republic obtained its independence from Haiti (not from Spain) in 1844.¹⁸ The process of shaping the national imagination that followed independence promoted an idea of a Dominican nation that was of mixed-race, yet other-than-black, in order to mark a clear difference from neighboring Haiti, which was imagined as a black nation. A famous poem written by the celebrated father of the nation, Juan Pablo Duarte, better summarizes this process: “Los blancos, more-

nos, cobrizos, cruzados, marchando serenos unidos y osados. La Patria salvemos de viles tiranos y al mundo mostremos que somos hermanos” [Whites, brown, red, mixed-race will all calmly march together with determination and courage. To save the fatherland from the vile tyrants and show the world that we are brothers.]¹⁹ Duarte’s omission of the word “negros” from his recipe for Dominican national race is linked to the explicit black identity of the “tiranos” that he refers to in this poem. Dominicans were narrated in Duarte through what was conceived of as the only possible race: the new hybrid Dominican race. Shalini Puri argues that the rhetoric of hybridity in the Caribbean allows a nation to “manage racial politics either by promoting cultural over racial hybridity or by producing racial mixes that are acceptable to the elite.”²⁰ In the case of the Dominican Republic, Duarte’s hybridity discourse served to create an other-than-black Dominican race that was culturally Hispanic and racially distant from his black French-speaking neighbors. This myth was ultimately corroborated by the United States’ imperial imagination: “Thus the U.S. Senate Commission of Inquiry who went to the Dominican Republic in early 1871...found people to be generally of mixed blood with a great majority being neither purely black nor white.”²¹ The United States’ approval of the Dominican Republic as “other-than-black” added to the complexity of how the country was imagined and perceived by its inhabitants and the outside world. Meanwhile it granted power and authority to the dominant narrative of hybridity put into motion by the liberal elites, ultimately condemning Afro-Dominicans to obscurity and marginalization.

In order to explain color diversity and hybridity, the elites resorted to claims of mixed (*indio*) identity that was only useful because the “ethnic element,” that is, the native people, was no longer present. The hybridity discourse gave way to a narrative of *indigenismo*, which was disseminated among the population for over a century.²² This narrative of *indigenismo* created an idea of cultural miscegenation that substituted the living Afro-Dominican heritage with the spirit of a decimated indigenous race. In his seminal text *Playing Indian*, Phil Deloria argues that the United States independence movement was grounded on claims of Indianness that helped Americans “define customs and imagine themselves as a legitimate part of the continent’s ancient history.”²³ Native American “history” represented power for the Dominican elite, as it did for the U.S. American founding fathers. It granted them the command to create a space of authority that would allow for claims of sovereignty and authenticity in front of other nations and the colonial powers. This rhetoric provided a series of advantages for legitimating their version of history. First, being part Indian provided a way of claiming genuine ties to the land and therefore securing a history prior to colonization,

while maintaining a link to the colonial power through the Spanish counterpart implicit in the racial mix. Secondly, the indigenous claims connected them ideologically and politically to other Latin American independence movements, locating the Dominican Republic within a much larger enterprise. Finally, it allowed for the desired erasure of African roots from the official narrative of the Dominican nation through their substitution with an indigenous heritage. Women were regarded as mothers of the *patria* and were therefore burdened with preserving this other-than-black image, becoming the carriers of whiteness and purity, a myth that was enforced and corroborated during the dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina (1930-1961).²⁴

Thus when Denny Méndez, an *india* in the Dominican racial imagination, was named “the first black woman” to represent the Italian nation 150 years after Dominican independence from Haiti, confusion, disapproval and disbelief overwhelmed Dominican public opinion as people attempted to understand the meaning of such a label. But for Dominican women immigrants in Italy, this label was no surprise. In fact, it is how they had come to understand themselves in the new nation because as Belisa Ramírez, a domestic worker in the Tuscany area explained to me, “that is how they [Italians] see us. It is where we belong. And that is ok, because being black here ain’t such a bad thing; at least it means we have a place, a name, you know. At least here I am a black woman rather than no one at all.”²⁵

As in the Dominican Republic, the terms that define blackness in Italy (*negra, nera, di colore*) are part of a complex process of contradiction and are linked to the internal—as in the separation of Northern and Southern Italy—as well as the external histories of nation-narration and public interpellation. Recent immigrants like Ramírez thus occupy an interstitial position in Italy for, as Graziella Parati has argued, the country is constantly changing as Italy’s subalterns find ways to “talk back,” reclaiming the possibility for a plurality in cultural representation that could finally challenge the long-protected image of Italy as a white Catholic nation.²⁶ Much work has been done to shed light into the Northern-Southern dynamic of Italy, particularly as related to race and class. It is helpful to remember, when thinking about the racialization of migrants in Italy, that the “coloring” of the Italian south is a significant element in the present day Italian racial imagination.

But Being Black Ain't So Bad . . .

A los italianos le gustan las negras, por eso yo soy negra, bien negra, por eso me dejo mis trenzas y ni me desrizo. Mientras más prieta, mejor. [Italian men like black women, that is why I am black, really black, that is why I braid my hair and don't relax it. The darker, the better.]

– Belisa Ramírez²⁷

In the 1960s and 70s migration theories often assumed that most migrants were male and that women were merely wives and dependents who followed their husbands. Consequently, migration was portrayed as a purely male phenomenon. The last thirty years, however, have seen an increase in women's autonomous migration as the main economic providers for their families. Since the early 1980s, increasing numbers of women—both single and married, and often better educated than men—have been moving on their own to take jobs in other countries. Men and women show differences in their migratory behaviors, face different opportunities, and have to cope with different risks and challenges, such as vulnerability to human rights abuses, exploitation and discrimination. According to data from the United Nations Population Division, obtained mostly from population censuses and covering both documented and undocumented migrants, the number of female migrants grew faster than the number of male migrants between 1965 and 1990 in the most important receiving countries.²⁸ Approximately half of all international migrants today are women.²⁹ Italy offers an important example for studying the growth of women's migration, as more than 70% of the overall immigrant population in Italy is female.³⁰

The first migrant women to arrive in Italy in the 1960s and 70s came from Eritrea, Cape Verde and the Philippines to work, for the most part, in the homes of Italian families.³¹ Their migration was often facilitated by connections with Catholic organizations and was a direct result of Italy's colonial past.³² Italy is not usually imagined as a colonial power, however, mainly because it did not exist as a modern nation until 1861. The Italian Empire joined other European nations in establishing colonies overseas, an enterprise that continued into the 20th century. By 1914, for instance, Italy had annexed Eritrea, Somalia, Libya and the Dodecanese Islands. Heather Merrill argues that in studying questions of migration and racialization we need to remember that although Italy has not been historically marked as a colonial power, it does form part of the great colonial expansion of the fifteen century, which in turn influenced its construction of race, identities, discourses and practices.³³

Female migration to Italy began in the context of the Italian feminist

movement, when Italian women found themselves confronted with the desire to become mothers as well as assert their role in society by exercising the power of working outside of home, gaining political representation and social visibility. Much like black women in the United States during the feminist movement in the early twentieth century, immigrant women in Italy facilitated the white middle class feminist agenda while said agenda largely ignored the needs of women of color and immigrants. At the same time that these changes were occurring in Italy, Black and Third World Feminism in the United States and other parts of Europe and Latin America was emerging, insisting on the need to analyze how gender, class and ethnicity intersect, often reproducing power imbalances and oppression. Jacqueline Andall argues that these discourses are extremely relevant to the Italian context as the category of gender becomes racialized through the emergence of a strong ethnic minority.³⁴

Immigrant women workers in Italy were increasingly marked, becoming subjects of a dual invisibility. On the one hand they were not part of the feminist agenda, despite being such a key element of it. On the other, they were relegated to the image of domestic workers or sex workers, a fact that contributed to notions of race, mis-representation and national un-belonging that often equated a person's ethnic background with marginal professions. That is, an Asian or black woman was automatically assumed to be a domestic or sex worker, which is evident in the practice of using the word "Filipina" (a woman from the Philippines) to mean "domestic worker." As Andall argues, while Italian women were asserting their roles as mothers and workers, immigrant women were only viewed as workers, their identity reduced to a stigmatized profession.³⁵ Despite this stigma, immigrant women were not perceived as a threat to the nation, something that contributed to a continuum of network migration in the 1980s and 90s. Needless to say, this preference for foreign workers and the abundance of work did not necessarily translate into good working conditions or important public representation, mainly because a large part of this immigrant population was undocumented.

In the 1980s the situation of immigrants in Italy gained national attention following the racially-motivated killing of Essan Masslo, an immigrant from South Africa.³⁶ The event shocked the Italian nation, which had been used to imagining itself as non-racist and compassionate due in part to Christian values and to collective amnesia regarding Italy's own history of colonialism. The killing of Masslo resulted in a public awakening to the question of race and the place of immigrants within the Italian nation. Soon after, legislation that became known as the "Martelli Law" was introduced, granting amnesty to all undocumented immigrants.³⁷ This law paved the way for many immigrants to become naturalized citizens of Italy, forcing a revision of Italianness to

be more inclusive of the new citizens and their diversity. But, as immigration reforms go, there was plenty of opposition, and the Martelli Law also provoked a rude awakening of the Catholic conservative Right. In September of 2000 Cardinal Biffi, Archbishop of Bologna, asserted that only Catholics should be allowed to immigrate in order to “preserve the Catholic identity of the nation.”³⁸ Although Biffi found support among many politicians, his words also sparked a dialogue that contra/dicted the dominant narrative of the homogenous white Catholic Italy represented in Biffi’s remarks. Through an act of “talking back,” scholars, writers, artists and the public were able to question “the hegemonic construction of an imagined Italian community.”³⁹

It is in this context of hegemonic interpellation that immigrant women in Italy eventually developed systems of support, usually in the form of ethnic, national and worker organizations, that allowed them representation in the larger Italian nation and a space from which to articulate their gender-specific needs. Pojmann’s study examines the impact of these types of organizations in shaping Italian politics and feminism, insisting on their significant role in interpellating Italian’s feminist movement.⁴⁰ Pojmann, as well as Andall, insists on the role of immigrant organizations in promoting significant ethnic alliances that lead to larger political representation. A recent example of this process could be located in the election of Mercedes Frías, a Dominican immigrant woman community organizer, as a representative of the Italian Parliament in 2006.

There is not much scholarship on the specificity of Dominican migration to Italy. The little that has been documented, mostly through informal interviews and statistical data, shows that it has been a network migration of mostly women, the majority from small towns in the southwestern, and northern Dominican Republic.⁴¹ As of 2009, the documented population of Dominicans, age 15 and up, in Italy was 28,789.⁴² However, this cipher does not reflect the large number of undocumented persons. Like previous generations of women immigrants from Asia, Africa, and other parts of Latin America, *dominicanas* migrated to Italy as domestic and sex workers, for the most part. In addition, there are a small number of care professionals (nurses, nurses’ aides) as well as *matrimonias* (Dominican women who have married Italian men). Regardless of the means of migration and their trade, what does become evident is that when Dominican women started arriving in Italy in the early 1980s they found in place many local ethnic women’s organizations that allowed them to find a space for belonging in their new host country.

Unlike other Latin American women, Dominicans found themselves with the ability to participate in both black and Latin American organizations, therefore inhabiting a somewhat privileged space within their own

marginality.⁴³ Much like the experience of Dominicans in Washington, D.C. during the 1940s, as studied by Ginetta Candelario, Dominican immigrants in Italy discovered that they were often read as black, but that their ability to speak Spanish (which in turn also facilitated their learning of Italian language) could set them apart, if desired, from Africans. This contra/diction made it so that Dominican migrants could be racialized as black in a U.S. or European context while, at the same time, marked as different through language and cultural identities.⁴⁴ This chameleon-like experience allowed *dominicanas* in Italy to quickly form links and alliances within various communities gaining, as Mercedes Frías recounts, “access to a larger form of sisterhood than the one I had known back home.”⁴⁵ But “being black” for Dominican women, meant more than a certain space of belonging. It also meant that their bodies could be physically marked as sites of consumption, corruption, and exoticism.

The story of Lucy Alcántara, a young woman immigrant to Italy illustrates this point. Lucy left her native town of Jaquimeyes at age 22 leaving behind her two sons, ages 6 and 3, in the care of her mother. “I came here,” she remembers, “through a *contrata*, a work contract to care for an elderly lady.”⁴⁶ The first year Lucy made very little money because she was expected to pay for her living expenses and pay taxes to the Italian government. “I barely had enough money to survive as I had to send back money for my kids and it simply was not enough, not enough. The people I worked for are really abusive. They made me do all kinds of chores that were not in my contract and whenever I complained they threatened to send me back. I was pretty back then and Italian men were always looking at me and touching me in the street. So one day I was like, enough! And I found me a job as a dancer, it was there that I met Carlo, and the rest is history.”⁴⁷ Lucy worked as an exotic dancer and occasionally “took clients home,” as she recalled during an interview with the author, for over 5 years. Along with her, the rest of the dancers/sex workers were all from her home country, Africa, or Perú. A few of them had been sex workers in their homelands, but the majority, like Lucy, had come to Italy to work as maids and changed careers when confronted with harshness of everyday life reality as domestic work.

Domestic work is one of the largest sectors driving international female labor migration. In Spain, for example, approximately 50% of annual immigrant quotas are allocated for domestic workers. Domestic work worldwide is an unregulated sector of the market as no labor laws and standards exist. Women, like Lucy, are therefore at high risk of being exploited and or badly treated.⁴⁸ Lucy, like many domestic workers, ended up running two households, her employers’ as well as her own, from afar. The economic pressure and the impossibility of mobility, as domestic work does not allow for more than meager raises, made it so

that Lucy's only possibility for a higher paying job was within the sex market: "I was not a loose woman (*mujer alegre*) back home. And if my mother ever knew what I did here... she would die, she would simply die. But I had to do what I had to do for my family, you know. And I feel lucky, blessed that I could get out of that horrible job, that I was able to make money otherwise and more importantly, that I found a man who took me out of that life and made me his wife. Very lucky."⁴⁹

By the first wave of Dominican female migration to Italy in the 1980s, the Dominican Republic had already become an important site of commercial sex, especially for European tourists. As early as 1920, travel narratives, ads, and rumors about *dominicanas*' hypersexuality circulated in Europe and the United States. The Dominican Republic and other Caribbean nations have thus been imaged as sexscapes, to borrow Denise Brennan's term, as a location for commercialized sexual exchange between white tourists and locals. By the same token, Dominican subjects have been imagined as sexually available and sexually proficient commodities for the enjoyment and consumption of Europeans and North Americans. As Brennan argues, the Dominican Republic has become in the eyes of foreigners a site for negotiating sexual encounters through a global and transnational economy of inequalities in which the circle of poverty is, quite often, reproduced:

In sexscapes... there are many differences in power between the buyers (sex tourists) and the sellers (sex workers) that can be based on race, gender, class and nationality. These differences become eroticized and commodified inequalities. The exotic is manufactured into the erotic—both privately in consumers' imaginations and quite publicly by entire industries that make money off this desire for difference.⁵⁰

The Dominican immigrant woman in Italy can embody the complex dynamic of the sexscape, being perceived as both a fantasy and a threat by the receiving nation. This reality means that by the time of Denny Méndez's victory Italians were accustomed to equating blackness and immigrant with sex or labor, a process that encapsulated the Dominican immigrant woman within a limited marginal space of consumption. The public resistance of the pageant judges as well as the opinion of many Italians reflected a keen understanding of the global and transnational economy of inequalities that made Méndez "inadequate" to represent Italy. The color of her skin meant more than a simple deviation from the aesthetics of "Italian beauty." Méndez's phenotype meant that Italy could be represented by the marginal, the poor, the prostitute, the foreigner, and the object of fear and desire, in short, by those who should remain outside the nation. This possibility challenged the very nature of beauty pageants in which virginity, purity, and innocence are presumed to be important qualities of the "Miss" representation of the nation. Or

as Ofori-Mensa reminds us: “In the United States and other English speaking countries, the word “Miss” in the beauty queen’s name functions as a reminder that she is supposed to be unmarried and therefore virginal, young and therefore pliable, a clean slate onto whose body can be mapped ideals of femininity and nationhood.”⁵¹ If blackness and Dominicanness meant sex or labor within the Italian nation, and the beauty queen must be virginal and pure, Méndez’s victory thus came to challenge not only the image of the immigrant body but also the very contradictory structure of national representation as embodied in the Miss Italia Beauty Pageant. The fact that Méndez would later represent Italy in the Miss Universe Pageant meant that Italy would have to answer Krieger’s question of “what does she (Méndez) have to do with Italy?” in the eyes of the world, forcing Italians to confront their role as colonizers and dominant in a global structure of economic inequality.

But the fact that Méndez won via television vote also suggests that (a) immigrant women had significant cultural power within Italian society and (b) that many Italians thought it important to challenge this limited representation of the nation, in order to diversify the traditional definition of Italianness. Méndez’s coronation is therefore a symbolic victory of immigrant women in Italy that allowed for a window of cultural representation that arguably changed what the face of “who could belong” looks like. The latter victory of Mercedes Frías as a representative to the Italian Parliament further advanced this goal by taking that which was symbolic into the political realm, therefore transforming cultural representation into political action.

Trans-National Afro-Latinidad

On September 23, 1996 an African-American journal, *Jet Magazine*, published an article entitled “First Black Miss Italy Picked Amidst Two Judges’ Disapproval.”⁵² The short article summarized Parietti’s and Krieger’s remarks insisting on the racism of the judges. The article popularized Méndez’s victory and the scandal that followed, placing her as an icon for blacks around the world. In the U.S. context where tensions between Latinos and blacks are as common as alliances between the two groups, seeing a Dominican woman representing blackness serves as a significant point of departure for examining questions regarding race, ethnicity and (trans) national belonging as linked to contemporary understanding of Dominican identities.⁵³ Furthermore, the embracing of a black Italo-Dominicana by a U.S. black magazine opened doors for the emergence of a circular, trans-atlantic Afro-Latinidad that has since become more evident, particularly in the act of embracing Afro-U.S.-Latino urban culture by Latin American immigrants in Europe.

Ten years after Mendez's victory, Mercedes Frías was elected as a representative to the Italian parliament on the *Rifondazione Comunista*, the re-vamped version of the Italian Communist Party that had lost its role after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Frías gained the support of the left-leaning Tuscany region mainly through her alliance with local immigrant organizations. I would argue that Méndez's coronation and her embracing of the label black opened doors for Frías to portray herself as a black immigrant woman therefore gaining support of a larger constituency of immigrants. The results were similar to Mendez's, although less popularized. Women's organizations all over Europe regarded Frías as an example of "black representation in Europe" and as a significant emblem of democracy. Both victories transcended the national space of Italy, blackness becoming, paradoxically, a passport to a type of universality that neither woman could have conceived back in their home nation. For Denny Méndez her victory as a black Miss Italia opened doors for a prosperous career in modeling and acting. Her face is now a recognizable trade of popularity and beauty in contemporary Italian society. For Frías, her black identity allowed her to continue representing immigrant workers' rights in a wider spectrum, becoming a type of ambassador for immigrant women rights all over Europe.

But how were these women received on the island of their birth? And how are their histories of representation addressed? Both Denny Méndez and Mercedes Frías had tried to launch their careers in their home nation first. Frías was a student activist and a community organizer in Santo Domingo until her departure in 1990. Méndez, on the other hand, attempted to become Miss República Dominicana in 1995, making it to second runner up. After their triumph in Italy these women were received with high honors upon arriving on the island, however, their Dominican blackness was hardly mentioned.

Upon discussing the cases of Méndez and Frías with an African American scholar a few months ago, I encountered the following common reaction: "But don't they know they are black? Why don't they (Dominicans) know that these women are black? Everyone else knows." As I searched in my mind for the right words to explain the trans-racial phenomenon that has placed migrant people of color in direct confrontation of multiple racial and racist systems I remembered Belisa Ramírez, a Dominican sex worker in Milan who clearly explained to me she did not care when Italians called her black but did not like it when Dominicans did so: "I do not mind people calling me *nera* here, here I am the *nera*, *la negrita* because here everyone, as long as she is not real white, is just black. But in Santo Domingo, don't you dare call me *negra*, over there I am brown, *india*, or even blond, anything but black!"⁵⁴ Belisa's words summarize the complexity of racialization and racial understanding as

linked to economic and cultural dynamics. To be black, however one might want to define it, is not something Dominican people deny and reject. It is the cost of blackness as associated with poverty, oppression, foreignness (as in Haitian), and un-belonging that people hope to avoid. Thus, Dominicans who embrace blackness in Europe or the United States whether by force or will, can, and often will, reject the same label in the Dominican Republic where it simply carries a different signifier.

The topic of Dominican complex racial identity has been at the center of Dominican studies in the U.S. often posing questions and discussions among scholars. Candelario and Torres-Saillant have both studied extensively the question of racial identity for Dominicans in the U.S. Diaspora, arguing that in the United States Dominicans are often confronted with their blackness through an encounter with the U.S. racial system. The case of Afro-Dominican identity in Italian society further complicates this concern while opening the dialogue to a different sphere. Away from the United States and the Dominican Republic, black identity can become a significant way of representation and belonging for the Dominican immigrant as seen in the cases of Méndez and Frías. Although problematic, especially in the context of the portrayal of blackness as a commodity for sex and work, these women have proven that it is indeed possible to subvert traditional images of oppression in order to create a space for representation, community alliance, and belonging. As controversial as the election of Méndez might have been, it is arguable that this event sanctioned the inclusion of blackness into the aesthetic notion of Italianness while it questioned the limited space immigrant women had been relegated to in the Italian nation. Ultimately, her victory allowed for a wider form of social and political representations of black women within the Italian nation that challenged the limited space they had been relegated to for decades. Denny Méndez might have not been the adequate representative of the nation Italians were accustomed to, but she was the face of an Other Italy, the one inhabited by the migrants, the southerners, the marginal, or rather, the majority. The question that remains is, can Denny Méndez choose to be black in the Dominican Republic? Or to borrow Torres-Saillant's term, can the *yolas* ever return?⁵⁵

Notes

- ¹ Alba Parietti won the Miss Italia beauty pageant in 1979 and went on to represent her nation in the 1980 Miss Universe competition. She has since become an important television and movie icon. During the week leading up to the 1996 pageant, Alba Parietti was temporarily suspended from the judging panel for comments suggesting that Méndez's race made her ineligible to represent the Italian nation. She later claimed that she had been misquoted and was allowed to return as a judge. See Karen Pinkus, "Miss (Black) Italy," *Black Renaissance* 2 (1998):80.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Heather Merrill, *An Alliance of Women: Immigration and the Politics of Race*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xviii.
- ⁴ Afia Ofori-Mensa examined the connections among beauty, belonging and blackness in late 1990s Italy, using as a case study Denny Méndez's Miss Italia win. She argued that Modern beauty pageantry has always been a site of tensions and contradictions, and in the context of Miss Italy 1996, these contradictions become more evident as the body of Méndez is equated to labor, sex and immigration. "Naughtiness and Nationhood. Immigration, Race and Miss Italia 1996" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Studies Association, Washington, D.C., USA, November 4-8, 2009).
- ⁵ See endnote 37 on the Masslo killing.
- ⁶ *Narrating Contra/dictions: Haiti and The United States in the Imagine of Dominican Identities*. Book Manuscript, 2013.
- ⁷ For the interviews conducted in the Dominican Republic I worked through a local micro-enterprise development organization known as FIME (Fondo de Inversión para la Micro-empresa), which works with community groups, focusing on women. The interviews were meant to assess women's perceptions of beauty, power and migration. I had a set of 15 questions prepared; however, the conversations usually went different ways, revealing fascinating insights into Dominican culture. The interviews conducted in Italy were done through network connections (mainly through acquaintances who were able to introduce me to several women willing to share their stories) and are part of preliminary research for a longer project on Dominican migration to Italy.

- ⁸ My analysis relies on the interviews conducted as well as on reactions that appeared in the Dominican popular media due to the fact that critical texts that focus specifically on Dominican migration to Italy are scarce.
- ⁹ “Denny Méndez,” Photo by Domenico Stinellis, AP 1996.
- ¹⁰ Ramona Gómez Quezada, interview with the author, September 23, 2006.
- ¹¹ Mariana de los Santos, interview with the author, September 7, 2006.
- ¹² Contra/diction is a term I use to explain the historical and rhetorical processes that have influenced the construction of Dominican Identity discourse since the birth of the republic in the 19th century and to the present (citation will be added after evaluation process is completed to maintain the author’s anonymity).
- ¹³ Interview with the author, September 23, 2006.
- ¹⁴ Photo by Miss Universe, LLC. Reproduced in *El Nacional*, June 4, 2003.
- ¹⁵ “Black Denial” was published June 13, 2007. The author, Francis Robles, conducted a series of interviews in Dominican hair salons and visited various Dominican scholars from the island as well as the diaspora. Ramona Hernández, Director of the Dominican Studies Institute in New York, and Ginetta Candelario, Professor of Women’s Studies at Smith College were quoted in the article asserting the author’s thesis regarding Dominicans’ “black denial” as evidenced in hair-straightening practices. Both scholars however, insisted that they had been misquoted and they that they disagreed with the simplicity of Robles’s argument.
- ¹⁶ Taína Mirabal is a Latina film producer from Los Angeles, California. Her first film, “Father of Racism,” examines the life of Juan Pablo Duarte, the founder of the Dominican Republic. Mirabal’s film alleges that Duarte was a white supremacist whose independence movement was actually a racial separation movement and whose secret society, La Trinitaria, was linked to the KKK. The allegations made in Mirabal’s film created a series of controversies that were highlighted in many newspapers and blogs in the fall of 2007. See *Diario Libre*, September 11, 2007 and *The New York Times*, September 2, 2007.
- ¹⁷ *The New York Times*, Sept 2, 2007.
- ¹⁸ In 1822 the entire island was unified under the Haitian flag. This unification lasted until 1844.

- ¹⁹ Rosa Duarte, *Apuntes de Rosa Duarte* (Santo Domingo: 2nd Caribe, 1970), 16. Juan Pablo Duarte was the founder of the Trinitaria (1836), the clandestine independence movement that obtained Dominican independence in 1844.
- ²⁰ Shalini Puri, *The Caribbean Postcolonial: Social Equality, Post-Nationalism and Cultural Hybridity* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 16.
- ²¹ Torres-Saillant, Silvio. "The Tribulations of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Racial Identity", 129.
- ²² *Indigenismo* was a Latin American movement that insisted on a dominant social and political role for Indians in countries where they constitute a majority. The movement became influential in Mexico with the revolution of 1910-20 and served as significant source of inspiration for Latin American literatures and arts. In the Dominican Republic the most significant literary representation of *indigenismo* is *Enriquillo* (1882) by Manuel de Jesús Galván.
- ²³ Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 125.
- ²⁴ Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina became president of the Dominican Republic in 1930, ruling for 31 years in what many regard as one of the most ruthless dictatorships in Latin American history. He was a Hispanophile and an anti-Haitian who presided over the killing of 20,000 ethnic Haitians in the country's northern borderland. He was notable for, among many things, his crimes against women and his insistence on preserving an image of the nation as white (or whiter than Haiti, at least). See Catharina Vallejo, *Las madres de la patria y las bellas mentiras: imágenes de la mujer en el discurso literario nacional de la República Dominicana, 1844-1899* (Miami: Universal, 1999), 113-142.
- ²⁵ Belisa Ramírez, interview with the author, July 31st, 2008. Ramírez was a sex worker or Sanqui from Sabana de la Mar working in Sosúa. She immigrated to Italy with a fiancée visa granted through a man who used to be her client. The interview took place in Spanish. I transcribed and translated the interview.
- ²⁶ Graziella Parati. *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture*. University of Toronto Press, 2005, 47-48.
- ²⁷ Belisa Ramírez, interview with the author, Tuscany, Italy. July 31st, 2008.
- ²⁸ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development*

Report 2009, 12.

²⁹ Ibid, 25.

³⁰ *International Migration Outlook* (Washington, DC: OECD Publishing, 2013).

³¹ Umberto Melotti, "International Migration in Europe: Social Projects and Political Culture," in *Ethnic Mobilisation in Multi-Cultural Europe*, eds. John Rex and Beatrice Drury (Aldershot: Avebury, 1994), 143.

³² See Heather Merrill, *An Alliance of Women: Immigration and the Politics of Race*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

³³ Merrill, xvi.

³⁴ Jacqueline Andall, *Gender, Migration and Domestic Service: The Politics of Black Women in Italy* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2000), 3.

³⁵ Ibid., 19.

³⁶ Jerry Essan Masslo was a refugee from South Africa murdered in August 1989 by a gang of criminals. His story evoked a strong emotional response all over Italy and led to the recognition of refugee status by Italian legislation. Shortly after his tragic death, the first anti-racist event ever organized in Italy took place in Rome. It involved over 200,000 people, Italians and foreigners. His death also inspired cultural productions, the most significant of which is the film *Pummaró* (1990). See Russell King and Nancy Wood, eds., *Media and Migration: Constructions of Mobility and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

³⁷ The Martelli Law, signed in January of 1990, was inspired by the Masslo crime. The law was named after its author Deputy Prime Minister Claudio Martelli.

³⁸ Parati, 23.

³⁹ Parati, 29.

⁴⁰ Wendy Pojmann, *Immigrant Women and Feminism in Italy* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), 6.

⁴¹ See Karen Weyland, *Negociando la aldea global con un pie aquí y otro allá. La diáspora femenina dominicana y la transculturidad como alternativa descolonizadora* (Santo Domingo: Intec, 2006).

⁴² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Latin American Economic Outlook 2010," under "Dominican

Republic” <<http://www.oecd.org/dev/americas/44535785.pdf>>.

- ⁴³ In addition to Dominicans, black Cuban women and Brazilian women have been migrating to Italy in small numbers. CARITAS reported that over 19,000 Cubans were living in Italy by 2006.
- ⁴⁴ Ginetta Candelario, *Black Behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
- ⁴⁵ Mercedes Frías, Presentation at Universidad INTEC (Santo Domingo, May 2006).
- ⁴⁶ Interview conducted by author, August 4, 2008.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ A reflection on the complex dynamics between Migration and Development, CARITAS Europa, Edited Draft 20-10-2008, p. 27.
- ⁴⁹ Interview conducted by author, August 4th, 2008.
- ⁵⁰ Denise Brennan, *What's Love Got to Do with It: Transnational Desires and Sex Tourism in the Dominican Republic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 16.
- ⁵¹ Afia Ofori-Mensa, “Naughtiness and Nationhood: Immigration, Race and Miss Italia 1996,” 7.
- ⁵² “First Black Miss Italy Picked Amidst Two Judges’ Disapproval.” *Jet Magazine* 23 September 1996.
- ⁵³ Nicolas Vaca examines the tensions that have existed among Latinos and blacks in the US. See *The Presumed Alliance*. Harper Collins, 2009.
- ⁵⁴ Interview with Belisa Ramírez, August 7, 2008.
- ⁵⁵ A *yola* is a type of raft used by Dominicans to migrate to U.S. territory via Puerto Rico, much like the Cuban *balsa*. During the 1990s many Dominicans embarked in this very dangerous journey, often losing their lives. The image of the *yola* has been appropriated by scholars and artists as a symbol of Dominican migration. In his seminal collection of essays *El retorno de las yolas* [*The Return of the Rafts*] (Santo Domingo, Trinitaria, 1999) Torres-Saillant examines the role of Dominican émigrés in influencing local politics, culture, and knowledge production.

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