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Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof: A Tale of Two Cities

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From the Burro to the Subway

THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, like much of Latin America, has a history of uneasy relations between the city and the countryside. When the former Spanish colony of Santo Domingo gained independence, a handful of small cities and their tiny cadre of lettered elites found themselves profoundly burdened by the demographic and political weight of the countryside. The independent Dominican peasantry, and the regional strongmen it supported, resisted the imposition of a centralized state and commercial agriculture. To urban intellectuals, peasants represented the backward and barbarous legacy of centuries of Spanish neglect.¹ Yet in a republic that seemed perpetually threatened by external domination, from either Haiti or the United States, Dominican nationalists also frequently depicted idealized country folk as carriers of supposedly essential Dominican values like Spanish language, premodern simplicity, and Roman Catholicism.² The disorganized, and racially suspect, countryside was the main obstacle to the flourishing of the nation. But if it could be bent to the will of urban elites, it was also the ultimate hope for national salvation and the antidote to foreign influence.

In the twentieth century, attempts by urban Dominicans to domesticate and transform the countryside unleashed the transformation of their rural nation into an urban society, a process that quickly spun out of their control. The change began as early as the 1930s, when the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo concentrated political power in the capital, renamed it Ciudad Trujillo (Trujillo City), and began to build it as a monument to the modernizing potency of the regime.³ But the urbanization of the Dominican Republic sped after 1950 as rural Dominicans began flooding into the monumental city. Between 1950 and 2000, the proportion of Dominicans living in cities (defined as provincial capitals and municipal districts) grew from 23.7 percent to 62.4 percent.⁴ In 1950, the population of Santo Domingo stood at 181,553.⁵ By the end of the century the population of greater Santo Domingo, including the capital and contiguous urban areas, had reached about 2.1 million, or about 25 percent of the national population.⁶ As in much of Latin America, the exodus from the countryside far outpaced construction in the capital and the demand for urban workers. Rural migrants built their own city of shantytowns in converted cane lands, steep canyons,

and marshy riverbanks on the outskirts of the capital. They engaged in daily struggles to secure jobs, housing, sanitation, water, schools, and electricity: the unfulfilled promises of the modern Dominican capital. The center of everyday Dominican politics and culture thus migrated with the rural poor, from small villages, cattle ranches, and sugar plantations to sprawling expanses of concrete block, corrugated iron, and found materials.

Rural migrants in the capital became key symbols of this uneasy change. To critics of the government, migrants were victims of the development politics pursued by Dominican leaders. They were starved out of the countryside and crowded into slums to provide capitalists with a permanent pool of reserve labor, the key sign that national development strategies were out of balance. To intellectuals allied with the government, migration to the city was a symptom of overpopulation, which undermined the otherwise exemplary course of economic development. The growing urban slums, they argued, were the result of the cultural failings and misbehavior of the Dominican masses who crowded into “illegal and promiscuous” shantytowns at the city’s edge.⁷

The rural exodus also became fodder for comedic commentary on the national condition. In the early 1970s, for instance, a character named Don Cibaíto appeared regularly in sketches on Radio Universal in Santo Domingo. Created by author Domingo Rodríguez Creus and comedian Julio César Matías, Don Cibaíto was a peasant who had ventured from the countryside to the Dominican capital. There, in comic monologues, he reported on the magnificent city to a kinsman in his remote village. “I am not going to send you the hundred pesos for your cataract operation, compadre,” he related in an early episode. “For what you have to look at in Nabá Aentro, one eye is enough.” A person would need “two eyes or more, if it were possible,” to take in all the sights of the capital, he marveled. “I don’t think even Nueva Yoi [a heavily accented pronunciation of New York] has as many houses and beautiful things. There must be almost three hundred houses, or maybe a few more.”⁸ In their tales of a man transported from the farthest reaches of civilization to the bewildering modern world, Cibaíto’s creators offered an easy sort of humor at the expense of the rural poor. Yet the sketches were not without sympathy for the peasant. Rodríguez and Matías used Cibaíto’s thickly accented voice to make sharp and unmistakably Dominican assessments of civilization itself, and especially of Dominican big-city life. “What’s modern is modern, compadre,” Cibaíto lamented, “even though it is ugly, expensive, and in bad taste. You have to be up to date because if you aren’t they criticize you, they call you a hick, a rebel, and an illiterate.”⁹

THE EMPIRE CITY

Cibaíto's creators deployed him as a symbol of the nation at large, a lovable island of backwardness suddenly afloat in the ugly and expensive sea of modern urban life. In this playful mockery, it was of no small significance that the mispronounced world capital, New York, was the yardstick against which Cibaíto measured the capital city he wandered. It was laughable, radio audiences surely expected, that anyone would think muddy Santo Domingo a bigger, more modern city than New York. But audiences likely shared Cibaíto's assumption that Dominican modernity ought to be measured by comparison with the United States—and that the comparison could be boiled down to the contrast between two cities, New York and Santo Domingo.

In the century before Cibaíto appeared on the radio, the Dominican Republic endured one of the most thorough experiences of United States imperialism of any country in the world. In 1870 the United States nearly annexed the nascent republic. When Congress voted the annexation down, U.S. trade representatives outmaneuvered their European rivals to monopolize Dominican imports and exports including the emerging sugar industry. In the 1880s and 1890s, a corrupt Wall Street firm purchased the entire national debt of the Dominican Republic, monopolized shipping to and from the island, and through its dealings with a Dominican dictator plunged national political life into chaos. In 1904 the United States seized direct control over the collection of Dominican customs revenue. In 1916, the U.S. Marines invaded Santo Domingo and for the next eight years governed the Dominican Republic by force. The U.S. War Department then supported dictator Rafael Trujillo's rise to power, lending his thirty-one-year regime both weaponry and legitimacy. After Trujillo's death in 1961, President John F. Kennedy sent the Alliance for Progress, the Peace Corps, and the Central Intelligence Agency to Santo Domingo in order to construct a stable, anticommunist government. Then, in response to a popular democratic uprising in 1965, President Lyndon Johnson invaded Santo Domingo again. By the time Cibaíto appeared on the radio, a new authoritarian patriarch, Joaquín Balaguer—elected while U.S. forces held Santo Domingo and backed by the U.S. Embassy and the CIA—was firmly in place.¹⁰

Open assertions of United States modernity and Dominican backwardness underwrote each of these imperial encounters, fundamentally shaping the ways that Dominicans imagined themselves. U.S. officials explained their aggression by claiming the role of tutor, helping a young, dark-skinned neighbor to learn the ways of civilized life. Dominicans responded with projects to imitate the United States and, as frequently, with rejections of everything about the United States as

wholly opposite to a true Dominican spirit. But whether they inspired mimicry or nationalist resentment, appropriation or self-deprecating humor, comparisons with the United States became inseparable from attempts to define Dominican identity. New York took on a special role in this relationship. New York was where Dominican sugar went to market and where shippers loaded manufactured goods for the return voyage to Santo Domingo. New York was where the San Domingo Improvement Company had its headquarters, where the U.S. government deposited Dominican customs receipts before disbursing them to creditors. Meanwhile, urban reformers, architects, and city planners consciously redesigned the buildings, parks, and public works in New York to “prepare” it for its “imperial destiny.” They built the Empire City on the theory that “the appearance of a metropolis will always be accepted as the index of the national character.”¹¹ As the twentieth century progressed the iconic New York City skyline cast a shadow long enough to be visible to the distant subjects of the U.S. empire. When Cibaito appeared on Dominican radio, the Empire State Building, the new World Trade Center, and the subway system were akin to the moon launch in Dominican public opinion, undisputed symbols of Anglo-American achievement. The comparison with New York served as an easy shorthand for the general differences between the United States and the Dominican Republic.

Songwriter Mercedes Sagredo summed up this contrast in a popular dance tune about a Dominican traveler to New York, “Del burro al subway.” “What a big change,” the chorus repeated, “from the *burro* to the subway.” New York was grand, Sagredo conceded, but it offered little comfort to the “typical” Dominican. “I prefer my little mule to riding the subway,” the song concluded. “I won’t trade my little hut, not even for the Empire State building.”¹² Like tales of Don Cibaíto’s endearing rural simplicity, this message may have been comforting as Santo Domingo was quickly transformed into a sweaty sprawl. But not all Dominicans preferred huts to skyscrapers. In fact, despite her nationalist sentiments, the author of the tune was among the first Dominicans to take up residence in New York City. When she arrived by steamship in 1929, she joined about 350 other Dominicans living in the city.¹³ In 1962, when she published, “Del burro al subway,” there were perhaps as many as 10,000 or 15,000, including many who had arrived in the year since Trujillo’s death.¹⁴ Then, in the four decades that followed, Dominicans became regular fixtures on the New York subway. By end of the century, conservative estimates put the Dominican ethnic population in the United States at about 1.12 million. By comparison, the total population living in the Dominican Republic at the time was only 8.27 million.¹⁵

NUEVA YORK

Nueva York, as Dominicans frequently called it, was the unquestioned capital of the new Dominican diaspora, home to more than two-thirds of U.S. Dominicans throughout the 1970s and 1980s. After 1990 smaller settlements in the cities of New Jersey and in Boston, San Juan, Providence, and South Florida grew in relative importance compared with the city. But fully one-half of U.S. Dominicans, more than 650,000 people, continued to live in New York City, and 200,000 more lived in smaller cities in the surrounding metropolitan area.¹⁶ The extent of this primacy was reflected in everyday speech. Just as Dominicans often referred to all of the Dominican Republic as Santo Domingo, they commonly referred to the whole United States as Nueva York. As settlements outside New York grew more widespread, the conventions of Dominican Spanish simply incorporated the increasingly important territories west of the Hudson, north of the Bronx, and south of Staten Island as “the states of Nueva York” or “the countries of Nueva York.”

“What a big change,” Mercedes Sagredo unwittingly predicted. Not only did a nation long imagined as essentially rural rapidly become unmanageably urban. The distant Empire City, the universal standard against which Dominican identity could be measured, grew over four decades into the second-largest Dominican city.¹⁷ Washington Heights, Corona, the Upper West Side, the Lower East Side, and the West Bronx became transplanted Dominican neighborhoods. Migrants brought their notions of racial belonging, their language, their political parties, their religious practices, their music, and their proliferation of street vendors to these newly Dominican spaces. They plastered the subway stations in their neighborhoods, once perfect symbols of the dissonance and distance between the United States and Dominican identity, with posters supporting various political parties in Santo Domingo. Some rose to leadership in Dominican political parties from their community activity in New York. Others, naming themselves the *dominicanos ausentes* (absent Dominicans), demanded the right to participate in Dominican national politics. After decades of delay, in 1994 the Dominican government allowed dual nationality for Dominicans who chose to naturalize as U.S. citizens. In 2004, for the first time, Dominicans voted for president of the Dominican Republic at polling places in New York, Boston, Florida, and San Juan. They helped elect Leonel Fernández, who himself had moved with his family to New York in the 1970s and spent summers working in the family *bodega* (corner store) in Washington Heights even after he returned to Santo Domingo to study law.¹⁸

Even as migrants carved out distinctive enclaves in their adopted city, transplanting homeland norms and institutions, and even as they created mechanisms for continued participation in homeland politics as *dominicanos ausentes*, they also became New Yorkers. Dominicans were the largest new immigrant group in New York after 1960, as the city once again became a patchwork of immigrant neighborhoods. They were among the poorest of all New Yorkers, crowding into small apartments and working in garment factories, as taxi drivers, as superintendents and janitors, as hospital workers, as nannies, and in countless small groceries or *bodegas*.¹⁹ And among the many groups that came to be called New York Hispanics or Latinos, Dominicans were second in numbers only to Puerto Ricans. Dominicans were Spanish speakers descended, in large part, from enslaved Africans. Even as they negotiated identities distinct from blacks and Puerto Ricans, they often shared the neighborhood spaces, politics, and social fate of those other groups. In the process they became one of the “minority” groups to which the city was left as the descendants of earlier immigrants confirmed their white status by fleeing to the suburbs.²⁰

This incorporation into New York, as workers, immigrants, and racialized minorities, reverberated profoundly in the national life of the Dominican Republic. More impressive than the prominent return of individual migrants, like Leonel Fernández, were the small sums of money sent home by hundreds of thousands of immigrant workers. In 1999, remittances sent home by Dominicans working abroad amounted to \$1.75 billion, 10 percent of the country’s gross domestic product. Remitted migrant wages provided three times more revenue than agricultural exports, including sugar, coffee, tobacco, and bananas. They also surpassed foreign direct investment, income from export processing zones, and international development aid. Only tourism contributed more foreign exchange to the national economy, and among the tourists who spent most freely in the Dominican Republic each year were thousands of Dominicans living abroad, visiting home.²¹

Much more complicated and controversial were the cultural changes migrants in New York began to transmit to the homeland. Becoming Dominican New Yorkers, migrants created new ways to imagine themselves and new ways to understand the world they inhabited. Like other immigrants they remade their gender and family practices, racial and ethnic identities, politics, music, and language even as they sought to define and preserve Dominican traditions. Given migrants’ intimate ties to families and communities in the Dominican Republic, this process had an inevitable influence on national culture.²² Dominicans tend to hold one of two sharply contrasting views of this influence. Those who see migrants as *dominicanos ausentes* or, more recently, *dominicanos*

en el exterior (Dominicans abroad) emphasize that these cultural transformations in New York were relatively mild, and generally brought the benefits of modernization to the homeland. Migrants, according to this view, transmitted technology and entrepreneurial spirit. They fostered local development through private investment and hometown associations. Some even argue that migrants brought home progressive racial and gender consciousness, a new willingness to celebrate African Dominican culture and challenge Dominican machismo.²³ On the other hand, those who refer to migrants with the widespread epithet *dominicanyork* deploy a range of insulting stereotypes about migrant acculturation that emerged in the Dominican Republic over the 1970s and 1980s. They hold *dominicanyork* responsible for infecting the Republic with modern social ills like materialism, perverse sexuality, crime, and drug use.²⁴ These stock narratives offer no better portrait of Dominican New Yorkers' influence on the homeland than the comic tales of Don Cibaíto offered of the daily struggles of poor migrants to Santo Domingo. And they share a basic, unfounded presupposition that New York steeped Dominicans in modern notions, for good or for ill, while Dominicans who stayed on Dominican territory remained blissfully isolated from contemporary affairs.

CONSUMERS AND CITIZENS

Perhaps the most dramatic, and most controversial, cultural change blamed on the influence of international migrants was the transformation of Dominicans into consumers. After midcentury, Dominican middle and lower classes learned of the practical allure of automobiles, household products, electronics, and leisure goods. They grew attentive to the symbolic value of brand names, hairstyles, clothing, and commercial media. What Dominicans, even those of modest means, owned, wore, watched, or heard became progressively more important in defining their everyday lives. Often, understandably, they associated the power to consume with New York. The old idea that New York represented the center of modern life persisted, now entangled with a new idea that modern well-being amounted to mass consumption. Popular musicians Pochy Familia y su Cocoband captured this entanglement in "El hombre llegó parao" (The Man Came Back Standing Up), a thumping 1995 dance hit, celebrating a Dominican who had left home on his knees but returned from New York fully erect, in both senses of the word. The song asked, "What is it about New York that makes people more beautiful?" Then it answered, "he came with seven suitcases, the man came back standing up." According to this logic, the products in

the suitcases represented migrant success, beauty, and even virility. "What did you bring me?" the chorus repeated. "A gold chain, a polo shirt, a bottle of whiskey!"²⁵ Things to buy and consume infused Dominicans' understanding of their evolving relationship to New York. Consumer objects like gold chains and fine clothes stood for the opportunities that New York offered Dominicans to remake themselves and return home standing up.

Yet the spread of mass media, consumer products, and consumer desires was not simply a consequence of Dominicans' brush with modern life in New York. It was also an important part of their transformation into city dwellers in Santo Domingo. Some twenty years before the Cocoband had its hit, Don Cibaíto had himself heralded the beginnings of this process. Advertisers deployed the character, on the radio and in print media, to sell "modern" products to the new urban populace. Migrants to the city, now far removed from land where they could grow the food they needed, encountered a barrage of messages diffusing the idea that civilization depended on consumption beyond mere sustenance. Advertisers told rural migrants that basic household products, from soap and detergents to margarine and gas ranges, were key measures of integration into modern urban life. Industrialists and merchants sought to transform shantytowns into markets for products manufactured by state-subsidized national industries.

Consumption was also crucial to Dominicans' relationship to world affairs, and to the shifting terms of international relations. After World War II, workers, employers, and governments in the United States and Europe created new forms of politics in which the categories of consumer and citizen increasingly overlapped. The rapid (if still uneven) expansion of mass consumption in both the United States and Europe created a new standard of civilization in the "White Atlantic," an idea of material comfort for purchase, against which the backwardness of the newly imagined Third World could be measured. Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department, in its efforts to best the Soviet Union, sought to spread an "American way of life" in Latin America as in Europe. Cold Warriors in the United States recommended rising living standards and expanding consumption to Latin Americans as the solution to social unrest and an alternative to revolution. So even as it sought to sell U.S. products to consumers in the region, Washington also cheered as state industries in the Dominican Republic began selling locally produced goods to the Dominican public.

Near the end of the century, however, the U.S. government and the international financial organizations it dominated changed tack, pressuring poor countries to dismantle national industries and throw their borders open to foreign goods. This flooded local markets with more

and different things to buy, and sped the integration of middle classes into international practices of consumption. At the same time, the dismantling of state economies eroded the capacity of most poor people to buy these same products. Poor Dominicans, like much of the world's poor, lived in constant contact with a world of things, both foreign and domestic, that had become a standard currency of modern comfort (even citizenship) yet were, for the most part, far out of reach.²⁶

Only the relatively well-off in Santo Domingo could afford Internet cafés, cable television, sport utility vehicles, cellular phones, food courts, and replicas of suburban midwestern steakhouses. But the new consumer society had a democratic side that helps explain its appeal to many poor Dominicans. Ideals of civilization based on mass consumption offered a contrast with the kinds of consumption that had previously distinguished urban elites from the rural poor. If a refrigerator or a gold chain marked a person's level of civilization, rather than skin color, university degrees, a box at the ballet, or membership in a hereditary oligarchy, then consumer triumphs, like those celebrated by the Cocoband, offered a new kind of hope in the barrios, a kind of consumer populism.

In these years, the spread of cell phones, pagers, NBA jerseys, and high-top sneakers in both the elite private schools and the barrios of Santo Domingo was a process common to cities around the world, from Johannesburg to Mumbai to Belgrade. All of these changes probably would have come to Santo Domingo too even if Dominicans had never begun to migrate to the United States. The New York celebrated by Pochy Familia in "El hombre llegó parao" was thus not simply a cause of the new consumerism—a source of information about what goods were possible, desirable, or fashionable to own in an otherwise innocent, rural country. It was also a reflection of Dominicans' already shifting relationship to consumption. Dominicans surely encountered a new kind of consumer society in New York, adapted to it, and helped speed and shape the spread of consumerism in homeland markets. But just as surely, Dominican migrants departed for the far-off city with the hope of shifting their relation, however marginally, to the things that already increasingly defined modern civilization, class, and status in the Dominican Republic. Dominicans in the barrios of Santo Domingo, like residents of many of the new global slums, made use of their ties to ghettos in wealthy countries in search of the new currency of international civilization. The chorus of "What did you bring me?" captured by Pochy y su Cocoband records the agile use that island Dominicans made of migrants, recasting the triumphant return from New York as an exhausting distribution of the consumer goods in demand in Santo Domingo.

A TALE OF TWO BARRIOS

This tale of two cities weaves between a broad view of the shifting international context and local stories of settlement and activism in two Dominican neighborhoods: Washington Heights, New York, and Cristo Rey, Santo Domingo. Washington Heights, the narrow strip of Manhattan north of Harlem, is the iconic Dominican neighborhood in the United States. It is the barrio where the largest number of Dominicans settled, where the most active Dominican community politics took shape, and where U.S. and Dominican media first discovered and described Dominican migrants. It is also a neighborhood where the presence of Afro-Hispanic Caribbean migrants complicated the tale of white flight, civil rights, and urban transformation familiarly told about relations between black and white New Yorkers. Cristo Rey, a mixed neighborhood of working-class homes, public housing projects, and makeshift shanties, is one of a string of barrios collectively known as the Zona Norte (Northern Zone) in Santo Domingo. These neighborhoods, constructed through a combination of informal land occupations, private development, and state construction, were the main sites of urban growth and social conflict between the 1950s and the 1990s (though newer shantytowns outside the municipal boundaries now absorb the largest proportion of new rural migrants). Washington Heights and Cristo Rey serve as the foreground for examining the sweeping changes in the Dominican Republic, New York City, and U.S.-Dominican relations.

In these barrios, local stories of settlement and community action most frequently center on youth and young people. As is common in migrant and immigrant populations, young people in families newly arrived in big cities were the most daring in their attempts to work out what it could mean to be Dominican American or modern, urban Dominicans. Young people played a special role in both the political rebellions and the great explosion of media and consumer culture that so deeply marked neighborhood life in New York and Santo Domingo after 1950, inventing and adopting new clothing and hairstyles and new music and dance in each city. Therefore young people were often in the crosshairs of local controversy about cultural purity and mixture. At the same time, young people were a potent political force in both cities. They were at the center of the national liberation struggles in the Dominican Republic in the 1960s and 1970s. And they were at the center of the antiwar and racial liberation struggles that shook New York City at precisely the moment that Dominican teenagers there were first testing what it might mean to be Dominican American. In Santo Domingo, the young antiimperialists who dominated student politics rejected U.S.

influences like rock and roll, hippie style, and disco dancing. In New York, the youth rebellions that surrounded young migrants reveled in these same styles. In each city, nationalist politics, generational rebellion, acculturation, ethnic definition, and style were tied together in the messy knot of adolescence.

PROGRESO AND CULTURA

Two concepts, *progreso* and *cultura*, prove particularly useful for understanding the histories many Dominicans tell about their neighborhoods and the young people in them. *Progreso* is an idea of historical change: over time, things get better. Although the histories of neighborhoods in New York and Santo Domingo are replete with tales of things getting steadily worse, the notion of *progreso* is close to the surface whenever residents talk about the changes around them. *Progreso* is how things ought to work. *Cultura*, on the other hand, is primarily a way of thinking about belonging. It measures who or what belongs to the Dominican Republic and who or what belongs to the United States or Haiti, the two defining “others” in the construction of Dominican nationhood. In particular, Dominican nationalists have long imagined *cultura popular*, the idealized practices and values of “the people,” to be the source of national liberation. In this sense, even the most “primitive” of the poor can embody Dominican *cultura* as when Mercedes Sagredo’s humble tourist prefers his little mule to the subway or Cibaíto adorably points out the flaws of the big city. But the fact that elite nationalists deploy the idea of *cultura popular* to represent national identity does not mean that they always accept and celebrate the actual cultural practices of the Dominican poor. It means rather that nationalist intellectuals on both the left and the right frequently regard the popular customs they like as truly Dominican and the ones they dislike as distasteful foreign influences. In particular they often describe “modern” cultural ills, such as materialism and delinquency, as the influence of the United States. They attribute “primitive” cultural ills, such as African Dominican religion, to the influence of Haiti, which shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic.

Understanding the history of ideas about *progreso* and *cultura* is particularly important for understanding both elite and popular stories of urban migration, international migration, and consumption because these concepts are also ways of talking about social class. *Progreso* is not only an idea about social change. It is also an idea of social mobility. In Dominican vernacular, *progreso* describes the improving status of an individual or family, not just of the neighborhood or the nation.

Building a concrete house to replace a shanty, moving from the countryside to the city, moving to New York, sending children to school, and even participating in the kinds of consumer triumphs celebrated by Pochy y su Cocoband are all kinds of progreso. Likewise, cultura is a measure of national belonging but also a measure of class distinction. Despite the powerful idea of cultura popular, older notions of cultura as high, primarily European, refinement remain fully entrenched. Quite simply, cultura is a virtue that some people have and others do not. If the spread of consumer products as a measure of progreso has a democratic side, many elites use the notion of cultura (with both its national and its class meanings intact) as a way of reinforcing lost distinctions. The president of the Dominican Realtors' Association remembers, for instance, that when Dominicans began returning from New York, responsible agents kept them away from the best neighborhoods in Santo Domingo. This was not a matter of discrimination against dominican-york, she argues. It was simply that the economic progreso migrants had attained was not matched by the acquisition of cultura.²⁷

Many of Santo Domingo's poor also see cultura as a mark of both national identity and refinement. Some barrio activists work tirelessly to enforce norms of proper behavior in their neighborhoods: to improve both the practice and the image of local cultura. Others attend university, against all odds, with the hopes of attaining cultura. And for others, cultura is merely the visible manifestation of progreso. Some people in the barrio of Cristo Rey, for instance, argue that Dominican New Yorkers return with "una cultura diferente." They offer as evidence of this different cultura that migrants are better fed, better dressed, have dollars in their pockets, and have lighter skin. "Different," in other words, is a euphemism for "better," and cultura is simply the outward expression of improved social status.

Ideas of progreso and cultura, in both their elite and popular formulations, are useful furthermore because they reflect Dominican thinking about color and race. In the early twentieth century Dominican intellectuals frequently used cultura in particular as a synonym for *raza*, a marker of shared national, Spanish, or Latin American traits. Wanting to insert themselves into a world that saw the capacity for progreso and self-government as tied to whiteness, they adapted international ideologies about African inferiority, about the beauty of white skin and features, and about the unity of national cultures and biological stocks to their own attempts to define Dominican nationality. When they wrote or spoke about cultura and raza, Dominican elites signaled the privileged place of European civilization in their idea of the Dominican Republic and dissociated themselves from Haiti, a "black republic" isolated by wealthy nations on the grounds that its leadership

was barbaric and ridiculous. Still, generally, in the history of Dominican nationalism, *raza* did not mean quite what *race* has come to mean in the United States. Despite the racism inherent in most ideas of national cultura, and despite widespread prejudices against blackness and African culture, Dominican sources show little presumption that variation of color among Dominicans implied distinct racial communities or politics within the nation. As Silvio Torres-Saillant writes, the large majority of Dominicans who have some African descent have remained largely “indifferent to the Negrophobia of elites,” and feel little drawn toward affirmations of black or mulatto* unity.²⁸

In fact, many of the most prolific elite proponents of European cultura in Santo Domingo have been people who would be considered black in most parts of the United States. While little research has been done on how ordinary Dominicans received literary and political discourses about race and national culture, ethnographic observations show that in both the barrios of New York and the barrios of Santo Domingo, middle-class and poor Dominicans tend to express their identities in terms of race as cultura, rather than race as a social community determined by color. Most are highly aware of color and its social consequences. Many are openly denigrating toward blackness and Haitians. Few openly celebrate the African origins of their cultural practices. Still most describe their raza as Dominican, shared regardless of color. This is a difficult racial discourse for many people raised in the United States to accept. In the United States the rejection of openly racist language, skepticism about intermediate color categories, and celebrations of a black community and African roots are central aspects of mainstream racial politics. The challenge as Torres-Saillant puts it, is to understand Dominican racial identity on its own terms, not as a deviation from a racial baseline set by the United States; to identify Dominican racism without succumbing to the idea that Dominicans suffer from “collective dementia,” that they deny what scholars can plainly see: that they are black.²⁹

Cultura is a tool for racial oppression, and a strategy for racial inclusion based on the exclusion of others. But cultura cannot be reduced entirely to the question of race, as it will be understood by most English-language readers in the United States. Left untranslated, however, both cultura and progreso show how ideas about race, national difference, U.S. influence, and migrant assimilation fit together with the stories

*While the term *mulatto* is considered offensive in the United States and has passed out of use, it is commonly used in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and the rest of Latin America. Although originally a derogatory term for people of mixed European and African ancestry (derived from the word for *mule*) the word lost its stigma in the period after slavery.

many Dominicans tell about changes in neighborhood and national life. They also show how Dominican thinking about national belonging and historical transformation overlapped with beliefs about social mobility and class hierarchy.

Finally, since *progreso* and *cultura* are concepts with origins in European colonialism, U.S. imperialism, and racist, elite nationalism in the Dominican Republic, they also help situate the recent transformation of the Dominican Republic in a much deeper historical process by which ordinary citizens came to use the same vocabulary as intellectuals, colonialists, and governments. The meanings of these words shifted, as they evolved from tools employed by a small, self-conscious elite into ideas that ordinary Dominicans used to understand their world and organize their lives. Indeed, while shifting economic and political structures help explain the major changes in Dominican society at the end of the century—urbanization, international migration, and growing consumer awareness—none of these transformations can be understood without tracing the evolving popular uses of *progreso* and *cultura*. Still, as important as it is to consider how *progreso* and *cultura* emerged as popular concepts beyond the control of elites, it is equally important to see how they never wholly left behind their origins as tools of exclusion. The remarkable durability of these old ways of thinking in the face of dramatic transformations helps also to highlight the persistence and reproduction of basic international inequalities and national predicaments in new contexts. *Progreso* and *cultura* show how different the world was in 2000 than in 1950, but also how strikingly similar it remained.