

**“AT HOME AT THE BORDER”:
PERFORMING THE TRANSCULTURAL BODY
IN JOSEFINA BÁEZ’S *DOMINICANISH***

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I am a turtle, wherever I go
I carry home on my back.¹

Home is where theater is.²

Dwelling in borders

The concept of the border has been used in recent years in cultural and literary studies as a metaphor to “give expression to the lived experience of the ways race, class, sexuality, and gender converge” in the formation of ethnic identities and subjectivities.³ Accordingly, the idea of a “border consciousness” as developed in the works of Gloria Anzaldúa and other US feminists of color is considered to emerge “from a subjectivity structured by multiple determinants – gender, class, sexuality, and contradictory membership in competing cultures and racial identities” that gives way to the creation of a “third space, the in-between, border, or interstice that allows contradictions to co-exist in the production of the new element (*mestizaje*, or hybridity)”.⁴

From this perspective, the meaning of borders broadens from one of geopolitical boundaries designed to separate peoples and territories to one of metaphorical interstices posing a challenge to the conventional confinement of nation-states to one common territory,

¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1999, 21.

² Josefina Báez, *Dominicanish*, New York: Ombe, 2000, 37.

³ Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, “Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*: Cultural Studies, ‘Difference,’ and the Non-Unitary Subject”, *Cultural Critique*, XXVIII (Fall 1994), 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

culture and language. Thus if, as human geographers Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen state, borders and b/ordering strategies “reject as well as erect othering”⁵ as they mark both the integration and the differentiation of nation and states, these borderlines also point to the liminality of the nation-state⁶ itself, as Homi K. Bhabha argues: “colonials, postcolonials, migrants, minorities – wandering peoples who will not be contained within the *Heim* of the national culture and its unisonant discourse ... are themselves the marks of a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation.”⁷ These shifting boundaries hint at the existence of what he calls “third spaces”, emerging as the result of the negotiation of cultural differences that these “wandering peoples” bring to the space of the nation-state.⁸

For our analysis of the work of Dominican-American performer Josefina Báez, this understanding of the border as an interstitial location enabling the re-articulation of dominant views on cultural identification is particularly productive. As one of those wandering peoples that Bhabha refers to, Báez creates in *Dominicanish* a Janus-faced “third space” where traditional linguistic, ethnic, and generic boundaries are transgressed and transcended. By locating the performing body and the narrative voice in the play at the interstices

⁵ Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen, “Bordering, Ordering and Othering”, *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, XCIII/2 (May 2002), 126.

⁶ The term “nation-state” refers to the coincidence on a same territory of a self-governed political entity (“state”) and a “large aggregate of communities and individuals united by factors such as common descent, language, culture, history, or occupation of the same territory, so as to form a distinct people” (“nation, *n.*1”), *OED Online*, June 2010, Oxford UP: <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00321434>. As Brinkman and Brinkman put it, “whereas the state is more related to political concerns, the nation relates to the establishment of the nationality of a given people. A given nationality usually relates to ethnicity, a common culture and history, and a common language, all of which is demarcated by a given territorial boundary or specific area” (R.L. Brinkman and J.E. Brinkman, “Globalization and the Nation-State: Dead or Alive”, *Journal of Economic Issues*, XLII/2 [June 2008], 427). The presence of migrant communities with distinctive ethnic backgrounds challenges the authority of nation-states as homogeneous entities, and points to the formation of post- and trans-national states.

⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation”, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha, London and New York: Routledge, 1990, 315.

⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, 2.

these borderlands represent, Báez makes a powerful statement about both the heterogeneity of Latina/o communities in the US and the complexity of Dominican diasporic experiences. It is at the interstices emerging from these transnational contacts that the transcultural body of the narrator is enacted in all her multiple embodied subjectivities.

Dominicanish, a theatrical performance assembled by Claudio Mir in 2000 blending together Báez’s poems, popular culture slogans, references to Indian philosophy, classical Indian *Kuchipudi* dance, blues and jazz lyrics and music, stages the creation of a borderland space in the clashes of colonial and neocolonial encounters in the multicultural neighborhoods of New York City. Therefore, the printed edition of the play, which has been defined as a “performance text”, is able to transcend traditional literary genres by combining high and low culture forms in a single volume. Furthermore, in an attempt to incorporate some of the visual magic of the stage into the printed edition of *Dominicanish*, a photographic animation presenting the artist performing *Kuchipudi* movements that is set in motion each time the pages of the book are turned has been included. This disruption of the stillness of the written text works to create a textual and visual pastiche, a hybrid composition that accurately illustrates the perceived fragmentation in the lives of migrant communities as a result of social and geographical displacement.

In the play, staged in the form of a solo performance, we witness the growth of a migrant girl into an adult woman as she comes to terms with her ethnic and linguistic identity as a New Yorker of Dominican origin. On this path, symbols and languages are constantly reformulated and re-appropriated to account for the painful metamorphosis that migrants suffer when facing a new reality. Taking as a starting point her personal experiences, Báez develops a piece in which traditional notions of Dominicanity are transformed into what she calls *Dominicanish*, a term she coins to designate her distinctive understanding of the implications of being a Dominican in New York.

By appending the suffix *-ish* to the term *Dominican*, she is able to create a witty wordplay combining the different meanings that the suffix *-ish* conveys to nouns and adjectives in English. As the *OED* notes, adding *-ish* to nouns results in adjectives that indicate the origin or language of the community denoted by the noun, as it is the case with English or Spanish. In this sense, the term *Dominicanish* refers to the language in which the text is codified – a mixture of American

English and Dominican Spanish – and to the transnational ethnic identification of the narrator, a New Yorker of Dominican origin. However, since it also provides the meaning of “in a certain way, approximately” as in *greenish* or “having the qualities or characteristics of”⁹ as in *childish*, the coinage also directly points to the interstitial location that she occupies in relation to ethnicity. For her, being Dominicanish implies being almost Dominican but not quite since she grew up not in the Dominican Republic but in Washington Heights, New York’s Dominican enclave par excellence.

Her in-between location with regards to her ethnic identity is further complicated when we consider the use she makes of the otherwise derogative term “Dominican-York”. As Norma Alarcón explains in relation to the term *Nuyorican* used to designate the Puerto Rican community in New York, these terms offer a critical space to articulate divergences and convergences between the two components of the dyad. In her view, the hyphen or slash that frequently divides the two terms implies “a conscious cultural and political intervention in which the territories on either side of the slash play a role of transformation on the subject posed on the slash itself”.¹⁰ For the narrator in *Dominicanish*, her transformation into a Dominican-York involves not only the recognition of her position as a bridge connecting two differing cultural systems, but also getting rid of the negative connotations that the term has acquired in official discourses in the Dominican Republic. In the view of Silvio Torres-Saillant, Dominican-Yorks on the island have come to occupy the “lowest subaltern position”¹¹ as a result of their migrant status and, thus:

... one cannot proudly assume a Dominican-York identity ... without positioning oneself as an adversary to our nemesis that is the criollo middle class. To speak as a Dominican-York presupposes recognizing

⁹ “-ish¹”, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn, 1989, *OED Online*, Oxford UP: <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50121759>.

¹⁰ Norma Alarcón, quoted in *Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage*, Alicia Arrizón, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999, 14.

¹¹ Silvio Torres-Saillant, *El retorno de las yolas: Ensayos sobre diáspora, democracia y dominicanidad*, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic: Ediciones Librería Trinitaria, 1999, 20.

an intrinsic marginality. It implies recognizing oneself as the voice of alterity.¹²

Paradoxically, this intrinsic marginality that locates the narrative voice in an eccentric position in relation to conventional definitions of Dominicaness also situates her in the margins of Americanness, since as Ramona Hernández and Francisco Rivera Batiz illustrate, the Dominican community in New York continues to be nowadays “one of the most dispossessed ethnic groups in the city”.¹³ However, this othering process is not exclusively the result of hard economic conditions, as Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel explains in *Caribe Two Ways*. For her, Dominican-Yorks’ intrinsic marginality is linked as well to the fact that their interaction with different worldviews often leads to “bringing into question Dominican ontological discourse so that Dominicanyorks become the other, both in US and insular contexts”.¹⁴ This is the case in Báez’s play where alterity is considered not a nuisance but a source of “constant and varied stimuli”¹⁵ that allows the protagonist to adopt a position of resistance to both Dominican and New Yorker cultural systems and celebrate her cross-border identity by embracing elements of the multiple subcultures she is exposed to as a transnational migrant in New York City.

New York as a borderland

It is worth examining at this point the central role that the city of New York plays in regard to the protagonist’s ethnic identification since, by defining herself as a Dominican-York, the protagonist is signaling her sense of belonging not to the American nation as a whole but – as it is the case with other ethnic communities in the city such as Nuyoricans or Cubanyorks – as part of this urban center. This transgression of the traditional space of the nation as the basis for the formation of ethnic identities points to the importance of the city of New York in the

¹² *Ibid.*, 20. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

¹³ Ramona Hernández and Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz, “Dominicans in the United States: A Socioeconomic Profile, 2000”, Dominican Research Monographs, New York: The CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, October 2003, 36: http://www.earthinstitute.columbia.edu/cgsd/advising/documents/rivera_batiz.pdf.

¹⁴ Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, *Caribe Two Ways: Cultura de la migración en el Caribe insular hispánico*, San Juan, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Callejón, 2003, 274-75.

¹⁵ Báez, *Dominicanish*, 7.

creation of Caribbean and Latino identities, particularly in the case of the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico where, as Agustín Laó-Montes explains, the metropolis has become a “symbolically central territory in the national imaginaries”.¹⁶ For this author, the city of New York represents “a transnational enclave, a translocal crossroads whose location stands both below and beyond the U.S. nation state”,¹⁷ enabling the creation of cross-border identities that pledge allegiance to the Caribbean islands while at the same time claiming their own space in the US metropolis.

In this light, Miguel D. Mena claims that in order to get to know the Dominican Republic “in its most intense borders” one must travel to New York.¹⁸ This idea is present in several other studies that explore the intense relationship of the Caribbean islands with the city of New York in the past decades, as in the case of Martínez-San Miguel, who argues that “given the intensity and continuity of migrations between the Caribbean and New York, it is not surprising that [many] have identified this city as one more island in the Caribbean archipelago”.¹⁹ In her view, the city represents “a geographic, economic and symbolic extension of the Hispanic Caribbean that reconfigures classic definitions of insular experience in order to incorporate it to an alternative cartography delimited by culture and its displacements”.²⁰ In this sense, the Big Apple can be seen as one more Caribbean island where “a transnational and multiethnic culture is constituted”. For Martínez-San Miguel, these transnational cultures establish “a problematic dialogue with both US multicultural discourses and celebratory definitions of

¹⁶ Agustín Laó-Montes, “Introduction. Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York City”, in *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, eds Agustín Laó-Montes and Arlene Dávila, New York: Columbia UP, 2001, 13.

¹⁷ Agustín Laó-Montes, “Islands at the Crossroads: Puerto Ricanness Traveling between the Translocal Nation and the Global City”, in *Puerto Rican Jam: Rethinking Colonialism and Nationalism*, eds Frances Negrón Muntaner and Ramón Grosfoguel, Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1997, 181.

¹⁸ Miguel D. Mena, “Y con ustedes, Josefina Báez, de La Romana al infinito”, *Cielonaranja*, Ediciones Cielonaranja, 2005, 8 March 2007: <http://www.cielonaranja.com/menajosefinabaez.htm>.

¹⁹ Martínez-San Miguel, *Caribe Two Ways*, 322.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 325.

Caribbeanness”,²¹ questioning the validity of the overarching assumptions in those ideological frameworks.

From this perspective, despite the fact that, as a world city, New York occupies a privileged position in the production of hegemonic discourses, this same condition enables the creation of transnational and transcultural borderland spaces “with [their] own institutions, forms of domination and hegemony, social movements, cultural genres, and social struggles”.²² The city itself can be seen as an enormous borderland where Hispanic Caribbean and North American national and cultural discourses are being defined and articulated. In the view of Martínez-San Miguel:

Living in New York, walking its streets, imagining the contour of its ways of identification and belonging already implies asking oneself about the problematic position that this city has occupied inside the imaginaries of an US, American and Latin-American identity. From inside, right from the metropolis’ interior, there emerges a series of experiences that make a coherent and harmonic definition of Anglo Americanness impossible. It is, then, a city that is defined from ethnic coexistence as another form of belonging to those micro-communities from diverse countries that define the New York experience.²³

This critical intervention in the definition of hegemonic American ethnic identifications is also affecting the ways that Dominicans see themselves both in the US and the Dominican Republic. The Dominican-York community, as part of the second largest city in Dominican population after Santo Domingo, has become a benchmark in the definition of Dominicanness through the establishment of a transnational socio-cultural system that undermines traditional ethnic and national frontiers.

At home at the border

At this multidimensional interstice embodied by the city of New York, the narrative voice struggles to come to terms with her alienated

²¹ *Ibid.*, 330.

²² I am drawing from Agustín Laó-Montes’ usage of the term “world city” that he characterizes as being “a main locus of economic, political, and cultural power in the modern world system” (“Introduction”, 18).

²³ Martínez-San Miguel, *Caribe Two Ways*, 471.

identity and to reconstruct her sense of belonging and at-homeness torn apart as a result of the experience of migration. This illusion of safety and protection that the concept of “home” traditionally conveys is, however, transformed in the diaspora, as sociologist Avtar Brah explains. In her view, homeness acquires in this context a dialogic nature since:

On the one hand, “home” is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of “origin”. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of locality ... The concept of diaspora places the discourse of “home” and “dispersion” in creative tension, *inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins*.²⁴

This understanding of home as “the lived experience of locality”²⁵ offers the unnamed narrator in *Dominicanish* the possibility of creating her own physical and emotional home outside traditional spaces. For her, “home” becomes a hybrid place situated in the imaginary spot where “here” (New York/present) and “there” (Dominican Republic/past) converge,²⁶ thus signaling the confluence of narratives of “home” and “self” in her search for her “lost” or “new” identity. In this context, her transnational home becomes a geopolitical borderland space situated at the intersection of identity politics and the politics of location where, in the opinion of Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporta-Sternbach, “transcultural subjects are free to inhabit multiple spaces simultaneously, to cross both invisible and real boundaries, and most important to imagine themselves differently”.²⁷

In the play, this is made explicit by the narrator herself who, asserting “Home is where theater is”,²⁸ expresses her acknowledgment

²⁴ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, London: Routledge, 1996, 191-92 (emphasis in original).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

²⁶ Angelika Bammer, quoted in *Stages of Life: Transcultural Performance and Identity in U.S. Latina Theater*, eds Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporta-Sternbach, Tucson: U Arizona P, 2001, 155.

²⁷ Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta-Sternbach, *Stages of Life*, 154, 156.

²⁸ Báez, *Dominicanish*, 37.

of the contingent nature of territorial and spatial identities and their ever-changing natures. For her, as it is for Chicana author Gloria Anzaldúa, whose metaphor of the turtle is quoted at the beginning of this article as an epigraph, “home” has become a portable site that can be embodied in multiple locations. In the opinion of Báez:

Home is where you are born, where you are, where you have been. It is what you carry with you. I am my home. I am also what I do and what I do is theater.²⁹

By situating her home right on the stage, and transforming it into a physical, social and psychic space, Báez moves away from traditional narratives on home in different ways. The association of the feeling of homeness with the physical mobility of the professional stage implies rejecting the understanding of the home as a patriarchal institution where gender hierarchies are created and maintained. This position is shared by Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty who argue that “home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance”.³⁰ Consequently, by detaching the notion of home from the physical building where the traditional family nucleus lives, Báez is able to transcend the private/public sphere division that works so well to hide those “histories of oppression and resistance” to which Martin and Mohanty refer and she advocates the transformation of homes into creative spaces where the expression of personal and collective struggles can be voiced.

However, given the fact that the concept of home is also intimately related to that of “homeland”, by situating her home in portable locations such as the body or the stage, Báez distances herself from nationalist discourses based on fixed origins and territories, and adopts a cross-border and transnational identity that allows her to counteract the pressure to assimilate into mainstream cultural systems, as discussed above. Furthermore, the symbiotic coalescence of home and body in Báez’s imaginary takes us to the discussion of the prominent

²⁹ Josefina Báez, personal interview, February 22, 2007.

³⁰ Bidy Martin and Chandra Mohanty, “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do with It?”, *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis, Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1986, 196.

role that the body of the performer plays on stage. The human body, which, as Rosi Braidotti points out, is “an inter-face, a threshold, a field of intersecting material and symbolic forces, ... a surface where multiple codes (race, sex, class, age, etc.) are inscribed”, acquires particular significance in the context of solo performances as it becomes the primary medium of representation.³¹

Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta-Sternbach examine the works of contemporary Latina performers to conclude that these theatrical manifestations “constitute a genre of [their] own”³² given the peculiarities they present. For these critics, Latina solo performances are unique “postmodern representation in a hybrid medium that encompasses drama, comedy, multimedia, parody, and cultural critique”.³³ As they explain, these monologues tend to draw primarily from autobiographical materials to create a “collage of personal experiences”³⁴ to be performed by the author/writer herself as a one-woman show.³⁵ Consequently, in this context, as Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta-Sternbach point out, “speaking the text necessarily signifies speaking (with/through) the body”,³⁶ and therefore, the body of the performer becomes a discursive text in itself whose symbolic meaning/s need to be decoded by the audience as part of the show.

Staging the transcultural body

In *Dominicanish*, the body of the performer/protagonist, inscribed in the collisions, clashes and fusion of various cultures, functions as an indicator of the transculturation processes that give way to the construction of her body and identity as borderland spaces. The term “transculturation”, coined by Cuban cultural critic Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s in an attempt to counteract Bronislaw Malinowski’s static notion of acculturation, challenges the passivity implicit in Malinowski’s model by highlighting the dynamics of resistance and

³¹ Rosi Braidotti, “Between the No Longer and the Not Yet: Nomadic Variations on the Body”, *The Gender Cyber Archive*, October 2000, Server Donne, 5 October 2008: <http://orlando.women.it/cyberarchive/files/braidotti.htm>.

³² Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta-Sternbach, *Stages of Life*, 95.

³³ *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

accommodation to different cultural systems in the “contact zones”.³⁷ Drawing from Ortiz’s theory and combining it with more recent contributions to this model from postcolonial and borderland cultural studies like those of Anzaldúa, Silvia Spitta, or José David Saldívar, Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta-Sternbach apply the concept of transculturation to the study of the works of Latina playwrights in the US. Despite the fact that their research focuses on the works of Puerto Rican, Cuban-American and Mexican-American authors, their model of analysis is very useful for the study of transcultural identities in other Latina communities with whom they share the experiences of migration and displacement. In their model, the process of transculturation must be analyzed from different perspectives as it manifests itself in a variety of ways: as bilingualism; as material culture, including the body; as dramatic action; as geographic and physical spaces; and as discursive locations.³⁸ All these dimensions are present in *Dominicanish* where, as stated earlier, transculturation functions as the framework within which the protagonist’s cross-border identity develops, and the performer’s body, as the medium through which the narrator speaks her discourse, reflects the impact of processes of transculturation.

In this regard, one of the first elements that captures the audience’s attention is the performer’s outfit, as she appears on stage dressed in an austere black cocktail dress, combined with a white pearl necklace and black low-heeled shoes.³⁹ The black attire of the performer visually evokes the aesthetics of female soul and jazz singers of the 1960s, particularly those of Billie Holiday, whose music and lyrics are a constant reference in the play. If the adoption of European styles in clothing and hairstyle, traditionally associated with white Anglo-American culture, could be interpreted as a sign of an attempt to

³⁷ Mary Louise Pratt uses this term to refer to those “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone”, in *Negotiating Academic Literacies: Teaching and Learning Across Languages and Cultures*, eds Vivian Zamel and Ruth Spack, Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998, 173). In *Dominicanish*, the city of New York would function as a contact zone where transnational and neocolonial relations of power are enacted.

³⁸ Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta-Sternbach, *Stages of Life*, 33.

³⁹ Josefina Báez, “Dominicanish”, 5 April 2007, *Youtube*, Video, 5 April 2008.

assimilate into mainstream culture, it can also be understood as an intentional act of appropriation of some of the elements of the hegemonic culture for other purposes. Following the notion of mimicry that Bhabha developed in relation to colonial societies, it can be argued that the jazz singer's black body functions as a marker of difference in the same act of reproduction, thereby challenging the dominant group's attempt to absorb and homogenize difference. In this sense, female jazz and soul singers imitate the fashions of the hegemonic Anglo culture but with a twist: it is "almost the same, but not white", as Bhabha puts it.⁴⁰

In *Dominicanish*, this twist goes a step further as the protagonist's transnational ethnic location functions as a marker of difference not only from white Anglo-American culture but also from that of African Americans, since a closer look reveals the presence of other transcultural elements in her external image. In this sense, her braided hairstyle positions her as defiant to one of the hegemonic beauty standards in African-American and Afro-Caribbean communities that urges women to straighten their hair to conform to the white ideal of beauty. In the view of Neal A. Lester, this fashion points to the existence of "continuing racial and gender biases about head hair both within and outside black cultural perceptions. Competing mythologies around something as deceptively insignificant as hair still haunt and complicate African-Americans' self-identities and their ideals of beauty, thus revealing broad and complex social, historical and political realities."⁴¹

Some of those complicated socio-historical realities are, in his opinion, intrinsically linked to the existence of what he calls a "caste system based on skin color and hair",⁴² and the intraracist ideals deriving from this framework can be traced back to slavery times, when forced miscegenation resulted in a wider variety of skin tones and hair textures in black populations. This is also the opinion of Tracey Owens Patton, who explains how lighter-skinned women attained privileged status as house slaves while those with darker skins

⁴⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 89.

⁴¹ Neal A. Lester, "Nappy Edges and Goldy Locks: African American Daughters and the Politics of Hair", *The Lion and the Unicorn*, XXIV/2 (April 2000), 203.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 205.

tended to be field slaves.⁴³ As she puts it, “this racist legacy and African American internalization of this White supremacist racial classification brought ... ‘The Lily Complex’”.⁴⁴ This complex, which consists in “altering, disguising, and covering up your physical self in order to assimilate, to be accepted as attractive”,⁴⁵ serves well to explain the images of jazz and soul singers just considered. However, as this author argues, while “adopting White European traits was essential to survival”, many African-American women developed creative ways of hairstyling that challenged “assimilationist notions of beauty” and “perceived expectations”.⁴⁶ These strategies, which take us back to the notion of mimicry, can in this sense be interpreted as active resistance to mainstream assimilation.

In Báez’s performance, however, the protagonist’s challenge to hegemonic white beauty ideals is made explicit by wearing her hair in knots, a traditional African hairstyle that signals the celebration of her Africanness. By doing so, she is at the same time navigating away from the dominant Dominican discourse on race that has created a fictive national ethnicity around the ideal of a racial *mestizaje* between the white Spanish colonizers and the Taíno natives of the Dominican Republic,⁴⁷ thus obliterating the African roots of the majority of the country’s population. This discursive framework, which has become dominant in Latin American and Latino/a identitarian discourses, also informs one of the main ideologies in Latino/a racial identity which defines Latinos/as a “third race, as it were, in between black and white”.⁴⁸

⁴³ Tracey Owens Patton, “Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair”, *NWSA Journal*, XVIII/2 (Summer 2006), 26; Lester, “Nappy Edges”, 205.

⁴⁴ Patton, “Hey Girl”, 26.

⁴⁵ *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*, eds Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, New York: HarperCollins, 2003, quoted in Patton, “Hey Girl”, 26.

⁴⁶ Patton, “Hey Girl”, 28.

⁴⁷ In relation to race and ethnicity in the Dominican Republic, see *Daughters of the Diaspora: Afro-Hispanic Writers*, ed. Miriam De Costa-Williams, Kingston/Miami: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003; David John Howard, *Coloring the Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Dominican Republic*, Oxford: Signal Books, 2001; Nestor E. Rodríguez, *Escrituras de desencuentro en la República Dominicana*, Mexico DF: Siglo XXI Editores, 2005; and Torres-Saillant, “Tribulations”.

⁴⁸ Laó-Montes, “Introduction”, 9.

However, despite the fact that this approach stems from an attempt to overcome the black/white hierarchy prevalent in Western racial ideology, since “Latinos/as” as “mestizos/as” are located in a subordinate position in relation to “whiteness” and above the category of “blackness”, the colonial hierarchy is in fact being reproduced. As Marta Cruz-Janzen points out, “the concept of *mestizaje* sheds light on the historical rejection of *Latinegros*⁴⁹ within most Latino cultures”.⁵⁰ This author argues that Latinas of African ancestry have become a “minority within a minority” as they “represent the mirrors that most Latinos would like to shatter because they reflect the blackness Latinos don’t want to see in themselves”.⁵¹ In her view, in the context of the United States,

... a society where “color supersedes ethnicity and culture”, black Latinos in the United States find themselves identified as African Americans by both whites and Latinos. The more Latinos become immersed in the racial ideology of the United States, the sharper and more unyielding the black/white dichotomy becomes, and the more powerful is their need and desire to free themselves of any and all vestiges of African ancestry.⁵²

Yet, in *Dominicanish*, the narrator challenges this prevailing discursive framework by overtly embracing her African heritage and identifying herself as part of the broader African-American community, as she states when she declares: “Con afro black is / beautiful. Black is a color. Black is my color.”⁵³ This identification is to be seen as an act of resistance to mainstream Americanness and Latino hegemonic ethnic definitions, but also as a sign of her interstitial location with regard to ethnicity that is further mystified by her use of earrings and bracelets from India for the performance. The combination of South Asian adornments with the European fashions

⁴⁹ “*Latinegro*” is a term that has gained currency among Latinos/as of African ancestry since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. For Cruz-Janzen, it has become “an empowering affirmation of *Latinegros*’ legitimacy as Latinos” (Marta Cruz-Janzen, “*Latinegras*”, *Frontiers*, XXII/3 [September 2001], 173).

⁵⁰ Cruz-Janzen, “*Latinegras*”, 175.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 172.

⁵³ Báez, *Dominicanish*, 26.

and African hairstyle on the black body of the performer functions as a powerful marker of transculturation processes, especially if we consider it in relation to some of the other elements that are part of the performance.

In this respect, the use of the ancient Indian *Kuchipudi* dance as the base for the performance contributes to the creation of the narrator’s complex transcultural ethnic location in different ways. By integrating a South Asian traditional dance into a play about Dominican identity, Báez blatantly transgresses the traditional spaces where Dominicanness is enacted. Even if, as cultural critic Ramón Rivera-Servera contends, “Báez does not utilize kuchipudi gestures for their iconography”,⁵⁴ her staging of this dancing style that originated at the beginning of the seventeenth century in the South East Indian region of Andhra Pradesh⁵⁵ poses a challenge to the traditional East-West dichotomy. Besides, for an audience who is not necessarily familiar with the aesthetics of the dance, the mingling of *Kuchipudi* movements with Theatre Biomechanics⁵⁶ results in a precise technique of corporal expression that evokes the movements of string puppets. This acting technique allows Báez to capture the sense of alienation and displacement experienced by migrant subjects whose body and verbal languages are often dissociated as a result of their affiliations to divergent socio-cultural spheres.

This “disjunction between content and expression”, which for philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari is characteristic of people living in a “language that is not their own”,⁵⁷ is performed both aesthetically and linguistically in the play. Thus, if visually a North American audience would at first sight associate the narrator’s black body and her outfit with an African-American identity, this perception abruptly changes when she utters the first words, as her accent points to a completely different ethnic location. Making fun of the perceived

⁵⁴ Ramón Rivera-Servera, “A Dominican York in Andhra”, in *Caribbean Dance from Abakuá to Zouk: How Movement Shapes Identity*, ed. Susanna Sloat, Gainesville: U Florida P, 2002, 157.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁵⁶ This acting technique developed by Vsevolod Meyerhold in Russia in the 1920s puts a special emphasis on the development of precision in movement on stage. Its aesthetics evoke the movements of robots or string puppets.

⁵⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature. Theory and History of Literature*, Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1986, 19.

“mispronunciation” of English words introduces the audience to “Dominicanish” as an interlanguage⁵⁸ where the linguistic references are to be retrieved from both Dominican Spanish and American English, thus alluding to the ethnic interstitial location the narrator occupies:

Every sin’ is vegetable
 ...
 Wednesday sursdei zersdais
 ...
 A as in Michael
 M as in apple.⁵⁹

The wordplay in this excerpt, arising from phonological and lexical transferences between the two languages the narrator is in contact with, hints at the feeling of dislocation she experiences when she arrives in the US. By freely crossing the semantic boundaries between English and Spanish throughout the play, Báez is able to create a complex set of meanings to display the protagonist’s struggle to master a new cultural and linguistic system. In the passage just quoted, there are a few examples of the ways Báez plays with language to account for the narrator’s cultural dislocation. For instance, if an attempt to decode the literal meaning of the first sentence might leave the audience puzzled (“Every sin is vegetable”), it takes on a completely different light when the presence of phonological transference from her native Spanish is considered. In this case, the word “sin” does not imply offense to a religious or moral law, but its meaning rests at the intersection of Dominican Spanish and English consonant production. Since neither the sound /θ/ – commonly represented by “th” in written English – or the sound /ŋ/ – usually represented by the cluster “ng” – exist in Dominican Spanish, the word “thing” /θŋ/ undergoes a process of alveolarization both in its initial and final consonant [θ>s; ŋ>n] that results in something similar to “sin”/sɪn/. This shift in pronunciation, combined with the

⁵⁸ “Interlanguage” is a transitional language developed by second-language learners in their process of acquisition of the target language, reflecting transferences from the structure, vocabulary, and phonology of their native language into the one they are learning.

⁵⁹ Báez, *Dominicanish*, 21.

process of lexical transference exemplified at the end of the quote where the A for “Ángel” (*angel*) in Spanish stands for Michael, and the initial M for “manzana” (*apple*) stands for its English translation, exposes the dissociation of the signifier and the signified in the protagonist’s mind as a result of cultural and linguistic collisions while at the same time functions as an enactment of her experience of cultural displacement.

This first stage in the formation of her transcultural identity leads her to the realization that mastering a new language will ultimately result in a transformation into a completely different person, as she expresses at the very beginning of the play:

I thought I would never learn English.
No way I will not put my mouth like that
No way jamás ni never no way
Gosh to pronounce one little phrase one must
Become another person with the mouth all
twisted Yo no voy a poner la boca así como
un guante.⁶⁰

However, despite her initial refusal to learn a new language, the twisted-mouth narrator will find in the music and lyrics of The Isley Brothers and other soul and jazz singers and groups the tools she needs to come to terms with her alienated linguistic identity:

In a cloud of smoke I found my teachers.
In an LP jacket I found my teachers
...
Los hermanos Isley
The Isley Brothers
...
Repeat after them
...
Last Saturday my teachers sang in Soul Train
Now I don’t care how my mouth look I like
what I’m saying.⁶¹

⁶⁰ “I won’t put my mouth like a glove”, in Báez, *Dominicanish*, 22 (emphasis in original).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

Her identification with African-American musical culture functions in this context not only as a marker of her Africanness but also as an act of resistance to the imposition of white Anglo-American language and culture as the norm since, even though she acknowledges the need to learn English in order to become an active member in her host society, she chooses not to use the standard English variety she is taught in school but the one she finds in soul and jazz lyrics. By listening to the songs of her favorite groups, her language skills improve so dramatically that her school teachers are left astonished by her mastery of poetic language:

Mister Juarez, My ESL teacher and later Mrs.
Kisinsky, my monolingual teacher were
amazed, 'cause I had the vocabulary *found
in wet tongues* and hookie party goers. And
I, believe it or not, was none of the above.
Me, the Dominican miracle in 84th street in
Brandeis representin'
Writing phrases and sentences in perfect syntax
Filled and full of sensual images.⁶²

The ironic remarks in this passage represent a sharp criticism of bilingual programs in public schools where the expectations for students' achievement are frequently set so low that successful learners are viewed as "miracles" in a failing education system. Besides, given the central role that elementary education plays in the early stages of social identity formation, it is essential to take a closer look at how the experiences in the American education system may affect the creation of transcultural identities in the US. It is in school where young students learn "what it means to be American, a good citizen, and a productive member of society"⁶³ through the study of American literature and history, among other subjects. In this sense, schools become key agents for acculturation, and thus, for Latino/a and other "minority" students the educational system might be interpreted to operate "as an instrument of the dominant culture", as

⁶² *Ibid.*, 33 (emphasis in original).

⁶³ Diana George and John Trimbur, *Reading Culture: Contexts for Critical Reading and Writing*. New York: Longman, 2004, 103.

Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta-Sternbach argue.⁶⁴ For this reason, and in an attempt to resist the pressure to acculturate to the dominant culture in school, the protagonist in *Dominicanish* turns to the music and lyrics of The Isley Brothers to counteract the perceived white middle-class bias in the education she receives:

SAT scores doubled but in no university catalog
I found my teachers: The Isley Brothers.
I did no see a class, department,
major, minor, sororities, fraternities
*groovin' with soul.*⁶⁵

Later in the play, she asserts, in the same vein:

Higher education took me to places of pain and
pleasure History in black and white
Distinguished teachers: Pearl Bailey, Earth
Fantasy, Wind September, Reasons and Fire,
Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong and the dearest
of all, my favorite Ms. Billie Holiday.⁶⁶

However, despite the important role that African-American culture plays in the early stages of her identity formation, as time goes by she will feel the urge to reconcile her black racial identity with her Dominican heritage. Therefore, after these first phases where she takes a position of resistance to assimilation to white dominant culture by identifying herself as part of the African-American community, she will eventually return to the urban, working-class New York neighborhood of Washington Heights in search of those components of her Dominican self that were obliterated when she started her formal education. In the view of Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta-Sternbach, since schooling frequently “involves the imposition of English and the subsequent erasure of ethnic, ancestral values”,⁶⁷ the

⁶⁴ Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta-Sternbach, *Stages of Life*, 49.

⁶⁵ Báez, *Dominicanish*, 34 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶⁷ Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta-Sternbach, *Stages of Life*, 49.

Dominican community and Washington Heights – or Quisqueya⁶⁸ Heights as this area is usually nicknamed in clear reference to the Dominican origins of the majority of this area’s population – function as borderland spaces where Dominican-Yorks are able to keep in touch with their Dominican heritage. In the view of Jorge Duany, “Washington Heights serves as an intermediary point of settlement, a place where Dominicans can speak Spanish, meet fellow Dominicans, attend mass in Spanish, shop in *bodegas*, listen to *merengue*, and remain encapsulated within Hispanic culture”.⁶⁹

In this sense, the Dominican community and *el barrio* – the ethnic neighborhood – play a critical role in the formation of transcultural identities in the US. As for other Latino/a communities in the US, Dominican *barrios* “have functioned as reterritorialized spaces where it is possible to maintain one’s culture and to resist assimilation”, thus becoming “source(s) of cultural resistance”.⁷⁰ This is the case in Báez’s performance, where it is through the walks along the streets of the *barrio* that the narrator feels confident again to express herself in Spanish and to include references to the Dominican subculture in her discourse, and this is marked by the shift to Spanish and the incorporation of references to Latino musical styles:

Suerte que la 107 se arrulla con Pacheco
Pacheco tumba⁷¹ añejo
Pacheco flauta Pacheco su nuevo tumbao el
maestro el artista Tremendo Cache
compartido en cruz⁷²

⁶⁸ “Quisqueya” is the Taíno Indian name for Hispaniola, the Caribbean island where the Dominican Republic is located.

⁶⁹ Jorge Duany, *Quisqueya on the Hudson: The Transnational Identity of Dominicans in Washington Heights*, New York: The CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 1994, 46.

⁷⁰ Antonia Domínguez Miguela, “Views of the Barrio in Chicano and Puerto Rican Narrative”, *American@*, III/1 (Spring 2005), 59. Domínguez notes that she uses the term “reterritorialized” as it is used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.

⁷¹ Johnny Pacheco (1930) is one of the most influential figures in salsa music. Born in the Dominican Republic, he moved to New York with his family when he was young and it was there that he would later become an internationally renowned star. “Tumba” is one of the styles of salsa music.

⁷² This refers to Celia Cruz (1925-2003), one of the best-known salsa singers, with whom Pacheco collaborated on various occasions throughout their careers.

Juntos de nuevo como al detalle Tres de Café y
dos de azúcar⁷³ Con el swing del tumbao y
reculando como Ciguapa.⁷⁴

But, although her reconnection with her Dominican heritage advances her a step further into the creation of her *Dominicanish* identity, this celebration of her Dominican heritage and culture is not uncritical.

In her “Letanía de la decencia”, one of the poems that serves as source for the performance text, and that is included as an appendix to the printed edition, Báez challenges some of the assumptions and beliefs that shape women’s roles and acceptable behaviors in Dominican and Dominican-American societies:

Me chulié en el hall

Metí mano en el rufo
Craqueo chicle como Shameka Brown
Hablo como Boricua
Y me peino como Morena
...
Me junto con la muchacha que salió preñá
Salgo con mi ex
Hablo con el muchacho que estaba preso.⁷⁵

In this passage, the narrator explicitly positions herself against the prevalent sexist and racist standards in Dominican communities that work to prevent women from becoming independent and strong female subjects. By doing so, she is able to incorporate gender as an analytical category in her poetic examination of the formation of transcultural Dominican identities in the US. As the excerpt from the

⁷³ “Tres de café dos de azúcar” is one of the most famous songs by Pacheco.

⁷⁴ “Luckily 107th Street lulls with Pacheco / Pacheco tumbao añojo / Pacheco flute / Pacheco his new tumbao / the master the artist / Tremendous Cache / shared in Cruz / Together again / perfect ensemble / Tres de Café y dos de azúcar / With tumbao’s swing and / walking backwards like a Ciguapa” (Báez, *Dominicanish*, 42). Ciguapa are mythical women believed to inhabit the mountains in the Dominican Republic whose feet are turned backward to avoid being followed.

⁷⁵ “I made out in the hallway / I messed around on the rooftop / I crack gum like Shameka Brown / I speak like a Puerto Rican / and I do my hair like a Black Woman / ... / I hang out with the girl who ended up pregnant / I date my ex / I talk to the guy who was in jail” (*ibid.*, 43 [emphasis in original]).

poem above suggests, by being exposed to this “litany of decency” from an early age, Dominican girls learn that it is inappropriate to assume a sexually active role in relationships, to adopt the looks of African-Americans, or to establish close links with other Latino/a communities – morals that the narrative voice openly defies.

From this perspective, exile and migration have had a positive effect on the protagonist since her transcultural experiences have provided her with the tools to recognize the racism and sexism underlying some of the popular beliefs in Dominican and Dominican-American dominant ideologies. As many other women migrants, she seems to be experiencing what Michel Pêcheux calls “disidentification”⁷⁶ with the culture of origin, a move that allows her to reconstruct her dislocated identity free of learned prejudices. This process of disidentification works in close connection with transculturation and translocation processes as she embraces some of the cultural practices and values existing in any of the other subcultures she is in contact with as an inhabitant of a borderland space. In the view of Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta-Sternbach: “For those who inhabit the margin or border – spiritually, physically, or metaphysically – disidentification signifies flexibility, straddling, oscillation, and liminality in a constant juggling of identities as a ‘survival strategy’ [Muñoz 1999: 5] within the dislocations and contradictions of the subjects’ cultural presence.”⁷⁷

As has been suggested throughout this article, in Báez’s play the protagonist’s survival strategies include disidentification with some of the cultural givens in Dominican societies and the subsequent search for new elements to give shape to her transcultural identity. Her steady transformation into a *Dominicanish* border subject where African American, Dominican and South Indian traditions are freely combined is acknowledged towards the end of the text when she affirms:

Now I am another person
Mouth twisted
Guiri⁷⁸ guiri on dreams

⁷⁶ Michel Pêcheux, *Language, Semantics, and Ideology*, trans. Harbans Nagpal, New York: St Martin’s, 1982, 157.

⁷⁷ Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta-Sternbach, *Stages of Life*, 6.

⁷⁸ “Guiri” is an informal word for foreigner or tourist in Spanish.

Guiri guiri business
 Even laughing
 Laughing in Dominicanish
 There is no guarantee
 Ni aquí ni allá⁷⁹
 Not even with your guiri guiri papers⁸⁰

This passage, which sums up the philosophy conveyed throughout the performance, alludes to the intrinsic instability of personal identity. By defining herself as a permanent foreigner (“guiri”) and stating that uncertainty is part of everyone’s life regardless of geopolitical location (“neither here nor there”), she implies that the construction of one’s subjectivity is never a complete process but “always on the way to the home of constancy”.⁸¹ The narrative voice reverberates with the idea of a “nomadic subject” who in the opinion of Braidotti is “a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. This figuration expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity.”⁸²

Her nomadic understanding of personal subjectivity, in combination with her idea of home as a portable location, results in Báez’s performance being a vindication of those physical and psychological interstitial spaces – borders – where migrant subjects dwell as spaces for aesthetic creation and alternative identitarian definitions. As Torres-Saillant notes, this is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the play, since it offers “an open ontological frame” where everything that is present in the life of migrant communities can be considered to take part in the formation of Dominican nationhood on and off the island.⁸³ Her transnational approach to Dominican identity, together with her rejection of all fixity in identity formation, becomes in this context a powerful tool to

⁷⁹ “Neither here nor there.”

⁸⁰ Báez, *Dominicanish*, 47

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸² Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, New York: Columbia UP, 1994, 22.

⁸³ Silvio Torres-Saillant, “No es lo mismo ni se escribe igual: la diversidad en lo dominicano”, in *Desde la Orilla: hacia una nacionalidad sin desalijos*, eds Silvio Torres-Saillant *et al.*, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic: Ediciones Librería Trinitaria, 2004, 17.

resist assimilation to dominant cultures. It is in this sense that *Dominicanish*, the term and the play, become the metaphorical border where the narrator is able to perform her transcultural identity free of prejudices; an interstitial location where the here and there collide and where she is able to establish her portable home without playing alliance to any fixed nationality; and a metaphysical borderland where she can continue to grow while struggling to live her life “chewing English and spitting Spanish”,⁸⁴ as the last words of the play put it.

⁸⁴ Báez, *Dominicanish*, 49.