

Ciguapas in New York: Transcultural Ethnicity and Transracialization in Dominican American Performance

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The Dominican American community in New York is perhaps one of the best examples of how processes of transculturation are affecting traditional definitions of ethnic identification. Given the intense economic, social and cultural transnational exchanges between the island and the USA from the 1960s, Dominican Americans have been challenging the illusion of homogeneity in the definition of Americanness for decades, creating transnational social networks that transcend traditional national and ethnographic boundaries. The theatrical works of Josefina Báez, a Dominican American performer living in New York, and Sherezada (Chiqui) Vicioso, a Dominican poet and playwright who lived and worked in the US metropolis for decades before moving back to the Dominican Republic, lyrically explore issues of diaspora, identity and migration and the impact these phenomena might have in the lives of migrant Dominican women. Presenting diasporic experiences from two differing but interconnected locales – New York and the Dominican Republic – these plays offer two complementary views on the ways in which ethnicity, race, social class, age and geopolitical location interact in the formation of transcultural identities, thus contributing to develop a hemispheric approach to the study of identity formation in the Americas.

I. TRACING TRANS-AMERICAN CONNECTIONS

In recent years, the field of American studies has been broadening its focus to include scholarship that explores the literary and cultural productions in the United States within a framework that transcends the nation-state as a category of analysis. As a means to better understand the cultural products of migrant and minority ethnic communities living in the US, scholars have turned towards comparative literary and cultural studies to establish links and commonalities among the often diverging sociocultural spheres that migrant and so-called “ethnic” artists portray in their works. Trans-American or inter-American studies have emerged in this context as a valuable framework for the examination of Latino/a cultural productions in the Americas. Adopting a

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transnational comparative optic, this paradigm seeks to unearth connections between North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean, thus contributing to the establishment of unrealized conversations among cultural productions in the Americas.

For Edna Acosta-Belén, in a moment in which “more rapidly than ever before, the Latino/a worlds of the North and the South are transcending spurious geographic, cultural, and linguistic borders,” it is of the utmost importance to transgress those “artificial boundaries that traditionally have separated the study of Latin America and Caribbean regions from their counterpart (im)migrant populations in the United States.”¹ Along the same lines, Agustín Laó-Montes argues that, in order to fully understand Latino/a cultural productions and identities in the Americas, it is necessary to adopt a “transcultural, transnational and translocal”² perspective to account for the multiplicity of locations where “latinidad” is produced.³ As he puts it,

Historically, latinidad is located in the colonial horizons of modernity; that is, in the colonial and neocolonial migrations from Latin America to the United States, in the continuous relationship of imperial domination and colonial/neocolonial economic and political inequality in the Americas, in the persistence of hemispheric imperial/colonial difference between the Anglos and Latin Americans (within and beyond national boundaries), and in the contact zones of colonial and neocolonial encounters in US world cities (especially New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Miami).⁴

Drawing from this understanding of the history and cultures of the Americas as inextricably linked in myriad ways, this paper develops a comparative analysis of the works of two Dominican American authors, Josefina Báez and Sherezada Vicioso, who illustrate diasporic experiences from two differing but necessarily interconnected locales: New York and the Dominican Republic.

The theatrical works of Josefina Báez, a Dominican American performer living in New York, and Sherezada (Chiqui) Vicioso, a Dominican poet and playwright who lived and worked in the city for decades before moving back to the Dominican Republic, lyrically explore issues of diaspora, identity and migration in the lives of migrant Dominican women. Offering two complementary views on the ways in which ethnicity, race, social class, age

¹ Edna Acosta-Belén, “Reimagining Borders: A Hemispheric Approach to Latin American and U. S. Latino and Latina Studies,” in Johnella E. Butler, ed., *Color-Line to Borderlands. The Matrix of American Ethnic Studies* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001), 254.

² Agustín Laó-Montes, “Introduction,” in Agustín Laó-Montes and Arlene Dávila, eds., *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 1–18

³ Laó-Montes employs the term *latinidad* (“latinness”) to refer to the specific positionings that Latinos/as (peoples of Latin American and Caribbean descent) occupy in the US, as well as to the historical locations and discursive formations from which these positionings stem.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

and geopolitical location interact in the formation of transcultural identities, a critical comparison of Báez's *Dominicanish* and Vicioso's *Nuyor/Islas* thus contributes to the development of a hemispheric approach to the study of identity formation in the Americas.⁵ By comparing these works, this article seeks to highlight the inextricable relationship that links the Caribbean with its diaspora communities, arguing for a transcultural understanding of the analysis of diasporic subjectivities and cultural productions.

II. CIGUAPAS IN NEW YORK

Our deity Ciguapa arrived in New York too.
 The subway steps changed her nature. In the ups and down to and
 from the
 silver-grey fast worms, her feet became as everybody else's in the
 rush hour crowd.
 She did not notice the drastic change.
 This was the first sign of assimilation
 – a concept not to be understood but experienced.⁶

As the excerpt above illustrates, in her poem "A 123 Portrait of a Legend," Dominican American poet and performer Josefina Báez successfully captures in just a few lines the various ways in which the subjectivities of transnational migrants change in the process of adapting to different sociocultural environments. In Báez's poem, the story of the mythical Ciguapa is not different to that of many other Dominican migrants who move to New York City in search of a better life. In the process of adapting to the hectic urban life, Ciguapa undergoes a sociocultural metamorphosis that involves a radical change not only in her looks but also in the nature of her divinity. No longer a goddess, and pulled by what the narrative voice identifies as an inescapable assimilation force, her feet take human form, signaling the beginning of a steady transformation into a transcultural subject.⁷

⁵ Josefina Báez, *Dominicanish* (New York: Ay Ombe, 2000) and Luisa Sherezada Vicioso, *Nuyor/Islas*, in Paquita Suárez Coalla, ed., *Aquí me tocó escribir. Antología de escritor@s latin@s en Nueva York* (Oviedo: Trabe, 2006), 70.

⁶ Josefina Báez, "A 123 Portrait of a Legend," *Callaloo*, 23, 2 (2000), 1038–39.

⁷ Even though, in the poem, the changes in Ciguapa's nature are attributed to the pressure to assimilate, i.e. to blend into the receiving dominant culture, I contend that these changes are more clearly explained in terms of a process of transculturation. The term "transculturation," coined by Cuban cultural critic Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s and vindicated more recently by scholars of Latino/a and Chicana/o studies, refers to the results of culture contact by acknowledging the dynamics of resistance and accommodation to different cultural systems. This model thus challenges the passivity on the part of the subordinate group implicit in the assimilation model, and concentrates on examining the agency of transcultural subjects. Defined as being situated between different cultures, languages and/or definitions of

For Ciguapa, this process implies gradually losing some of her most distinctive features, especially those that distinguish her from human beings. In Dominican folklore, Ciguapas are described as having female human form with very long hair covering their brown (or blue) naked bodies, and they look like women except for their backward feet, whose footprints they use to disorient potential stalkers.⁸ These fierce women are believed to live in the mountains of Hispaniola, and their legend is somehow reminiscent of that of Greek sirens in that they utter a penetrating call to attract unwary travellers.⁹ Even though the origins of this myth are uncertain, it is important to note that, in popular culture, they have been attributed to the indigenous Taino cosmogony and their presence in oral and written literary traditions usually points to a precapitalist legendary past.¹⁰

Bález's poem is not, however, a nostalgic look at a mythical past but rather a critical examination of a discouraging present in which Ciguapas and the world they represent can no longer exist. In "A 123 Portrait of Legend," the Ciguapa at the beginning of the poem is a postcolonial subject who is forced to migrate to the metropolis and confront the harsh realities of a globalized world. Therefore the change of direction in her feet from backward to forward can be interpreted as a break with the past both on a personal as well as a collective level. If for her this turn represents the beginning of her life as a transnational migrant who looks towards the future, the seeming humanization of her anatomy is, paradoxically at the same time, a critical look at a dehumanized postindustrial world system that is forcing millions of Caribbean peoples to abandon their traditional ways of living and systems of beliefs in the name of progress.

subjectivity, transcultural subjects negotiate their identities by conjugating aspects of the multiple realities they inhabit.

⁸ Silvio Torres-Saillant, "Nothing to Celebrate," *Culturefront: A Magazine of the Humanities*, 8, 2 (1999), 42.

⁹ "La Ciguapa," *Diccionario de Mitos y Legendas*, 2007–8, accessed 20 Aug. 2010, available at www.diccionariodemitos.com.ar/mitos/ciguapa.htm.

¹⁰ There seem to be no references to these creatures either in any of the chronicles written by the Spanish colonizers or in the pre-Columbian cave paintings found in the island. For these reasons, ethnologist Manuel Mora Serrano considers Ciguapas to be a truly "national legend," shaped over the course of the Trujillo years as part of the nation-building project. Manuel Mora Serrano, "Indias, vien-vienes y ciguapas: Noticias sobre tres tradiciones dominicanas," *Eme-Eme: Estudios Dominicanos*, 19 (1975), 66. By linking it to the indigenous Taino cosmologies, the legend of Ciguapas would conform to the fictive national ethnicity orchestrated by Trujillo, which revolved around an ideal racial and cultural *mestizaje* between the Taino natives and the white Spanish colonizers. For more information on the history of the myth see Rodríguez, Emilio Jorge, "Encroachment of Creole Culture on the Written and Oral Discourses of Hispaniola," *Matatu – Journal for African Culture and Society*, 27 (2003), 109–35.

This painful metamorphosis is perhaps more clearly exposed by the fact that the only thing that Ciguapa keeps from her earlier life in the mountains of the Dominican Republic is her characteristic cry. However, in New York, her penetrating call is also transformed, and she utters it not to attract men, as the legend goes, but to express her feelings of alienation and despair:

Laughable reality. She whose laugh is based on a constant and bitter cry.

Constant nostalgia. Bitter reality. Unheard cry.

Here is no man's land. Here is no woman's stand. You can become what you are not by circumstances, opportunity, luck, unluck, karma.

You can become a saint or forget your divinity.¹¹

The creative adaptation of her bawl points again to a process of transculturation, which, in this case, brings to light the suffering she experiences in her daily life as a factory worker "earning less than the minimum."¹² Even though there is little room for celebration in the poem, and the image it portrays is not very optimistic, the last line of the quote above seems to suggest that there is also hope and expectation in migrants' lives. This mixed sensation that is characteristic of experiences of displacement is one of the topics that both Josefina Báez and Sherezada Vicioso explore in depth in their theatrical works. Taking on stage the struggles of female characters as they come to terms with their dislocated sense of identity, Vicioso's *Nuyor/ Islas* and Báez's *Dominicanish* offer a thorough insight into the transculturation processes that affect migrant subjects. As contemporary Ciguapas, the narrative voices in these plays strive to adjust to their new realities adopting elements from the various sociocultural systems that coexist in New York City.

On the one hand, in *Dominicanish*, Báez creatively fuses and mixes a wide variety of cultural forms to craft a performance text in which she gives form to her particular understanding of what it means growing up Dominican in New York. Based on her own experiences, she freely combines her own poems with popular-culture slogans, song lyrics, allusions to Hindu philosophy and many other references to the multiethnic cultures of New York City, creating a collage through which an autobiographical narrative voice chronicles the steady development of a transcultural identity. As Claudio Mir explains in the foreword to the printed edition of *Dominicanish*, the play is "Josefina's journey through the past and future. The beginning of her formative years, her long trips to India through Washington Heights and La Romana. It is the fragments of a story of a little migrant girl, a dancerwriteractressyogateaching-artistwoman

¹¹ Báez, "A 123 Portrait of a Legend," 1039.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1038.

who writes everyday.”¹³ Therefore, from the first pages in which the voice of a twelve-year-old recently arrived migrant verbalizes her struggle with learning English, to the final verses in which an adult narrator celebrates a transcultural ever-evolving subjectivity, cultural blends are articulated as powerful tools to resist homogenizing narratives.

Also in the form of a monologue but following a more traditional structure, *Nuyor/Islas* is Ramona’s conversation with her past and present experiences as a returned Dominican in the Dominican Republic. Her reflections will become an exploration of her progressive distancing from Dominican hegemonic discourses along with an increasing awareness of the transcultural subjectivity that her migrant experience has brought about.

If it is certainly true that the situations the characters in these plays undergo are somehow different due to disparity in age, class, race, and geographical location, the fact that they share the experience of living in the city of New York as Dominican migrants bonds them beyond physical and social borders. Their experiences in the metropolitan contact zone engender a transnational connection that speaks of the elusive nature of boundaries in the study of cultural productions in the Americas.

III. “ALMOST DOMINICAN BUT NOT QUITE”: TRANSNATIONAL DIASPORA SPACES

In order to fully understand how the city of New York becomes in the plays a transcultural diaspora space that enables the formation of transcultural Latino/a subjectivities,¹⁴ it is important to take a look at the iconic role that the city plays in Caribbean imaginaries. In this regard, Miguel D. Mena states in his article “Y con ustedes, Josefina Báez, de La Romana al infinito” that in order to get to know the Dominican Republic “in its most intense borders,”¹⁵ one must travel to the city of New York. This idea is also present in Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel’s *Caribe Two Ways: Cultura de la migración en el Caribe insular hispánico*, in which she 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

¹³ Claudio Mir, “Orchestrating a Journey,” in Báez, *Dominicanish*, 111.

¹⁴ I am drawing from Avtar Brah’s notion of “diaspora space” to encompass the notions of diaspora, border, and dis/location: as a conceptual category it is inhabited not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but also those who are constructed as “indigenous.” Avtar Brah, “Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities,” in *idem*, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁵ Miguel D. Mena, “Y con ustedes, Josefina Báez, de La Romana al infinito,” *Cielonaranja: Ediciones del Cielonaranja*, 2005, accessed 8 March 2007, available at www.cielonaranja.com/menajosefinabaez.htm; all translations from Spanish are my own unless otherwise stated.

archipelago.”¹⁶ 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”;¹⁷ consequently the Big Apple can be seen as one more Caribbean island where “a transnational and multiethnic culture is constituted.”¹⁸ For Martínez-San Miguel, these transcultural groups establish “a problematic dialog with both US multicultural discourses and celebratory definitions of Caribbeanness,”¹⁹ questioning the validity of the overarching assumptions in those ideological frameworks. From this perspective, the city itself becomes an enormous transcultural enclave in which Caribbean and North American national discourses are being redefined and articulated.

The city of New York, as the second-largest city in Dominican population after Santo Domingo, and the Dominicanyork community in particular, have become a benchmark in the definition of Dominicanness through the establishment of an intense transnational sociocultural system that undermines traditional ethnic and national frontiers. In the opinion of Torres-Saillant, the migratory experience of Dominicans from the 1960s has enabled the creation of an alternative epistemic and cultural community which, distanced from the dominant ontological discourses on Dominicanness, challenges traditional notions of nationalism, territoriality, and ethnicity.²⁰ Arguing in a similar vein, Néstor Rodríguez affirms that Dominican diaspora populations have come to understand Dominicanness as contingency, conceptualizing ethnic identity as a dynamic condition determined by the geopolitical space in which it is articulated rather than as an ethnodemographic reality.²¹

This idea of ethnicity as geopolitically motivated is clearly exposed in the chosen settings for Báez’s and Vicioso’s plays. The first one, shared by the protagonists in both plays, is geographically located in the migrant neighborhoods of New York City. Besides, *Nuyor/Islas* incorporates the suburban areas of the cities in the Dominican Republic to which many Dominicanyorks return in retirement. Both locations are marked by intense transnational and transcultural contacts, and are not therefore traditional

¹⁶ Yolanda Martínez San-Miguel, *Caribe Two Ways: Cultura de la migración en el Caribe insular hispánico* (San Juan: Ediciones Callejón, 2003), 322. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 325.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 330. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 330.

²⁰ Silvio Torres-Saillant, “No es lo mismo ni se escribe igual: la diversidad en lo dominicano,” in Torres-Saillant et al., eds., *Desde la Orilla: hacia una nacionalidad sin desalojos* (Santo Domingo: Ediciones Librería Trinitaria, 2004), 25.

²¹ Néstor E. Rodríguez, *Escrituras de desencuentro en la República Dominicana*, (México DF: Siglo XXI Editores, 2005), 111.

centers for hegemonic articulations of Dominican national identity, allowing for the creation of alternative definitions of Dominicaness.

In this context, the titles of the two plays can be interpreted as metaphorical names for spaces in which their transcultural identities come into play. On the one hand, in *Nuyor/Islas*, Vicioso situates the development of Ramona's migrant identity in the contact zones represented by the slash dividing the word in the title of the play, i.e. New York and the Caribbean Islands.²² Ramona is thus articulating her transcultural identity from an interstitial location situated in between those geopolitical locales. In this sense, "Nuyor/Islas" is similar to other terms such as "Nuyorican" or "Dominicanyork," which, for Norma Alarcon, 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 these 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."²³

In Báez's work, this issue is further complicated as she moves away from a dyadic model, seeking to de-essentialize any notion of a coherent ethnic identity by incorporating elements from multiple cultural backgrounds. "Dominicanish" is the coinage through which Báez is able to name her own subjectivity-in-process and the transnational enclave where the action of the play takes place. By appending the suffix -ish to the adjective "Dominican," Báez is able to create a witty wordplay that combines the different meanings the suffix -ish conveys to nouns and adjectives in English. As the Online Oxford Dictionary explains, adjectives resulting from adding -ish to nouns indicate the origin or language of the community denoted by the noun, as is the case with *English* or *Spanish*. Thus the multiethnic neighborhoods of New York City are the place of origin of "Dominicanish" subjectivities.²⁴ In this regard, it is also interesting to note that, since the resulting adjective also provides the meaning of "in a certain way, approximately,"²⁵ as in *greenish*, or "having the qualities or characteristics of" (AskOxford), as in *childish*, being Dominicanish implies being – to misquote Homi K. Bhabha – "almost [Dominican] but not quite,"²⁶ since her subjectivity is developed not in the Dominican Republic but in Washington Heights, New York's Dominican enclave par excellence.

²² The vocable "Nuyor/Islas" is composed of "Nuyor," which reproduces the Spanish pronunciation of "New York," and *islas*, which in Spanish means "islands."

²³ Norma Alarcon quoted in Alicia Arrizon, *Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999), 14. ²⁴ Báez, *Dominicanish*, 31.

²⁵ Ask Oxford.com, "-ish," (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), accessed 10 Oct. 2009, available at www.askoxford.com.

²⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

From these two differing but interconnected geopolitical locales, the protagonists in Báez's and Vicioso's works experience the transformation Alarcon refers to, critically reexamining their ethnic identity. Furthermore, both texts' reliance on the authors' personal experiences also suggests that their art can be seen as the means to articulate the intersections of all their concerns as women and artists, so that, as Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporta-Sternbach explain in relation to other Latina playwrights, their works illustrate "a poetics where politics of identity and representation intersect with the politics of location."²⁷ The creative outcome of this fusion results in a critical revision of the system of ethnicization and racialization in Dominican national identity that I explore in depth in the following section.

IV. TRANSCULTURAL ETHNICITY AND TRANSRACIALIZATION ONSTAGE

In their *Stages of Life: Transcultural Performance and Identity in U. S. Latina Theater*, Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta-Sternbach argue that, in Latina theater and performance art, transculturation processes manifest themselves in various forms: as bilingualism, material culture (including the body), dramatic action, physical and geographical space, and discursive location. Even though these authors reach their conclusions after a careful examination of the works of several Latina authors living in the US (mainly Mexican American, Cuban American, and Nuyorican), I contend that this same model can be productively applied to the study of transcultural works in a trans-American framework, as my analysis of the plays by Báez and Vicioso suggests.

Language is one of the most debated and controversial issues in the definition of national identities, and the renegotiation of linguistic identity is perhaps one of the most traumatic aspects in migrant experiences. The initial contacts of the Spanish native-speaking narrators with English as the hegemonic language in the metropolis can be considered as the "non-English-speaking immigrant's first trauma,"²⁸ as it is through language that they first face dislocation in the host country. The painful experience is reflected at the very beginning of *Dominicanish*, when the twelve-year-old

²⁷ Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporta-Sternbach, *Stages of Life: Transcultural Performance and Identity in U. S. Latina Theater* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), 54–55.

²⁸ Lorgia García-Peña, "Dominicanidad in Contra (Diction): Marginality, Migration and the Narration of a Dominican National Identity," PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2008. In Dissertations & Theses: A&I (database online); available at www.proquest.com (publication number AAT 3328825, accessed 15 March 2010), 140.

narrative voice expresses her struggle with adapting to the demands of her new home, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

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.²⁹

Her reluctance to learn English is based on an awareness of the “forced dislocation that result [*sic*] from the imposition of the new (immigrant) identity.”³⁰ This new transcultural identity, which is articulated through language and language difference, among other ethnicity markers, begins to take shape at this first moment of cultural clash. However, as time goes by, what was perceived as irreconcilable systems gives way to a complex and hybrid language resulting from the creative mixture of African American vernacular, Dominican Spanish and American English.³¹ This particular transcultural linguistic system is called “Dominicanish,” thus adding yet another dimension to the meaning of the title of the performance, this time referring to the language in which the text is codified.

In *Nuyor/Islas*, while written mostly in Spanish, the presence in Ramona’s speech of elements of “Spanglish,” a transcultural linguistic code in itself, also reveals the effects of extended exposure to language contact in the protagonist’s idiolect. For instance, when she is recounting her experiences as a factory worker, and reports what her supervisor used to tell her, she says, “Sam me decía: ‘You are a lady,’ pero no me pagaba más que a los otros, aunque yo fuera la ‘Forelady’” (“Sam would tell me: ‘You are a lady,’ but he didn’t pay me more than the others, although I was the ‘forelady’”).³²

These episodes of code-switching do not only occur at the morphosyntactic or linguistic level, but are one of the means through which the narrative voices articulate their transcultural ethnic identity. Alternating among differing

²⁹ Báez, *Dominicanish*, 22: “I won’t put my mouth like a glove”; emphasis in original.

³⁰ García-Peña, 140.

³¹ In *Dominicanish*, Báez re-creates a complex language in which natural language is only one of the symbolic systems providing meaning. References to visual images such as graffiti and publicity slogans, allusions to song lyrics, excerpts from the Dominican national anthem, Hindi philosophy, abound in the text, giving way to a highly symbolic language whose analysis is beyond the scope of this article. For more on this issue see Lorgia García-Peña’s “Performing Identity, Language and Resistance: A Study of Josefina Báez’s *Dominicanish*,” *Wadabagei*, 11, 3 (2008), 28–43, and Sophie Mariñez’s “Dominicanish, de Josefina Báez: la translocalización de los símbolos,” *Agulha. Revista de Cultura*, 21, 22 (2002), available at www.revista.agulha.nom.br/agz1baez.htm, accessed 13 Feb. 2010.

³² Vicioso, *Nuyor/Islas*, 70.

sociocultural systems, the bodies of the protagonists become sites for renegotiating their racialized identities through a process that I refer to as transracialization.³³ As a result of being exposed to different systems of racial categorization in the diaspora, the narrative voices reconfigure their racial identities, challenging the assumptions of hegemonic racial discourses both in their Dominican and host North American societies.

The existence of processes of transracialization in *Dominicanish* is represented by the narrator's identification with African American cultures. As she explains, it is in the lyrics and music of soul and jazz singers that she finds the tools she needs to come to terms with her alienated linguistic and racial identity. As she repeats throughout the text, it is by listening to the music of black jazz and soul groups that she will gain confidence in performing her new transcultural and transracial identity:

In a cloud of smoke I found my teachers.
 In an LP jacket I found my teachers
 ...
 The Isley Brothers
 ...
 Repeat after them
 ...
 Now I don't care how my mouth look I like
 what I'm saying.³⁴

Her identification with African American musical culture functions in this context therefore not only as a linguistic marker but also as an act of resistance to the various processes of racialization that interact in the formation of ethnic identities in the USA context. The presence of jazz and blues lyrics in the text – as well as the musical pieces in the live performance of the play³⁵ – links

³³ By “transracialization,” I refer to the process of transformation in racial identification experienced by subjects who are exposed to different systems of racial categorization, in the same sense that the prefix “trans-” is applied to the term “transculturation” as discussed in this paper. This usage is different to John Raible's use of the same term focussing on the effects that integration of children of different racial backgrounds has in the processes of socialization and racialization in white non-adopted siblings in US families. More information on the latter is in John Raible, “What Is Transracialization?,” John Raible Online. A Home Away from Home for the Transracial Adoption Community. 28 Jan. 2007. Wordpress. 17 March 2009. Available at <http://johnraible.wordpress.com/what-is-transracialization>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 26–27.

³⁵ The performative aspects of the live performance of *Dominicanish* deserve a more detailed analysis, but are beyond the scope of this article. I am focussing mainly on the printed version of the play, and the references to the performance and the performer are included to complement the textual analysis. For a more thorough exploration of the performative dimension see Lorgia García-Peña's “Performing Identity, Language and Resistance”; or Roberto Irizarry's “Travelling Light: Performance, Autobiography, and Immigration in Josefina Báez's *Dominicanish*,” *Gestos*, 42, 21 (2006), 81–96.

her with the broader African diaspora tradition, thus contributing to establishing unrealized conversations among black diasporic communities. By doing so, she is contesting not only the North American racial system in which whiteness is presented as the norm, but also one of the main racial ideologies in the construction of “latinidad,” which, based on the notion of *mestizaje*, “defines Latinos as a third race, as it were, in between black and white.”³⁶ 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 I. Cruz-Janzen points out, “the concept of *mestizaje* sheds light on the historical rejection of *Latinegros* within most Latino cultures.”³⁷ In her article “*Latinegras: Desired Women – Undesirable Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, and Wives*,” 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.”³⁸ In her view, in the context of the United States,

a society where “color supersedes ethnicity and culture,” black Latinos ... 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.³⁹

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.”⁴⁰ The insertion in her narrative of the slogan of the civil rights movement points both to her solidarity with black peoples in the US and to a process of transracialization as she is defining her identity outside the hegemonic racial discourses in the communities she inhabits. As Lorgia García-Peña rightfully argues, “being black and being Dominican appear, at the moment of girl Josefina’s arrival to the US, as contradictions,”⁴¹ and this is the case not only in

³⁶ Laó-Montes, “Introduction,” 9.

³⁷ *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.” in Marta Cruz-Janzen, “*Latinegras. Desired Women – Undesirable Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, and Wives*,” *Frontiers*, 22, 3 (2001), 173, 175.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴⁰ Báez, *Dominicanish*, 26.

⁴¹ García-Peña, “Performing Identity, Language and Resistance,” 142–43.

the Latino/a communities of New York, but also in her native Dominican Republic.

Thus her embracement of a black identity openly challenges the notion of a fictive national ethnicity rooted in the idea of a racial *mestizaje* between the white Spanish colonizers and the Taino natives of the Dominican Republic, a discursive construction that obliterates the African roots of the majority of the country's population.⁴² In this respect, Néstor E. Rodríguez argues that the Dominican Republic continues to suffer from a process of internal colonization resulting from the persistence of the nationalist discursive framework that originated in the creation of the Dominican nation in the nineteenth century.⁴³ In his opinion, this is evident in many instances in Dominican public life, and he cites as an example the fact that, still today, most of the population in the island think of themselves as "Indian" in spite of the majority of the population's black and mulatto origins.⁴⁴ One of the most important strategies for overcoming this internal colonization is precisely to migrate, as Aida Heredia explains, since Dominicans' contact with a different system of racial categorization usually leads them to (re)discover their African heritage. Under these conditions, "emigration, principally to the United States, acquires a high value in the context of the official ideology; it implies a reconfiguration of our memory, our consciousness, our identity."⁴⁵ This was the case for Chiqui Vicioso, who explains in her "An Oral History (Testimonio)" that it was not until she traveled to the United States for the first time that she was able to challenge Dominican racial categories:

I discovered my identity as a caribeña in New York . . .

In the United States, there is no space for fine distinctions of race, and one goes from being "trigueño" or "indio" to being "mulatto" or "Black" or "Hispanic." This was an excellent experience for me. From that point on, I discovered myself as a Caribbean mulata and adopted the Black identity as a gesture of solidarity.⁴⁶

The process of transracialization described by Vicioso is articulated under two different discursive formations in *Nuyor/Islas*, as Ramona counterpoises her own view on the performance of racial identity with that of her daughter.

⁴² Etienne Balibar coins this term to account for the process of racial and ethnic homogenization existing in the discursive formation of modern nations in "The Nation Form: History and Ideology," in Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, eds., *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991), 96–100.

⁴³ Rodríguez, *Escrituras*, 11.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁵ Aida Heredia, "The Journey Inward: Sherezada Vicioso's 'Un extraño ulular de voces traía el viento,'" in Miriam de Costa-Williams, ed., *Daughters of the Diaspora: Afro-Hispanic Writers* (Kingston and Miami: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003), 327.

⁴⁶ Luisa Sherezada Vicioso, "An Oral History (Testimonio)," in Miriam de Costa-Williams, ed., *Daughters of the Diaspora: Afro-Hispanic Writers*, trans. Nina M. Scout (Kingston and Miami: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003), 314.

While Ramona, as a woman who moved to New York as an adult, does not completely abandon the ideological framework she grew up in, her daughter, a second-generation migrant raised in New York City, shares with the narrator in *Dominicanish* her engagement in black political thought and, as Báez's character, adopts black looks and hairstyle in solidarity with other African American communities in the USA. For Ramona, however, her daughter's behavior is completely unacceptable, and at odds with the system of beliefs she had learnt in her native country, as she expresses in the following passage:

This daughter of mine is a hopeless case. I don't know what kind of ideas she got into her head in College, but she is always wanting to look like Tracy Chapman, with an Afro and an outfit that do not suit her at all.

...

And she was so headstrong, refusing to do her hair like Grace Kelly, sleek and smoothed back, or to dress as I wanted.⁴⁷

This initial rejection of her daughter's identification with African American politics will be transformed throughout the play and, after a critical reevaluation of her previous values, she starts to redefine her own racial identity, incorporating into her discourse some of the ideas held by her daughter. Therefore, if when she arrives in New York she struggles to maintain her Dominican values intact as a way of resisting the processes of transculturation, and imagines herself as "Indian," by the end of the play Ramona is ready to articulate her transracial identity as exemplified in the following quote, in which she refers to the conversations she used to have with her daughter:

She was always right.

So much fuss over the Haitians and they are as poor as we are and we are New York's Haitians.⁴⁸

This challenge of the racial discourse against Haitian migrants that is still prevalent in the Dominican imaginary, by which Haitians are considered the "other" and represented as "black" in contraposition to the alleged *mestizo* origins of Dominican nationals, is, in the opinion of Daisy Cocco de Filippis, characteristic of the Dominican experience in the United States. In her view, "the admission of a shared African heritage as well as [an] understanding of their position as marginalized members of North American society, has brought about another level of consciousness to be shared with other Dominicans who in the past had accepted anti-Haitian sentiment in the island."⁴⁹ This idea that, as discussed above, is shared by Vicioso, Báez, and the

⁴⁷ Vicioso, *Nuyor/Islas*, 72–73.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴⁹ Daisy Cocco de Filippis. "Dominican Writers at the Crossroads: Reflections on a Conversation in Process," in Conrad James and John Perivolaris, eds., *The Cultures of the Hispanic Caribbean* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida: 2000), 156.

characters in their plays, presents migration and diaspora spaces as powerful locations for surmounting constraining racial stereotypes and ethnic definitions. In this sense, it can be argued that transcultural interactions in the global environment of New York City work to promote a redefinition in the characters' ethnic identity that transcends traditional racial categorizations. By adopting a transracial identity, these women are able to establish links with other minorized ethnic communities, a move that allows them to overcome, at least partially, some of the effects of displacement they undergo as migrants.

As contemporary Ciguapas, the narrative voices in Báez's and Vicioso's plays fiercely struggle to survive in hostile environments by creatively adapting to the new circumstances. These empowered female characters prove that Dominicanyorks and the transcultural and transnational networking they bring about are changing the ways Dominicans imagine themselves inside and outside the island. Finally, as has been argued throughout this paper, the myriad processes that affect the identity reconfigurations of those communities and individuals who live their lives "laughing in Dominicanish,"⁵⁰ be it in the US or in the Dominican Republic, can only be brought to light by adopting transcultural approaches to the study of the Americas.

⁵⁰ Báez, *Dominicanish*, 47.

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