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Hair Race-ing Dominican Beauty Culture and Identity Production

GINETTA CANDELARIO

Use to be
 Ya could learn a whole lot of stuff
 sitting in them
 beauty shop chairs
 Use to be
 Ya could meet
 a whole lot of other women
 sittin there
 along with hair frying
 spit flying
 and babies crying
 Use to be
 you could learn a whole lot about
 how to catch up
 with yourself
 and some other folks
 in your household.
 Lots more got taken care of
 than hair
 —Willi Coleman, "Among the Things
 That Use to Be"

At the most banal level, a beauty shop is where women go for beauty. But as Willi Coleman evocatively notes, at beauty shops "lots more [gets] taken care of than hair." The degrees, types, and technologies of artifice and alteration required by beauty are mediated by racial, sexual, class, political, and geographic cultures and locations. Thus, beauty shops can be considered as sites of both cultural and identity production. Some have argued

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that if the female body generally has been subjected to “externalization of the gendered self” (Peiss 1994, 384), the explicitly racialized female body has been subjected to “exile from the self” (Shohat and Stam 1994, 322–33). With the rise of global colonialism, slavery, neocolonialism, and imperialism, African-origin bodies have been stigmatized as unsightly and ugly, yet, simultaneously and paradoxically as hypersexual (Hernton 1988). White female bodies are racialized as well, but this racialization is enacted via the assumption of de-racination, racial neutrality, and naturalized white invisibility (Frankenberg 1993). This white supremacist racial history interacts with masculinist imperatives of gender and sexual homogenization and normalization in particular ways (Young 1995). Moreover, bodily beautification requires material resources and aesthetic practices that are class bound. The beauty shop, then, can be analyzed as a site where hegemonic gender, class, sexuality, and race tropes simultaneously are produced and problematized.

In particular, hair—the subject and object of beauty shop work—epitomizes the mutual referentiality of race/sex/gender/class categories and identities. One can, as I found during a six-month participant observation at a Dominican beauty shop in New York City, “learn a whole lot of stuff sittin’ in them beauty shop chairs.” Here, the concern is to present both the representational and the production practices of hair culture as a window into the contextualized complexity of Dominican identity. The hair culture institutions, practices, and ideals of Dominican women in New York City during the late 1990s are presented as an instructive selection from a larger study (Candelario 2000).

DOMINICAN IDENTITY: ETHNICITY AND RACE IN CONTEXT

The importance of hair as a defining race marker highlights the centrality of beauty practices. Hair, after all, is an alterable sign. Hair that is racially compromising can be mitigated with care and styling. Skin color and facial features, conversely, are less pliant or not as easily altered. That Dominicans have equated whiteness both with *lo indio*, an ethno-racial identity based on identification with the decimated Taino natives of the island that now houses the Dominican Republic and “*lo Hispano*” or hispanicity, reflects the multiple semiotic systems of race they have historically negotiated. *La/a india/o* is invoked to erase the African past and Afro-

diasporic present of Dominicans (Howard 1997). Hispanicity affirms the ethno-racial distance between Dominicans and Haitians, an organizing principle in Dominican national imaginaries since the rise of the state.

Operating in the context of both Latin American and United States' notions of race, transnational Dominicans engage in a sort of racial "code switching" in which both Latin American and United States race systems are engaged, subverted, and sustained in various historical and biographical and spatial contexts and moments. For example, for a variety of reasons I explore at length elsewhere (Candelario 2000), Dominicans in Washington, D.C., identify as black nearly twice as often as Dominicans in New York (see also Dore-Cabral and Itzigsohn 1997; Levitt and Gomez 1997; Duany 1994). Confronted in New York City with the U.S. model of pure whiteness that valorizes lank, light hair, white skin, light eyes, thin and narrow-hipped bodies, the Dominican staff and clients at Salon Lamadas continue to prefer a whiteness that indicates mixture. The identity category labeled "Hispanic" is deployed as the signifier of somatic, linguistic, and cultural alterity in relation to both Anglowhiteness and African American blackness. That *Hispanic* looks are preferred over both the Anglo and African American somatic norm images (Hoetink 1985) of the host society attests to resistance to acculturation and insistence on an alternative, or "other" space.

Dominicans, who might have been considered black by European and U.S. observers were it not for their own colonial antipathy toward Haiti and later, toward Haitians, historically have been endowed with a sort of literary and political honorary whiteness in the service of both the domestic elite and the military and political-economic interests of the United States. It is an ethno-racial identity formulation predicated on the physical disappearance of Taino natives, coupled with their literary (Sommer 1983), iconographic, and bodily re-inscription, and a concomitant textual and ideological erasure of blackness (Torres-Saillant 1999). Rather than use the language of Negritude—*negro*, *mulatto*, and so forth—to describe themselves, Dominicans use language which limits their racial ancestry to Europeans and Taino "Indians"—*indio*, *indio oscuro*, *indio claro*, *trigueño*, *moreno/a*. The result is an ethno-racial Hispanicized Indian, or an Indo-Hispanic identity.

A series of regionally anomalous events in the political economic history of Santo Domingo accounts for this distinctive formulation of whiteness. Chief among those anomalies are the relatively short duration and limited importance of plantation slavery, the massive depopulations

caused by white emigration, the impoverishment of the remaining white and creole colonials during the seventeenth-century Devastation, and the concomitantly heavy reliance upon blacks and mulattos in the armed forces and religious infrastructure (Moya Pons 1995, Torres-Saillant 1996). At the same time, Spanish colonial norms of whiteness, what Hoetink (1967) has called the “Iberian variant” of a white “somatic norm image,” were darker than the contemporary Anglo-European version.

French travel writers of the nineteenth century, when visiting the Spanish part of the island then called Saint Domingue, noted that people who seemed obviously of mixed African and Spanish descent considered themselves, not mulattos or colored, but *los blancos de la tierra*, literally, “the whites of the land.” According to Moya Pons, “This meant that despite their color, [the whites of the land] were different from the slaves whom they saw as the only blacks of the island.” (1996, 16) In other words, in Dominican history, whiteness—whatever its bodily parameters—is an explicitly achieved (and achievable) status with connotations of social, political, and economic privilege. It is, moreover, understood to be a matter of context.

THE DOMINICAN BEAUTY SHOP IN NEW YORK CITY

The representation of Dominican women in the beauty shop occupations reflects both the importance of beauty culture to Dominican women, and the shifting opportunities available in the New York economy. When Dominican women first began to arrive in New York in the 1960s and 1970s, they generally frequented shops owned by other Latina/os, especially Cubans and Puerto Ricans, who were already established in Upper Manhattan (Masud-Piloto 1996, Rodriguez 1991, Sánchez-Korrol 1983). Although Dominicans had been migrating to New York City since the early nineteenth century, the Dominican community began to establish itself more permanently after the 1965 revolution and the 1965 U.S. Immigration Act (Martin 1966). The post-1980 flow of Dominican women into beauty shop occupations—whether as owners, hairdressers, manicurists, shampoo girls, estheticians, or masseurs—reflects simultaneously changes in the New York economy from manufacturing to service industries, changes in the demographics of the Washington Heights area, and changes in Dominican beauty culture in the Dominican Republic as well (see New York City Department of City Planning 1995). While Dominican women continue to be overrepresented in the nondurable goods manufacturing

sector (Hernández 1989; Hernández et al. 1997), particularly in the apparel industry (Pessar 1987a, 1987b; Waldinger 1986), the volatility of that sector, together with the regimentation, occupational hazards, low pay, and low status of manufacturing and much service-sector employment, make beauty shop ownership and employment appealing by comparison.

In addition, in the Dominican Republic beauty culture has come to be seen as a respectable and professional field. Although commercial beauty shops have existed in the Dominican Republic since at least the 1930s, they generally serviced the elite. The majority of Dominican beauty culturalists operated out of their homes until the 1980s. Typically these shops were located in a converted front room, patio, or garage space and consisted of an owner-operator and a young neighborhood assistant. Shop owner-operators and assistants alike were considered nearly at par with domestic workers, and thus were of low socio-economic status. Additionally, beauty culturalists were reputed to be women of loose sexual morals. In the early 1980s, however, beauty culturalists began to professionalize, via the establishment of a professional organization, *Asociación de Estilistas Dominicanas* (Dominican Hair Stylists Association), the proliferation of beauty schools and certification programs, and a shift from the use of domestic and home-manufactured products to an increasing reliance upon hair-care products and technologies imported from the United States. Beauty shop work, in other words, has come to be viewed as a skilled profession one trains for and pursues.

Work in the New York Dominican beauty shop, while not entirely autonomous or especially well-paying, makes possible greater autonomy and flexibility and higher earnings and community status. Job quality and job satisfaction are often higher than in manufacturing or other service-sector employment. In addition, the Dominican beauty shop represents a female-dominated entrepreneurial sector, somewhat parallel to the male-dominated Dominican *bodega* (grocery store). In his study of Dominican entrepreneurs in New York City, Guarnizo (1993) found that entrepreneurial Dominican women frequently chose beauty shops as their niche. He reported, "One out of every five respondents is a woman. Unlike male [business] owners, however, women are clustered in a single sector: 60 percent of women own service firms (especially beauty salons and other personal service establishments) while only 25 and 15 percent of them own commercial or manufacturing firms, respectively" (121).

The appeal of this sector for Dominican women in New York City is manifold. In economic terms, beauty shop start-up costs are substantially

lower than commercial or manufacturing firms, and therefore are more accessible to low-earning, poorly capitalized, or less-educated women. Further, barriers to entry are fewer, both in terms of fixed capital and human capital (Schroder 1978; Willet 1996). In cultural terms, beauty shop work is considered women's purview, while commercial or manufacturing ventures are generally considered male domains. *Bodegueras* (female grocery shop owners), for example, while not uncommon, often have male kin *representandolas* (representing them) at the store counter. Similarly, while Dominican men do own beauty shops, they are less likely to be owner-operators, preferring instead to hire women managers.

Currently there is a thriving Dominican beauty culture industry in New York City, supported primarily by Dominican, and increasingly by African American women (Williams 2000). In Washington Heights/Inwood alone, that is, in the vicinity in northwestern Manhattan from 155th street to the 190s, from the Harlem River on the east to the Hudson River on the west, where 40 percent of the Dominican population in New York resides, there are 146 salons (1992 Economic Census, Service Industries, Firms Subject to Federal Income Tax, Zip Code Statistics, *Manhattan Yellow Pages*, April 1999–April 2000). On average, these salons are two-tenths of a mile (or one-and-one-half blocks) apart from one another. There is, in other words, a salon on nearly every single block in Washington Heights.¹

By comparison, there are only 103 (or 40 percent fewer) beauty shops in the far wealthier Upper East Side, which is the district from East 61st to East 94th Streets, from Fifth Avenue to the East River. These salons are eight-tenths of a mile apart on average. In Harlem, where average per capita income is nearly identical to that in Washington Heights/Inwood, there are 112 shops. Shops in this district, which ranges from 114th to 138th Streets, and from Fifth Avenue to the Hudson River, are four-tenths of a mile apart on average. Washington Heights/Inwood is only slightly more densely populated than Harlem, but has 30 percent more shops. These numbers are all the more impressive given the exceedingly high poverty rate (36 percent) and low per-capita income level (\$6,336) among Dominicans in New York City. It is quite clear that hair and beauty shops are important to Dominicans.

Today, the Dominican salon in New York City is a neighborhood institution that indicates community actualization. If, as the old sociological maxim holds, for most immigrant communities the establishment of ethnically specific funeral homes indicates community salience (e.g., Park et al. 1925; Gans 1962), for Dominicans, the beauty shop holds a simi-

lar role in the community. The Dominican beauty shop, with the physical space it plots out and the social relationships it contains, is a site that not only reflects transnational community development and cohesion, but helps sustain it.

SALON LAMADAS

Salon Lamadas, where I spent six months as a participant-observer, is in many ways a typical Dominican salon.² It is located in the heart of Washington Heights, on St. Nicholas Avenue several blocks south of the 181st Street shopping district. Surrounding the salon are a telephone station, a pharmacy, a Pronto Envio (remittances center), and a family restaurant. This is a typically busy commercial and residential street, trafficked primarily by Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and, increasingly, Mexicans.

Founded in 1992 by an owner operator, Salon Lamadas is an average-sized shop with four stylists, including the owner, and a shampooer, a manicurist, and a facialist/ masseuse. Music is always playing at the salon, sometimes quite loudly. Generally it is merengue and salsa, although one or two ballads surface. Often in the afternoon the television is turned on, as well, and is usually tuned to *Cristina*, a popular Miami-based, Spanish-language talk show. In addition to the music and the television, the blow dryers are constantly going. Despite all this noise, the women hear each other quite well, and carry on conversations across the room. The atmosphere is one of conviviality and easy familiarity.

The salon is open seven days a week. Although many salons in the United States close on Mondays, Dominican salons do not. This is true for several reasons. First, Dominican women use salons for regular weekly hair care, not for intermittent haircuts and hair treatments. Therefore, there is steady demand throughout the week, although Fridays and Saturdays are still the busiest days. Second, the staff needs to work six days a week in order to earn enough money to survive in New York and to remit dollars to their families in the Dominican Republic (Hernández and Torres-Saillant 1998, Grasmuck and Pessar 1991). Third, because Dominican women are heavily represented in blue- and pink-collar work (Hernández 1989; Hernández, Rivera-Bátiz, and Agodini 1995), the salon must accommodate to their varied and long working hours.

Salon Lamadas, like most neighborhood salons, has a core of clients

who frequent the shop regularly, usually once a week. Thirty of those “regulars” were approached for interviews. Fifteen agreed. Although this is not a statistically representative sample, neither in size nor in selection, they are a diverse group in terms of current age, age at migration, generation of migration, residency status, labor-force participation rates, professional status, educational attainment levels, Spanish- and English-language proficiency, marital status, household composition, and physical appearance.

The interviews consisted of two or three separate three-hour interviews. The first was a life-history interview, in which the respondent’s migration, labor markets and educational experience, family life, and personal history were explored. The second interview inquired into the respondent’s experience of Dominican beauty culture, both at Salon Lamadas and more generally. In addition, a third interview consisting of a photo elicitation component was conducted, following Furman (1997) and Kottak (in Harris 1964: 57). Using color photocopies of images copied from hairstyle books utilized at Salon Lamadas, respondents were asked to select and describe the women they found “most attractive” and “least attractive.”

The explicit work of the salon, the transformation of a Dominican woman’s hair into a culturally acceptable sign of beauty, hinges the customer’s sense of self and beauty on certain racialized norms and models. The Dominican salon acts as a socializing agent. Hair care and salon use are rites of passage into Dominican women’s community. At the salon, girls and women learn to transform their bodies — through hair care, waxing, manicuring, pedicuring, facials, and so forth — into socially valued, culturally specific, and race-determining displays of femininity.

Many of my respondents recalled visiting beauty shops as children with their mothers. Chastity, for example, said, “I used to always go with my mother to this shop in Flushing, where I grew up. She would go all the time and I’d go with her. I must have been real little because I remember being like “Wow” and “Ooo” about everything. They all looked glamorous to me. (Laughs) She still goes there, and it was the first shop I used myself. I still go there sometimes just to catch up on the neighborhood gossip.”³ As Chastity explains, for young girls with their mothers, the shop seems “glamorous” and adult, and therefore awe-inspiring.

These shops act as community centers; the exchange of information and women’s insights is as much a part of their function as the production of beauty. Further, as in Chastity’s case, it was often the mother’s shop that young women first visited. Generally speaking, however, they themselves did not become beauty shop clients until they were about fifteen years old.

That fifteen is the age when Latin American girls of means are introduced into society, and when Latin American girls generally are socially considered “women”, is not coincidental (King 1998). Kathy recalled her first salon visit: “Aha, the first time I went to a shop I was already like fifteen years old. And it was to have my hair trimmed a little. But I already wanted to get out of the ponytails and buns already. And so I went to a neighbor who had a shop in her house and I had my hair washed, trimmed, and set. Oh, I looked so pretty.” The repeated refrain of how “pretty” they looked after their first beauty shop visit also marks the transition from “innocent” childhood to “sexual” young womanhood. All of the respondents raised in the Dominican Republic, and several who were raised here, recalled that the transition from childhood to young womanhood was marked by the loosening of their hair from ponytails and *moños* (buns).

Others recalled first visiting a beauty shop in preparation for their migration to the United States, a moment which also might mark the transition from girlhood to adolescence. Nurka, for example, recalled that before migrating, when she was fourteen, her mother took her sisters and her to a beauty shop in town:

Look, it was to come here. Exactly. Yes. (Chuckles) I had never gone to a salon. I always, I had two pony tails like this, and that was it. But I went. When we were coming here, mommy went to pick us up. And she took the three of us to the salon. I think my brother also had a haircut. And it was, we were in the country, and mommy took us to the east, to Bayaguana, the place was called. She took us there to have us all have our hair cut. They trimmed our hair, they washed our hair and it was, “Oh!” Everyone, “Oh! What pretty hair! Oh, how pretty!” (Laughs) And that was true, yes of course. I remember it as if it were today, yes.

For Nurka, the transition from childhood to adulthood was marked as much by the change from pigtailed hair to hair done at the shop, as by the move to New York. Her transformation into young womanhood is socially recognized by people who acclaim her “pretty hair”, now loose and womanish.

Like Nurka, Chastity remembers her grandmother styling her hair into pigtailed hair and later *moños* for neatness and ease of care. So long as mother and grandmothers were responsible for their children’s hair, these were the preferred styles. As Nana explained,

Look, I hated those buns. It was three buns, one here, one here, and one here. My grandmother used to make them with a piece of string. And

the other children used to make fun of them saying like “*Tin mari de dos pingó, cucara macara titire fué*” [a nonsensical children’s rhyme]. I used to tear them [the buns] apart when I was walking to school. So then, when I became a little bigger, my grandmother told me that I was already old enough to take care of my hair myself. And that was such a joy for me! Oh! I started wearing curlers and styling my hair well.

The transition of hair care from one’s caretaker’s hands into one’s own, thus, paralleled the increasing responsibility for one’s own body and self.

RACIALIZED REPRODUCTION AND HAIR CULTURE

. . . Cause in our mutual obvious dislike
for nappiness
we came together
under the hot comb
to share
and share
and share
—“Among the Things That Use to Be”

A central aspect of Dominican hair culture has been the twin notions of *pelo malo* (bad hair) and *pelo bueno* (good hair). Bad hair is hair that is perceived to be tightly curled, coarse, and kinky. Good hair is hair that is soft and silky, straight, wavy, or loosely curled. There are clearly racial connotations to each category: the notion of bad hair implies an outright denigration of African-origin hair textures, while good hair exalts European, Asian, and indigenous-origin hair textures. Moreover, those with good hair are, by definition, not black, skin color notwithstanding. Thus, hair becomes an emblem of the everyday engagement of *blanqueamiento*, or whitening.

The Dominican salon, in being the preeminent site of Dominican hair culture practices and technologies, provides insight into the relative saliency of *blanqueamiento*, which is fundamentally about physical relations, sexual and otherwise, between people. This is not to say that *blanqueamiento* does not operate in nonmaterial culture realms as well, as Piedra’s (1991) work on literary whiteness has aptly illustrated it does. However, there is an explicit physicality to *blanqueamiento*, particularly as it implicates racialized gender. It is there that beauty culture practices comes

into play. *Blanqueamiento* is a long-term process of encoding whiteness bodily. Hair culture is a much more immediate, if more ephemeral, solution.

In the United States, non-African American women rarely have the opportunity to interact with African American women around beauty regimens. Consequently, they do not experience first-hand the variety of hair textures in the African diaspora through touching, washing, or styling “black hair”, through seeing media depictions of black hair care, or through seeing African American women themselves caring for their hair. African American women, on the other hand, constantly are exposed to white women’s hair care and hair textures through a variety of hegemonic media: dolls, television, cinematic and print media representations, and through observing first hand white women’s hair ministrations throughout the day. Currently, women with non-African-diaspora hair textures spend a great deal of time throughout the day grooming their hair—brushing it, tying it up, loosening it, washing it, drying it, or otherwise fussing with it. By contrast, African-diaspora hair once styled retains its set and is typically washed every third or fourth day at home or in the salon. Thus, many non-African Americans simply do not know what “black hair” feels like, how it is maintained, what products are used on it, and what beauty practices are employed.

The first time that many white women are exposed to black women’s hair in close quarters is when they are put into a communal living situation, such as a school dormitory or armed services barracks. A commonly cited experience of black women is that of the white housemate who asks to touch her hair, thus exposing the white woman’s segregated upbringing, the novelty (specifically, the racialized exoticism) of African-diaspora hair textures, and, ultimately, her own white aesthetic privilege. Black women often recount the strong impact and significance of these encounters, while white women seem surprised at the hostility with which their seemingly innocent desire to touch is met (Cary 1991; Frankenberg 1993).

Beauty shops in the United States originated as, and continue to be, socially segregated spaces, in practice if not by law (Willet 1996). Schroder, for example, relates the story of the disruptive effect of a new hire’s “ethnic clientele” in the implicitly (if not explicitly) white racialized “atmosphere existing in the salon” (1978, 193). African Americans and Anglo Americans alike hesitate to frequent each other’s shops, although from the mid-1980s a series of individual and legal challenges to those social norms have occurred (C. Coleman 1995, Goodnough 1995, Willet 1996).

Dominican women, conversely, do not experience this brand of racial segregation. Simply stated, Dominican families are comprised of people with a variety of hair textures, facial features, and skin tones. Girls and young women are allowed “hands-on” exposure to a range of hair textures throughout their lives. Fannie, for example, utilized one hair care regime at home suited to her mother’s and her own fine, lank hair. As she came of age, however, and began to socialize with her cousins, whose hair care regimes included roller sets, relaxers and *doobies* (hair wraps), she became versed in those methods as well. Responding to the question of how she came to work in a beauty shop, she notes that her first experiences with Dominican beauty culture occurred in the context of her family, which is “very large” and very diverse. As she recalls:

We would all go to the beach together, in Barahona, there are a lot of beaches. And when we would come back from the beach, I would return with my hair dry and straight, you know? And then, they would come with their hair, you know, curly. You know, bad hair that is relaxed? That when it comes into contact with sea waters it becomes, you know, Dominican hair, black women’s hair? And they would say to me, “Oh! You’re all set to go dancing, but not me. Come on then, and get to work fixing my hair too.” And so I, in order to hurry up and for us to all get ready at the same time, I wanted to help. And that’s how I started practicing. “Let me set your hair.” “Here, fix my hair.” You know? Between ourselves, girls to the end, getting together.

Fannie’s story highlights several themes that will be explored in this section. It was in participating in her cousin’s hair care regimes that she learned and began to practice setting hair. Further, her cousins marshaled her assistance in caring for their hair, evidently undaunted by her personal unfamiliarity with their hair texture. In helping to care for each other’s hair, a spirit of feminine intimacy across racial boundaries marked by hair care practices — “between ourselves, girls to the end” — was developed and sustained. Finally, although she herself is Dominican and has fine, lank hair, light eyes, and freckled white skin, Fannie equates “Dominican hair” with “black women’s hair” and “bad hair that is relaxed.” It is her cousins’ beauty culture practices, in other words, that “typify” Dominican women’s hair culture.

Similarly, Dominican mothers and daughters often have dissimilar hair textures, yet mothers have to care for and style their daughter’s hair. Doris, for example, never used curlers herself, nor did her sisters, but she had

to set her daughters' hair, which is thick and curly. "I myself haven't used them yet," she said. "It was out of necessity, out of necessity that I learned. I'd put them and they'd come out, more or less, with lots of pins and things like that. . . . I saw at the salon how they did it and I, more or less, in my mind I had an idea of how they were done, and I did them and they didn't come out too badly. Because you know, it's very difficult to get them to come out as nice as they do." This passage indicates that the salons Doris frequented catered to clients with hair like hers, as well as to clients who used roller sets. In other words, unlike U.S. shops, the typical Dominican beauty shop caters to women of various hair textures. Further, the work done in the shops, as Doris points out, is "very difficult" and requires a degree of skill. Finally, as with Fannie and her cousins at home, the beauty shop helped to socialize Doris, and later her children, into Dominican beauty culture.

"A RICE AND BEANS FACE":
LOOKING DOMINICAN, SEEING HISPANIC

For Dominicans, hair is the principal bodily signifier of race, followed by facial features, skin color, and, last, ancestry. Juan Antonio Alix's nineteenth-century *décima*, or ten-line poem, "El negro tras las orejas" ("Black Behind the Ears") illustrates this phenomenon well:

De la parienta Fulana	Such and such relative's
El pelo siempre se mienta;	Hair is always mentioned;
Pero nunca la pimienta	But never the black pepper
De la tía siña Sutana.	Of aunt so and so.
Por ser muy blanco se afana,	One strives to be very white,
Y del negro hasta se aljea	Even distances oneself from the black
	man
Nublando siempre una ceja	Always arching an eyebrow
Cuando aquél a hablarle viene	When he comes to speak with one
Porque se cree que no tiene	Because one thinks that one does not
	have
"El negro tras de la oreja."	"The black behind the ears."

[Alix 1996, 8, trans. by author]

Although Alix's *décima* was written in 1883, the role of hair as race-signifier among Dominicans dates back to at least the late eighteenth century (Moureau de Saint-Méry 1944, 95).

Given that Dominicans are endowed with many of the physical signs to

which they attribute blackness, and that they draw a distinction between blackness and hispanicity, how do they discern who is “Hispanic” and who is not?⁴ Hairstyle books offer an invaluable window into how Dominicans read bodies racially. I elicited formal responses to pictures in these books during interviews with salon clients. In addition, on several occasions when the shop was quiet and there were no clients, I opened the books and asked the staff, individually and collectively, for their opinions of the hairstyles and models depicted.

The core questions guiding the elicitation were: Who do Dominican women consider beautiful? Is the norm closer to, or further from, whiteness or blackness? How are “Hispanic looks” conceptualized? What is the relationship between aesthetic preferences and social status? While a sample of eighteen respondents is not a statistically valid one, the results resonate with larger, historical indications of Dominican notions of beauty and race, as well as with my ethnographic findings in the beauty shop.

At Lamadas, of the thirteen books customers use when selecting a hairstyle, ten are of white models and hairstyles. Three of the books feature African American women. One afternoon I approached owner-operator Chucha with one of the three African American hairstyle books and asked her about the styles it contained.

Chucha: I just bought that book. I bought it because my clients have to locate themselves in the hair they have.

Me: How so?

Chucha: Why, Dominican women don’t want to see that book. They ask for the white women’s book; they want their manes long and soft like yours.

Me: Why?

Chucha: It’s because of racism. It’s just that we don’t even know what race we are. That if we’re white, that if we’re black, *indio*, or what. . . . I don’t want to know about blacks, so I don’t have to be fucking around with kinks. Look, I came out like one of my aunts, and that was suffering in my house in order to lower my kinks. The Dominican woman wants her soft mane, long hair. I bought that book now so they can start to locate themselves well. They don’t want to see that book. They ask for the white women’s book, the one for good hair like yours. Look, I have a client who brings me a three-year-old girl so I can blow dry her hair. You know what that

is? Three years old. And in the end, when she gets home and starts playing, her hair stands on end again. (Laughs.) The latest was that she wanted her to have her hair set. That little girl sat under the dryer better than some big ones, reading her magazine. Do you think that's right? That's suffering. It's not fair. I tell her, "Leave her with her curly hair, put a ribbon in it and leave it!" But no, they want their soft manes.

Chucha wants to help her clients "locate themselves," and the selves she is pointing Dominican women to are black. But this is a self-image rejected by her clients, who "don't want to see that book." Instead, they "ask for the white women's book." Attributing the desire for long and soft hair to racism and to racial confusion, Chucha reiterates the equation of blackness with kinky, difficult hair, a result of failed *blanqueamiento*. As she indicates by tracing her own "greñas" (kinks) to her aunt, blackness is errant, and betrays. It leads to "suffering."

Interestingly, Chucha depersonalizes her own suffering, referring instead to "Dominican women," to her clients, or to her family's suffering. The ambivalence Chucha expresses, as a woman whose own hair was treated as a cause of sorrow in her childhood and as a stylist who actively participates in the very system she condemns, typifies the paradox of Dominican beauty culture. She is critical of her clients for choosing the white book, for subjecting their three-year-olds to suffering under the dryer, and for preferring "long manes." She relishes the resiliency and unruliness of a child's kinky hair that refuses to relax. Yet, she is an active agent of the very system she criticizes. Further, she is subjected to it herself, even as an adult.

The texture of Chucha's hair was variously presented as "pelo macho" (macho hair), "pelo durito" (slightly hard hair)" and "pelo fuerte" (strong hair)" by her staff, and as "greñas" (kinks) and "pasas que hay que bajarlas" (these raisins that have to be tamed) by herself. Much like the customers who pretend not to notice the waiter's gaffe in order to support his role (Goffman 1959), Lamadas' staff politely overlook and accommodate Chucha's hair texture, both through their grooming of her hair and through their softened descriptions of it. Yet Chucha herself is ambivalent about her hair, as the following selection from my field notes indicates:

Chucha and Leticia attended a Sebastian hair product seminar in New Jersey today. The topic was how to use a new color product. Chucha sat down and recounted the details of her experience to Maria: "They don't

work on bad heads there. It's all for good hair, like hers (pointing to me) and yours (Maria)." I asked why not, and whether they had ever asked for a different kind of hair on the dummies. Again Chucha responded: "There it is! Our job is to adapt straight hair, good hair products, to ours. I was dying laughing, thinking about the surprise they'd experience if my hair got wet!" she laughed. "If my hair got wet!"

The "they" Chucha refers to are the Anglo-American producers, marketers, and beauty culturalists at Sebastian. Chucha's laughter and pleasure in relating the story indicate to me her awareness of her corporate host's reliance on superficial appearances. Water would return her hair to its natural, tightly curled state. Her looks, she recognizes with relish, are deceiving. So, it seems that on some level Chucha is well aware that she is transforming herself racially when she does her hair. The question is, what is she transforming into? I argue that it is not a desire for whiteness that guides Dominican hair culture. Instead, it is an ideal notion of what it means to "look Hispanic."

Again, situating Dominican identity in the appropriate spatial and political context is necessary. The use of the term *Hispanic* in Spanish by Dominicans in New York is an engagement with both the historic hispanophile identity institutionalized by the Dominican state and elite, and with the white supremacist foundations of the United States racial state (Omi and Winant 1994). For Dominicans, to say in Spanish that they are "Hispanic" is at once a connection to a European linguistic and cultural legacy and also a recognition of subordinate ethno-racial status in the United States (Oboler 1995). In this tense negotiation of multiple historical contexts and codes, the usual United States notions of both whiteness and blackness are subverted.

However, merely subverting whiteness and blackness is not liberating, for the concept of race as an organizing principle remains intact. The bounds of the categories are altered, but their hierarchical systematization is not. Blackness continues unabashedly to be equated with ugliness. When asked for their opinions of the appearance of women depicted in an African American braiding book, Salon Lamadas' staff was vehemently derogatory in their commentary. At one point a debate ensued over whether the woman who Chucha had previously described as having "una cara de arroz con habichuelas" (a rice-and-beans face) was Latina or African American. Nilda, Maria, and Flor felt that she was Latina. Nené, Alma, and Leonora disagreed, particularly Nené, who felt that she was definitively black.

Nené: Her features are rough, ordinary—black muzzle, big mouth, fat nose.

Nilda: Blacks are dirty and they smell. Hispanics are easy to spot!
(Turning to me.) You have something Hispanic.

Me: What?

Nilda: Your nose. Fannie is white, with good hair, but her features are rough black ones.

Leonora: It's just that black shows.

Hilda: Black is not the color of the skin. Really pretty, really fine. The white person has black behind the ears.

In this exchange, several things become apparent. First, those who “look” Latina/o could easily be African American, and vice versa. Second, “blackness” is discerned through a sometimes contradictory, but cohesive, system of bodily signs: hair, skin, nose, and mouth. When these features are “black” they are perceived to be animalistic and crude, as the terms “rough” and “muzzle” and the attribution of filth and odor indicate. Yet, they are also common, if base, among Dominicans as the term “ordinary” implies. At the same time, an intermediate category, “Hispanic,” is deployed to contain the fluid middle between black and white. Ancestry, even if not discernible through skin color and facial features, is immutable. Thus, my nose indicates my African ancestry. But, as the repeated references to my “good” hair as signifier of whiteness indicate, ancestry does not determine current identity. Finally, the continuing currency of the one-hundred-year-old expression “black behind the ears” is striking.

“BLACK WOMEN ARE CONFUSING,
BUT THE HAIR LETS YOU KNOW”

*But now we walk
heads high
naps full of pride
with not a backward glance
at some of the beauty which
use to be.*

—“Among the Things That Use to Be”

Dominican women are lay anthropologists, employing the sort of reading of the racialized body utilized by, for example, Franz Boas. Boas was

often called as an expert witness in legal cases in which the determination of a person's "race" was required. In one instance, he was asked to determine whether a "golden-haired blonde with beautiful gray eyes and regular features" married to a prominent Detroit doctor was passing for white. (Her husband was suing her for divorce based on his belief that she was.) Boas concluded that the woman was not black, explaining, "If this woman has any of the characteristics of the Negro race it would be easy to find them. . . . One characteristic that is regarded as reliable is the hair. You can tell by a microscopic examination of a cross section of hair to what race that person belongs" (Boas, in Rooks 1996, 14). Microscopic examinations, it seems, can also be made without benefit of a microscope.

Bodies are racially coded in distinct, referential, and ultimately arbitrary ways in any given historical and cultural context (Gilman 1998; Gould 1996; Montague 1974). Race is a biological fiction that nonetheless has been institutionalized into a social fact through particular cultural practices. In a community that strives for *blanqueamiento*, race for Dominican women assumes immediate importance as a personal bodily, social, and cultural attribute.

Simply stated, Dominican women consider women they perceive to be Hispanic, and specifically Dominican, as most beautiful. *Hispanic* (or *Latina*) is often synonymous with *Dominican*. Both terms are taken to mean "a middle term," "a mixture of black and white," an intermediate category. Latin looks, accordingly, are those that contain elements from each constitutive "race." As the illustrations below indicate women selected most often as looking Hispanic are also the ones most often selected as prettiest. The top three "prettiest" women were all thought to look Latina. The top eight of the nine women selected as prettiest were thought to look Latina by 20 percent of the respondents. Only the ninth woman of those selected as prettiest was a blonde-haired, white-skinned woman who was universally declared to "not look Latina." At the same time, there were no "white" women among the women perceived as "least pretty." Instead, as the Looks Hispanic Ratio indicates, the women considered "least pretty" were those African diaspora women furthest away from standard Hispanic-looking woman (fig. 1).

Since the Looks Hispanic category included women in nearly equal proportion from the white and black hairstyle books, there does not seem to be a preference for "pure" or "European" whiteness. Rather, each of the women selected as looking Latina was selected because her face and/or hair were perceived to indicate some degree of both African and European

Figure 1. Perceived Prettiness with “Looks Hispanic” Ratio





















	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice
Prettiest			
Looks Latina Ratio	13:13	7:13	6:13
Least Pretty			
Looks Latina Ratio	4:13	4:13	1:13

Note: The images in figures 1–4 are taken from these sources: *Before and After: American Beauté*, vol. 2 (Freehold, N.J.: Dennis Bernard); *Family Album III*, Auburn, Mass.: Worcester Reading Co.; *Family Images*, vol. 2 (Auburn, Mass.: Worcester Reading Co.); and *Ultra World of Hair Fashion* (Auburn, Mass.: Worcester Reading Co.).

ancestry (fig. 2). Those thought not to evidence any degree of mixed ancestry were also those thought to “Not look Hispanic.” (fig. 3) It is the lack of “naturalness” in sculpted and obviously processed hairstyles that Dominican women point to as disconcerting, and as distinguishing African American hair culture from Dominican hair culture.

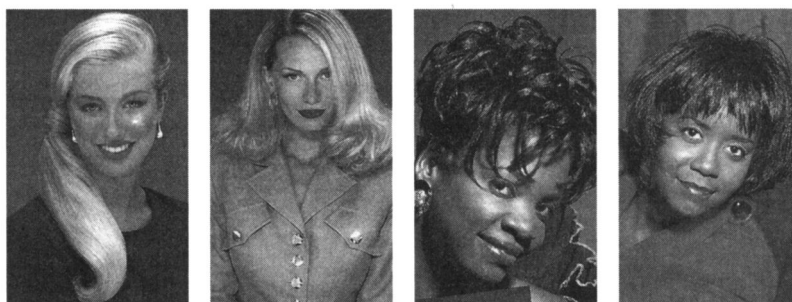
Dominican women place great emphasis on hair that appears “healthy, natural, and loose.” As Nuris put it, “The difference between here and there, black women here, they use a lot of grease, their hair looks, it doesn’t look as loose as Dominican women’s. Dominican women don’t use it that way, they wear their hair processed, but the hair looks healthy, it stays well, very pretty, the hair, the hair always looks healthy. . . . I think the difference is like to look more natural. To look more, like, for the hair to look

Figure 2. "Looks Hispanic," in Order of Frequency Selected, and with Prettiness Ranking

	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice	4th Choice	5th Choice
Top Five					
Prettiest Ranking	#1 of 9		#7 of 9		
Second Five					
Prettiest Ranking			#2 of 9		
Third Five					
Prettiest Ranking	#3 of 9		#5 of 9	#6 of 9	
Fourth Five					
Prettiest Ranking				#8 of 9	#4 of 9

looser. That's it." In other words, the extensive technology, time, and effort employed to make the hair "loose and manageable" must not show. Indeed, it is precisely the emphasis on naturalness that signifies the racial iconography of Dominican hair culture. In this way, Dominican whiteness both subverts U.S. white supremacy based on the "one drop of blood rule" (where "one drop" of African "blood" makes one black [Davis 1991; Harris

Figure 3. "Does Not Look Hispanic," with Prettiness Ranking



9:9

1964]) and sustains the *blanqueamiento*-based white supremacy of Dominican hispanicity.

Similarly, while light skin is generally valorized, white skin in and of itself is insufficient, and skin that is too white is considered unsightly. As Chucha put it: "There are blacks who have pretty faces. And there are whites who have ugly faces." Nonetheless, the fact that each of these possibilities is constructed as exceptional points to the standard equation of whiteness and blackness with beauty and ugliness, respectively. Consider the following exchange between Doris, a white skinned, straight-haired Dominican woman married to a brown skinned, curly-haired Dominican man, and me, a similarly white-skinned, straight-haired Dominican woman. Recall that Doris is the woman who learned to set her daughters' hair by observing stylists at her salon.

Me: Tell me something. You've just told me that we value hair a lot and color less, in the sense that if hair is "good" you are placed in the white category. What happens in the case of someone who is very light but has "bad hair"?

Doris: No, that one is on the black side because it's just that the *jabao* in Santo Domingo is white with bad hair, really tight hair. Well, that one is on the black side because I myself say, "If my daughters had turned out *jabá*, it's better that they would have turned out brown, with their hair like that, *trigueño*." Because I didn't want my daughters to come out white with tight hair. No. For me, better *trigueña*. They're prettier. I've always said that. All three of my children are *trigueños*.

Me: Why? What makes them prettier?

Doris: Well, their color. Because for me, someone white, an ugly, ordinary white person, looks worse than a brown one, a black one who doesn't, who really is black. If they're white like that, the way there are some white, those white people, white, white, fine, they look exaggeratedly white like that. They don't look good. To me, they're not attractive. I prefer someone of color.

Of color, but not black. The aesthetic model is the body that is a “middle term” as my respondents named it, neither too white nor too black. In other words, the *mestiza/mulatta*, the embodiment of the *Taina/o* icon displayed at the Dominican museum, in the Dominican beauty pageant, in the Dominican media, and in Dominican history books.

The question remains, however: How do contemporary Dominican women and girls look at pictures of African American women who look like them and yet distance themselves from this similarity? What is taking place when women at the salon identify with the women in the white hairstyles book, and distance themselves adamantly from those in the African American hairstyles book? Are they doing psychic violence to themselves? I argue that they are not, to the extent that Dominicans identify as “Hispanic” and consider those who evidence a degree of mixture to “look Hispanic.” Thus, if one were to be guided simply by the fact that Dominican women at Salon Lamadas preferred to look at the white hairstyles book, it could easily be concluded that Dominican women prefer “white” looks. See table 1, which records the preference for images selected from the “white” book, and the concomitant rejection of images from the “black” book.

TABLE 1: Binding of “Most Attractive” and “Least Attractive” Images

Descriptors	Number	Percent
“Most Attractive”	60	100
Selected from “white” hairstyle book	39	65
Selected from “black” hairstyle book	21	35
“Least Attractive”	59	100
Selected from “white” hairstyle book	17	29
Selected from “black” hairstyle book	42	71

However, the symbolic and literal binding of the images into one of two choices—black or white—reflects the U.S. dichotomization of race. There are no “Latina” or “Hispanic” hairstyle books. Once the images are considered outside of the context of their bindings, however, as they were by Salon Lamadas’ clients during the photo elicitation interviews, it be-

TABLE 2: Perceived Ethnicity/Race and Perceived Prettiness

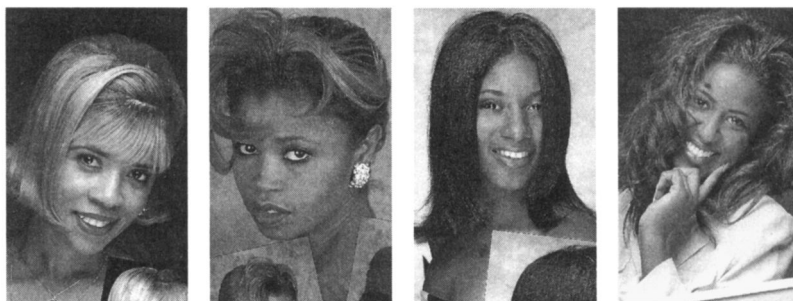
Attributes	Described as "Hispanic"		Described as Non-Hispanic "White"	Described as Non-Hispanic "Black"
	White Book	Black Book		
Prettiest	92%	100%	8%	—
Least Pretty	71%	83%	29%	17%

comes clear once again that the preference is not for U.S. whiteness, but for "Hispanic" or mixed looks. In other words, it is neither the white book nor the black book *per se* that Salon Lamadas' clients prefer or reject. It is the images contained in each book that they consider to approximate or not approximate a "Hispanic" ideal, an ideal dually defined as containing elements from both blackness and whiteness where Dominicans are concerned, and, more generally, as indicating *mestizaje* (see table 2). Thus, nearly all of the women selected as attractive from the "white" book, and 100 percent of the women selected as attractive from the "black" book were also thought to look Hispanic. And while neither of the two women from the "black" book who were considered to be unequivocally black were considered among the prettiest, only one of the two white women considered unequivocally non-Hispanic was among the prettiest. None of the top three choices as the prettiest of the women was perceived to be a white Anglo (see fig. 1). The top choice was considered unequivocally Latina, while the second and third choices were "probably" Latina and "possibly Latina, possibly black" respectively.

Again, although Anglo white women were not considered prettiest, they were also less likely to be categorized as "least pretty." The top three choices for "least pretty" all were perceived as closer to blackness and further from Latina-ness (fig. 2). What's more, those perceived to be whiter Latinas were more heavily represented among the top nine prettiest women. Most interesting, however, was the assessment of the appearance of the woman selected both as most Latina-looking and prettiest.

The top choice in both the "Looks Hispanic" and "Prettiest" categories is almost stereotypically Latina. Clara Rodriguez has noted the media representation of "Latin looks" in the United States consists of skin that is "slightly tan, with dark hair and eyes" (1997, 1) a reasonable description of the top choice in this study. That said, it is important to note that half of the twenty women my respondents perceived to look Hispanic were drawn from the African American hairstyles book and had features that the re-

Figure 4. "Looks Dominican"



spondents considered to connote a degree of ancestral blackness. Further, it was also those women that my respondents selected as looking “typically” Dominican (fig. 4). “Looking Dominican” as noted above, evidently means having visible African features. Thus, one discerns who is simply “black” and who is “Dominican” not only by signs of mixture—lighter skin, looser hair, thinner features—but by reference to hair culture, because, as Lamadas client Paulina explained, “Black women are confusing, but the hair lets you know.”

CONCLUSION

*Cause with a natural
there is no natural place
for us to congregate
to mull over
our mutual discontent
Beauty shops
could have been
a hell-of-a-place
to ferment
a revolution.
—“Among the Things That Use to Be”*

In stretching the bounds of whiteness in the United States to accommodate their own definition and understanding of it, Dominican women’s hair culture stands in sharp contrast to African American hair culture.

When Chucha notes that the job of the Dominican hair stylist is to “adopt white products to our hair,” she is pointing to precisely that alternative understanding of whiteness. African Americans, by contrast, have developed their own unique system of hair care and hair care products—at times in opposition to, at times parallel to, and at times simply oblivious of the Anglo somatic norm image. For Hoetink (1967) it is “illogical” that African Americans “despite [their] adoption of the whole [white] preference pattern, nevertheless place [themselves] at the top of the [aesthetic] preferences list” as a study of African American’s aesthetic preferences in St. Louis found (160). What Hoetink overlooks, and what therefore makes African American’s self-valuation logical in the context of white supremacy, is that segregation forced African Americans to create their own social, economic, and aesthetic spaces. Straightening their hair, for example, is not necessarily a “white wish” on the part of African Americans. Rather, as Mercer (1994) points out, it is often a means to an explicitly “black” hairstyle. Certain sculpted hairstyles require chemically processed hair for their construction. The explicit artificiality of hair sculpting stands in sharp contrast to naturalness in the European model, indicated not only by “hair that moves,” but by “natural” styles such as Afros and dreadlocks.

In a recent video documentary featuring the African American millionaire and beauty products entrepreneur Madame C.J. Walker, several former Walker agents and customers emphasized that black women cared for their hair with Walker products and methods, not in order to look white, but “to be beautiful” (Nelson 1987). They repeatedly stressed African American women’s desire to be pretty in their own right, noting that Walker didn’t sell “straighteners” or “relaxers,” and that she emphatically disallowed the use of those words in her advertisements and sales pitches (Rooks 1996). The question for Dominican women is whether it is possible similarly to engage in beauty practice outside of the patriarchal imperatives of *blanqueamiento*.

Given that contemporary Dominican beauty practices require alteration, consumption, and production of ephemeral capitalist goods and services; expenditure of limited financial and temporal resources; and denigration of blackness, can beauty be empowering? Individual women do empower themselves through beauty. In the context of white supremacist and heteronormative patriarchy, beauty is a form of cultural capital that can be exchanged for symbolic and economic capital (Bourdieu 1984). But can Dominican women as a political group, as a social category, be

empowered by beauty regimes? In a word, the answer is no. For beauty regimes require ugliness to reside somewhere, and that somewhere is in other women, usually women defined as black. Who is black in the Dominican context of New York City is mediated by the historic relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, the current relationship between Dominicans and African Americans, and the continually mutual constitutiveness of beauty and race semiotic systems. Racial identity is enacted through racialized reproduction practices and beauty practices. Beauty is a scale, a continuum of some kind, whether hierarchical or linear. The absence of beauty, culminating in ugliness, carries the threat of derision, expulsion, and even violence.

And yet, while beauty regimes are not empowering, the community that is developed around beauty practices often is. Small revolutions ferment in the beauty shop daily when Dominican women confront oppressive conditions generated by government offices, hospitals, schools, employers, husbands, and lovers, with the support and assistance of their beauty shop community and kin. This is the paradox of Dominican women's beauty culture.

NOTES

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1. Dominican population data are taken from Duany 1994. Information on number of salons is taken from the 1992 Economic Census, and geographic dispersal of salons is derived from the yahoo.maps website.
2. Proper names of businesses and of individuals interviewed have been changed in the interests of confidentiality.
3. All interview excerpts have been translated from Spanish by the author.
4. The term *hispano* (Hispanic) almost universally was used interchangeably with *Latino*. It was the more prevalent term, however, and will be used here when paraphrasing or quoting others. *Latina/o* will be used as the author's descriptive.

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