**Quisqueya Unbound: Gender Roles among Dominican Women in Providence, RI**

by

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**INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**

In her novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Julia Alvarez distills into fiction one of the fundamental differences between Dominican women and men in the United States. Consider this description of Laura, mother of the “girls” of the title:

> Recently, she had begun to spread her wings, taking adult courses in real estate and international economics and business management, dreaming of a bigger-than-family-size life for herself. She still did lip service to the old ways, while herself nibbling away at forbidden fruit. (p. 116)

Her husband Carlos, on the other hand, fears that, “Soon he would be surrounded by a houseful of independent American women” (p. 146), and ponders a return to the Dominican Republic. As immigrants, Laura and Carlos diverge in their experiences of family, work, and community, while sharing a commitment to the patriarchal ideology of their homeland. According to a number of researchers (Grasmuck & Pessar 1991, Pessar 1995, Torres-Saillant & Hernandez 1998), this divergence defines gender role changes among Dominican immigrants to the United States. This paper will address gender role changes among Dominicans in Providence, Rhode Island, and compare findings from preliminary data to those established by earlier studies. The question guiding this project is: How do Dominican women and men in Providence configure their participation in the domestic sphere, labor market, and community; and how does this participation shape their gender statuses and roles?

This paper presents findings on women for three reasons, one pragmatic, one academic, and one analytic. First, all of my initial interviews have been with women, so I lack data specific to Providence’s Dominican men. Second, and more important, I focus on Dominican women because of their relative absence from accounts and analyses of recent Dominican immigrants; those scholarly works which include attention to gender (Grasmuck & Pessar 1991, Pessar 1995, Gilbertson 1995, Safa 1995) do the admirable service of raising very important question and calling for further research on Dominican women. Finally, earlier works and my own pilot data demonstrate that men and women in the Dominican community experience key institutions in gender-specific ways, allowing for discrete analysis.

There are also a number of reasons to study Dominicans in Rhode Island’s capital city. Foremost among these is the fact that there is no literature on Providence’s Dominicans. This lack is notable because, as of 1990, Dominicans contribute the second-largest foreign-born population to Rhode Island as a whole (up from ninth in 1980), and Dominicans comprise nearly five percent of Providence’s population (as compared to 2.5% of the national population) (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990). The next reason to study Dominicans in Rhode Island is the state’s position as the fifth-largest receiving area for Dominican migrants; the city of Providence receives 85% of all Dominican migrants to the state. The final, and most sociologically interesting, reason to study Dominicans in Providence is peculiar to this “renaissance city”: scholars have long described Providence as a

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1 The larger project will not ignore, however, that migrants’ changing gender roles present challenges for men as well as women, and for the second generation as well as the first. In the methodology for the larger project I have made efforts to include the range of gender and generational experiences in both fieldwork and analysis.
middle-class city" (Gilkerson 1986, McLoughlin 1986). Most researchers aver the middle class aspirations of Dominican migrants to the United States, and many note the social and economic obstacles to attaining the social and material markers of middle class status in the Dominicans’ primary enclave of New York City. It is possible that so many Dominicans choose Providence as a primary or secondary destination within the United States because these obstacles are more easily overcome there. A lower cost of living, more favorable labor market, and the middle-class cachet of this small city may well combine to draw initial migrants who establish cadenas which encourage others to resettle here.

This paper will review the literature on Dominican migration to the United States, describe the research study, and present preliminary data from that study.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE
Since, as noted above, very little research has considered Dominican migrants to parts of the United States outside the primary enclave, this review of literature draws heavily upon research findings from New York City. The central institutions receiving scholarly attention are: household and family, labor force, and community (including politics and culture). I will treat each of these briefly below with respect to the processes of gender inherent in each.

Recent scholars draw important distinctions between Dominican men’s and women’s experiences and aspirations in various U.S. institutions, especially in contrast to comparable experiences and aspirations on the island. For example, Torres-Saillant & Hernández couch their discussion in the following terms:

Among the features that distinguish the Dominican experience in this country from the Dominican experience in the homeland is the heightened visibility of women as they share with men the leadership in the collective struggle for survival. The diaspora shows a keen awareness that men do not have a monopoly over the task of forging a destiny for the community (1998: 141-142).

Pessar (1995) notes three themes which indicate the importance of a gendered analysis of the Dominican migration to the United States. These are: regular employment for women, challenges to traditional patriarchal norms and values, and consequently, more egalitarian patterns of authority and responsibility. Pessar builds on Grasmuck and Pessar’s (1991) emphasis on consideration of gender and generation as sources of normative changes in Dominicans’ institutional relationships. None of Pessar’s respondents conceded that men and women could be each other’s equals in their traditional spheres of activity. Thus, as gender roles change, women “help” men earn money, while men “help” women at home. In Pessar’s words,

... Dominican women have chosen immigrant ideology (with its stress on social advancement), traditional family ideology, and the ideal of the sole male provider, before the personal gains that wage work has brought them (1995: 55).

This ideology, which seems to support the prevalence of what Safa (1995) calls the “myth of the male breadwinner”, informs the... larger configuration that finds Dominican female immigrants increasing their control over an array of societal resources, while Dominican men see their control over social and economic resources actually diminish (1995: 59).

The sense that “the Dominican Republic is a country for men; the United States is a country for women,” pervades men’s and women’s constructions of the meaning of immigrant status: many men see their lives in the U.S. as transitory, as a staging ground for a campaign for middle class status in the Dominican Republic; women are more prone to forge more permanent lives in the United States, diverting resources meant for the return “home” to the pursuit of a middle class lifestyle stateside. This may, in turn, affect the transnational behavior of men and women, though Pessar draws no gender distinctions in the factors which facilitate participation in both U.S. and Dominican society (e.g. advances in transportation and communication). Nevertheless, the theme of women’s and men’s divergent experiences and perceptions prevails, and is nowhere more evident than in the domestic sphere.

These analyses markedly challenge traditional gender ideals which prevail, if not in Dominican society, at least in the perceptions of the casual observer. Consider the following examples:

Males in [Dominican] society: The Dominican Republic is indisputably a male-dominated society.... The male ethos rests on a trilogy of concepts: personalismo, the patrón, and machismo. Stressing the uniqueness of the individual, personalismo values dignity and honor above responsibility to a group, and personal integrity over abstract rights and institutions.... ¶ [The] patrón custom ... permeates the entire society. In return for his guidance, the patrón demands unquestioning loyalty. Machismo (maleness) reinforces these traditional values. Males are expected to be daring, forceful, virile, competitive, and to have a sense of humor and fatalism.

Females in [Dominican] society: The Dominican woman looks to the male for her definition, and the feminine ideal is the exact opposite of machismo. Traditional feminine ideals are gentleness, passivity, self-sacrifice, abnegation, and identification with her husband. A dedicated homemaker, her life is devoted to her husband and children. Unlike the male, who is expected to be sexually promiscuous, a woman must be faithful -- regardless of her husband’s behavior. Despite this, Dominican women are generally hardworking and self-reliant. Many must rear their children without male support (Pariser 1998: 59).

These examples are notable for the contrast between the individual male and a generalized female, for the tone of detached, superior (North American) observation, and for the contrast between the stereotype exemplified here and the subjective reality reflected in recent research findings.
Household and family dynamics

One of the critical transmogrifications in migrant women’s experience in the United States is from primarily reproductive roles to more heavily productive ones. This isn’t to say that Dominican women are not economically active in the Dominican Republic, nor that their roles as mothers and wives are necessarily diminished as part of the immigration and acculturation process. Rather, women’s productive and reproductive roles differentiate in meaningful ways during the process of establishing North American lives. Grasmuck & Pessar (1991) interpret Dominican family and household dynamics in terms of gender and generation challenges to traditional patriarchal forms which still dominate in the Dominican Republic. These authors also propose that the neo-classical model of an income-pooling household with a male “benevolent dictator” is inappropriate to Dominican immigrant intentions and outcomes in the United States. This is what Kabeer refers to as the paradox of the neo-classical “dichotomous depiction of household decision making as one of market efficiency in production and altruism in distribution” (1996: 100). In light of this paradox, Dominican families and households better fit an alternative model in which the labor of household members is commodified and gender roles in the household are renegotiated “temporarily to submerge traditional family values” (Grasmuck & Pessar 1991: 151).

How temporary these renegotiations are, and how deeply they submerge patriarchal gender ideology are important questions for my own research.

While changes to the traditional power dynamics of Dominican households are adopted to respond to an urban labor market in which jobs are unstable and wages are low, the social consequences have been to alter gender and generation dynamics such that women, by virtue of their labor force participation, and children, by virtue of their English language and North American cultural fluencies, challenge and sometimes permanently depose their benevolent dictators -- husbands and fathers. This “coup” prompts changes in the economic structure and strategies of Dominican families in the United States; significant changes are reported in the household division of labor as well.

Drawing on Rapp (1978), Grasmuck & Pessar suggest that “analogies may be drawn between middle class American families and Dominican immigrant families aspiring to middle class status” in that, “they have selected a pattern of family relations ‘which is consistent with resource accumulation, rather than dispersal’” (1991: 154). Quoting their field research among Dominican families in Washington Heights, Grasmuck & Pessar offer the following example:

At the Collado’s home, Tomás was preparing dinner. Tomás claimed that he would never be found in the kitchen, let alone cooking, in the Dominican Republic. But, he added, there his wife would not be working outside the house; he would be the breadwinner. Tomás explained that since he made his living in the United States as a chef, it seemed natural that his contribution to running the household should include cooking at home. He joked that if he wore out more pairs of socks running about in the kitchen, it was all right because his wife worked in the garment trade and she could apply her skills at home by darning his socks. ¶ Tomás and his wife said that soon after they were both working they realized that “if both worked outside the home, both should work inside, as well. Now that we are in the United States, we should adopt Americans’ ways” (1991: 152).

This example is reminiscent of conclusions drawn by Hochschild (1989) in which dual earner, non-white families achieved egalitarianism in their household divisions of labor to a greater extent than whites, despite an ideology -- a “family myth” -- of traditionalism in gender roles. The disassociation of family myth from North American realities for many Dominican families may contribute to relatively high rates of marital dissolution and female household headship, when compared to other Latino populations (Pessar 1995). One often-cited reason for marital dissolution is that women’s and men’s goals do not develop in tandem as families establish themselves in the United States; most notably, women’s decision making is geared toward remaining in the United States, while men’s sights often remain trained on the Dominican Republic. It would seem that, just like Laura and Carlos Garcia in the Alvarez novel, women’s and men’s perceptions and experiences of intimate relations and household level decision making differ dramatically.

Nowhere is this difference more apparent than in the reasons women cite for the dissolution of their marriages after arriving in the United States. Eighteen of the 55 women in Pessar’s 1995 study were divorced at the time of the interviews; 14 of those named a struggle over the “market-work/housework bargain” as the main disruptive factor (Pessar citing Hood [1983]: 56).\(^3\) Essentially, divorce among Dominicans in the United States appears to be related to conflict over the household division of labor, challenges to traditional household authority, and, disputes over household finances. The cultural distance divorced Dominican women have

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\(^3\) Pessar enumerates other central difficulties as follows: (1) husbands who emigrated after their wives insisted on a return to a traditional division of household labor when they arrives stateside; (2) husbands insisted on wives paying all household expenses, reserving their income for discretionary purposes; (3) infidelity by either spouse during their migration-induced separation; (4) unemployed husbands’ insistence on retention of traditional male privileges (e.g. a life “en la calle”); and (5) husbands with wives receiving welfare felt their male power usurped by “a more powerful patron, the State” (Pessar 1995: 56-59)
traveled is clear in Pessar’s finding that women were often surprised by family and community support for their decisions to leave their marriages.

So far, this literature review has focused on the changing gender status, role, and ideology governing Dominican women’s reproductive labor. We would be in error to assume that these changes were isolated from women’s productive labor (Toro-Morn 1997), so we turn our attention there next.

Labor force participation
If divergence characterizes Dominican men’s and women’s experience in the domestic sphere, convergence more accurately describes their experience of the United States labor market. Dominicans of both genders participate heavily in the New York City labor market when compared with other Spanish-speaking immigrants. While it is not surprising that they find most of their employment in declining manufacturing and burgeoning service industries (see Pessar 1987), it is noteworthy that they construct their work in New York in particular ways, especially that, “they reproduce the social relations necessary to maintain the small, informal workplaces in which many Dominicans are employed” (Grasmuck & Pessar 1991: 163). Furthermore, we come to understand that, during the migration process, many Dominicans endure reductions in the prestige and stability of their occupations as one price of their pursuit of a middle class lifestyle.

Clearly, the rigors of a post-industrial economy dominate Dominicans’ experiences of the U.S. labor market; two of its more elusive features are informalization and the pervasiveness of ethnic enclaves (Grasmuck & Pessar 1991, Gilbertson 1995; see also Benería and Roldán1987). According to Grasmuck and Pessar, informalization “has entailed a movement away from firms that were relatively high-paying, vertically integrated, and union-organized to businesses that have a small workforce, are informally organized, specialize in the most risky and most labor intensive phases of production, and are difficult to organize” (1991: 176). Further, Grasmuck and Pessar describe five key features of the New York labor market with respect to their Dominican respondents of both genders:
1. There is a strong association between small firm size and informal business operation, which includes the cost-cutting (and potentially exploitative) measure of paying employees off the books.
2. The majority (67.3%) of Dominicans work alongside other Dominicans or other Hispanics, with nearly 85% working with other minority or immigrant groups.
3. A sizable proportion (22.5% of the undocumented, 13.1% of the documented) of Dominicans work for other Dominicans or other Hispanics (30.4% of the undocumented), indicating a high degree of ethnic sponsorship and ethnic homogeneity in firms (this is also evidence of Pessar’s *cadenas*).
4. About one third of Dominicans in the sample work in firms that service or supply the Latino community.
5. In those few instances where opportunities for participation in workplace struggles presented themselves, over two thirds of Dominicans participated.

Taken together, these characteristics of the labor market in New York indicate a propensity to work in ethnic enclaves; the vulnerability of Dominican labor force participants ensures their loyalty and continued service (1991: 178-183).

While Dominican women participate in the wage labor force similarly to their male counterparts, and are similarly devalued and victimized as workers, there are some differences worth noting and investigating further.

First, women’s labor is in demand (Mitter & Rowbotham 1994), though women uniformly earn less than men; the “ordinal stratification of wages moves from undocumented females, to documented females, to undocumented males, to documented males” (Grasmuck & Pessar 1991: 189). Second, and regardless of this persistent wage gap, Grasmuck and Pessar’s ethnographic work revealed that women report being better satisfied with their jobs than Dominican men: “Women showed a greater tendency than men to associate their work with the migration goal of economic and social mobility for the entire household” (1991:189). The following quote, from one of Grasmuck and Pessar’s respondents, a Dominican female head of household, is revealing of this pattern, and supportive of Kabeer’s (1996) argument for an alternative economic model of work and family:

Sure, my job as a sewing machine operator is not in itself a big thing, but I’m more than satisfied, because with this job I’ve been able to send my son to college, and my son’s successes in college are mine, too. One day, when he becomes a lawyer, I too will feel like an important person in this country (1991:189).

Because Grasmuck and Pessar’s ethnographic research was relatively limited in scope, they call for “more in-depth and systematic research”, but offer these findings regarding the gendered nature of the New York labor market for Dominicans:
1. Dominican women face a “far more restricted job market” than Dominican men.
2. Dominican women’s wages tend to be lower then Dominican men’s.
3. Women appreciate the “household gains employment brings them as wives and daughters.”
4. Hard-won egalitarian roles in the domestic sphere are threatened by marital instability.
5. Women are reluctant to jeopardize their jobs (or the egalitarian household roles that accompany them) by participating in workplace struggles (Grasmuck & Pessar 1991: 190-193).
The work of Safa (1995) and Bobea (1999) bring a new perspective to these questions. These authors wonder about the relationship of increased labor force participation and women's (and men's) status. In Safa's words:

Does wage labor merely exploit women as a source of cheap labor and add to the burden of their domestic chores? Or does wage labor give women greater autonomy and raise their consciousness regarding gender subordination? Curiously, similar questions are seldom raised in reference to men's involvement in wage labor. It is always assumed men will be employed, while for women, employment is still considered an option (1995: 37).

This challenge to the "myth of the male breadwinner" relies upon analysis of men's and women's relative positions within the international division of labor. In the postindustrial present, men have lost status as "their" jobs no longer provide a family wage or disappear altogether. Women, though by no means privileged in the new order, enjoy greater demand for their labor; the result is the ambivalence referred to in the quote above.

As we look critically at women's increased involvement in a postindustrial labor market, it becomes important to turn the same critical eye on the increased satisfaction Dominican women report with their employment experience, which stands in contrast to their higher levels of dissatisfaction in the domestic sphere after immigrating. Citing a "transitional symbolic system of stratification based on commodity consumption" which has emerged to help Dominican immigrants assure themselves of social mobility and middle class identity, Grasmuck and Pessar find that "job satisfaction and loyalty are enhanced by the belief of many Dominicans that employment in the United States has solidified their middle class standing" (1991: 195-196). They elaborate:

The fact that the majority of our informants identify themselves as middle class and drew on Dominican-based referents in arriving at this self-attrition is emblematic of the fact that Dominicans do indeed remain between two islands (1991: 197).

This self-attrition may prove elusive to the Second generation of Dominican workers in the United States. Pessar (1987) anticipates that the children of Dominican migrants may find themselves living less "between two islands" than their parents -- they may, in fact, fall through cracks in the new international division of labor, unable by virtue of their North American education to be satisfied (or satisfactory, for that matter) in either the United States or the Dominican Republic. Consider the following:

... unlike their parents, who were gratified by jobs that led to improved living standards in the United States, the second generation, who evaluate their consumer power and lifestyle by American, rather than Dominican standards, are bound to be dissatisfied with the low-status jobs many will be forced to accept (p. 125).

It remains to be seen how the statuses of generation and gender play out in the work decisions and relationships of Dominicans in Providence. The transitional mentality noted above is prominent as well at the level of community. In the next section I consider Dominicans' participation in three dimensions of community activity: transnational behavior, political participation, and cultural expression.

Community activity
The preceding section places labor force participation among Dominicans within a context of postindustrialism. When considering community activity, including political participation and cultural expression, we must consider another context: transnationalism.

Transnationalism. Pessar (1995) describes her respondents as creatively and effectively forging transnational identities, social relations, economic opportunities, political participation, and popular culture. As transnational actors, they are contributing to the new globalizing trends that mark our contemporary world. They are, nonetheless, trend setters, who must confront skepticism, if not hostility, from those who insist that immigrants must settle permanently and assimilate totally in the United States, and that returnees must cheerfully accept the status quo of the society they have temporarily abandoned (89 - 90).

In a challenge to prevailing myths about hemispheric migration trends, Pessar (1988) suggests that the emigration of rural peasants may predispose their home communities to economic decline, and that remittance societies like many in the Caribbean (including, to a certain extent, the Dominican Republic) develop a false sense of economic security. Finally, she contends that:

If research findings continue to point to migration as an enduring feature of our interdependent economies in the hemisphere, certain policy makers and researchers will have to abandon the popular assumption which holds that migration is a temporary "anomaly" adjusted when development spurts subside or recession strikes (3-4).

It appears that the deterritorialization that marked 1980s migration in the Western Hemisphere has itself become an enduring feature of its political economy.

Anderson's definition of 'nation' as "an imagined political community ... both inherently limited and sovereign" (6) gave us 'nationalism' based upon the concept of 'imagined community'. If communities of all sizes are socially constructed, it follows, in Anderson's formulation that that imagination is particular to each given community. The narratives and texts that emerge from particular "imaginings" identify the individual as
well as his or her community. As Guarnizo (1994) posits, transnationalism can come from above or from below, from the level of social structure, or from the level of symbolic interaction.

A persistent question is, “how do people do transnationalism?” Here we may turn for some answers to Itzigsohn, who tells us that Dominicans’ transnational community can be thought of as a field of social interactions and exchanges that transcend political and geographical boundaries of one nation to become the relevant field of action and reference for a large number of Dominicans in their country of origin and in the broad diaspora that it has generated (1999:317).

Itzigsohn goes on to distinguish narrow from broad transnationalism. Narrow transnationalism includes recurrent involvement in “economic, political, social, or cultural practices that imply a continuous presence in two places simultaneously" (1999:5). Examples include running branches of a business in each place, or maintaining membership in Dominican political parties from the U.S. On the other hand, broad transnationalism “refers to a series of practices in which people engage, material and symbolic, that does not involve constant moving between the two countries, but nevertheless includes both countries as reference” (5). Examples of this kind of transnationalism include participating in Dominican festivals in the U.S. or attending a political meeting on Dominican affairs held in the U.S.

Basch, Glick Schiller, & Szanton Blanc (1994) apply the notion of transnationalism to the social, economic, political, and cultural phenomenon of international migration. Like Anderson, these authors envision transnationalism as a dialectical process. One distinction is that Basch and her colleagues see transnational phenomena embedded in the hegemonic processes of global capitalism whereby “oppositional ideologies are never constructed on virgin soil. The dominated struggle within a medium of formulations shaped by the dominators” (13-14). They offer the term ‘transmigrant’ to describe those individuals who operate within a framework “that situate[s] transnational processes within global history, make[s] central the agency of transmigrants, and contextualize[s] ongoing contention over the loyalty and identity of immigrants” (22). The authors contend that the agency of transmigrants extends even to their participation in the processes of hegemonic construction. Basch, Glick Schiller, & Szanton Blanc present Caribbean instances of transnationalism as prototypical:

Caribbean migrants ... were described as belonging to “remittance societies” in which generation of migrants spent long periods away from home, supporting their families and often family landholdings or small enterprises with the money they sent home. The Caribbean experience was seen as a special case rather than as a growing global pattern that challenged our conceptualizations of migration and “the immigrant” (1994:31).

Essential to political-economic or cultural formulations of transnationalism are ideas of race/ethnicity and gender. Basch, Glick Schiller, & Szanton Blanc contend that, “To talk about nation ... is to talk about race” and that “race, ethnicity, and nation are hegemonic constructions and are all part of the historical exercise of state power and domination (1994:37, 35). Other authors (notably Torres-Saillant & Hernández 1998 and Duany 1996) consider specifically Dominican experiences of negotiating “[t]wo different models of racial hegemony”: the Caribbean color gradient model and the United States “hypo-descent” model (Duany 1996: 253-254). Race is an aspect of nation-building; gender may not be. For Basch, Glick Schiller, & Szanton Blanc, gender is “a location from which to construct identities that allow us to think beyond the nation building processes of particular nation-states” (1994:40). The possibility of gendered transnationalism is important for this project’s consideration of Dominican men’s and women’s gender roles. We must anticipate that changing gender roles develop and operate in a transnational context.

The ideas of transnationalism described here inform my readings of the literature on Latino and Latina political participation, which has distinctively gendered aspects. And transnationalism is essential to understanding Dominican cultural expression, as we will see below.

**Political participation.** Responding to media interest in his ill-fated campaign against Jim Langevin for the office of Secretary of State, University of Rhode Island senior Ed Lopez told the *Providence Journal*, “I want them [Rhode Island voters] to see a Latino face and a Latino name and see that we are part of the American system. We are making our voice heard. We are here to change the system. People cannot ignore us anymore” (Pina 1998:B4). Lopez is not alone: during the 1998 midterm elections, 25 Hispanics ran for seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, one for a Senate seat, and 43 for state offices around the country. Furthermore, the Hispanic vote was expected to be a “swing vote” or otherwise critical to a number of contests (Hearst Newspapers 1998; Powell 1998). This expectation currently has George W. Bush courting voters in Spanish. The attention paid Latinos in the most recent election season, both as candidates and as voters, is evidence of their inexorable penetration into U.S. political life.

Dominican Americans have been slow to enter the fray, though there are a few outstanding exceptions. One is the successful campaign of Guillermo Linares for New York City Council, which got a boost from Linares’s mother, who wrote a letter from the Dominican Republic asking New Yorkers to vote for her son (Pessar 1995). Another example of Dominican political activity in New York concerns the Dominican-led drive to gain control of
school district number six in Washington Heights, whose high school now has a Dominican principal. Successes such as these are encouraging, but anomalous, according to Torres-Saillant and Hernández: “Dominicans have not, on the whole, made any major political strides since their population began to grow rapidly in the mid-1960s.... [T]he community suffers from a political invisibility that is hardly justifiable in light of the great size of the Dominican population” (1998: 96).

The transnationality of the political sphere has received considerable attention, and is consistently fueled by developments such as that permitting “los Dominican-Yorks” to submit absentee ballots for elections in the Dominican Republic. A recent dissertation by Pamela Graham of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill concerns Dominican immigrants and transnational politics (CITATION). Itzigsohn et al (1999) notes that the major political parties of the Dominican Republic have had or do have offices in Providence. The challenge now is to understand the contours of Dominican political life in terms of its transnationality as well as its gender distinctions. With changes in welfare law in 1996, continuing cultural offenses against Latinos (exemplified by the English Only movement), and a second generation possessed of the “political aptitude required for successful lobbying before public institutions”, Dominicans seem poised to enter a new era of greater political mobilization (Torres-Saillant & Hernández 1998: 152). That mobilization will come only where serious barriers to Dominican political participation are overcome. One such barrier is the low rate of naturalization. Another impediment to political participation by Dominicans in the United States is “Tammany Hall”-style politics which characterizes political participation. In her illuminating account of the parallel modes of political participation and practice by Latino men and Latina women in Boston, Hardy-Fanta (1993) proposes that the pros and cons of customary machine politics have the paradoxical result of encouraging and impeding political participation. In the Dominican Republic, political machines get out the vote, and assure loyalty by granting jobs and other benefits of patronage. They are also rife with fraud, corruption, manipulation of the media, and interference in the delivery of utilities. Hardy-Fanta demonstrates that “[t]he influence of party politics and political machines in ... the Dominican Republic raises anew the question whether hierarchical or collective organizations stimulate political participation” (1993:184). Her question is important when one considers the high degree of transnationalism that characterizes political behavior by Dominican migrants to the United States. Her answers illuminate the gendered nature of Latino/Latina political participation in Northeastern cities. She claims that hierarchical organization denotes masculine responses to political problems, while collective or participatory modes represent a more feminine experience. Several dichotomies describe the landscape of political participation among Latinas and Latinos in Boston; the picture that emerges is one of his and hers political cultures.4

If it is true that Dominican Americans are on the threshold of increased (and increasingly effective) political activity, it will be important to determine the nature and scope of that activity. It is clear that special attention must be paid to gendered aspects of political culture, as well as to the decidedly transnational characteristics of Dominican political participation. This research will seek Dominican definitions and descriptions of political activity in Providence.

Cultural expression. Recent accounts of Dominican Americans include formidable listings of Dominican contributions and achievements in literature, the visual and performing arts, popular music, sports, and cuisine (Dwyer 1991; Pessar 1995; Torres-Saillant & Hernández 1998). Interesting as this evidence of Dominican and American interpenetrations is, of greater interest for this project are considerations of Dominican cultural space and identity within the North American cultural landscape. Torres-Saillant & Hernández (1998) offer a singular assessment of Dominican American cultural expression which combines notions of transnationality with ideas of gender, race, and class. Their ideas are worth quoting at length:

One of the most obvious results of the immigrant experience for Dominicans is that the space of their physical and existential mobility increases tremendously. Their living space after migration encompasses both the native country and the North American mainland. They now can access a larger mental habitat within which to configure their human identity. Their ampler sphere of experience entails an ability to harmonize English with Spanish, snowstorms with tropical rains, and merengue with rock or rap, to cite only a few divergent images. But it also entails the possibility of creating alternative models by rearranging existing ones (p. 146, emphasis added).

These authors present a number of individual profiles which “reflect cultural contours that frame the life of the community”, including a description of “Agustín Trejo, a worker in a fish market in Providence, Rhode Island, [who] came to this country illegally without knowing a word of English and after two years was engaged to marry

4 The dichotomies, which together make up what Hardy-Fanta calls the “4-C” model of political participation, are: (1) connectedness versus positions and status; (2) collectivity versus hierarchy; (3) community versus formal structures; and (4) consciousness of the link between personal self-development and political activism versus a limited vision of public action.
a woman who had been born inthis country” (1998: 146)\(^5\) At the risk of belaboring the current point, it is useful to let Torres-Saillant’s and Hernández’s conclusion speak for itself:

Dominicans in the United States retain their simultaneous access to two geographies, nations, languages, and politics as parallel modes in reference to which to articulate their concepts of self and society. Their cultural forms have become hybrid, shaped by what is retained from the homeland and what is acquired in the host country. ... Dominicans in the United States have developed cultural forms that without a doubt subvert the norms brought from the native land while simultaneously modifying the culture of the host country (p. 147).

Finally, an appropriate coda is provided by Duany (1994), writing on Dominican migrants to Washington Heights: Transnational migration transforms social relations and generates a new identity that transcends traditional notions of physical and cultural space. Among other changes, the diaspora calls into question the immigrant’s conception of ethnic, racial, and national identities as defined in their home countries (p. 46).

Obviously, the present paper trains its lens on the processes of gender in several aspects of the lived experience of Providence Dominican. The dichotomies, which together make up what Hardy-Fanta calls the “4-C” model of political participation, are: (1) connectedness versus positions and status; (2) collectivity versus hiearchy; (3) community versus formal structures; and (4) consciousness of the link between personal self-development and political activism versus a limited vision of public action. It would be imprudent to ignore the intersecting categories of race and class as mitigating influences on women’s participation in political, economic, and other social processes. Dominican conceptions of race are inextricable from those of class, with African descent and low social class positively related. It is interesting to note that “the continuing racial segregation of North American society may actually present an opportunity for Dominicans to come to terms with their real ethnicity”, perhaps even to “find it expedient to assert their blackness”, and to ally with other people of color (Torres-Saillant & Hernández 1998: 143-144). Furthermore, both prevalent social classes in the Dominican Republic suffer “narcissistic injuries” upon migration to urban North America, the urban middle class occupationally degraded, the rural poor bureaucratically and institutionally overwhelmed (Reubens 1980).\(^6\) As a final note, it is important to consider the possibility that the second generation may internalize North American patterns of race, given their likely ghettoization in the labor force (Pessar 1987).

This brief review has addressed what I consider to be the central areas of inquiry regarding gender roles among Dominican migrants to the United States. I have attempted to place accounts of Dominicans’ immigrant experiences within a context that includes impact of postindustrialism as it affects migration and labor markets, and transnationalism as it affects immigrant behavior and identity. In the study from which this paper is drawn, I investigate three conceptual locations of gender role change: household and family dynamics, labor force participation, and community activity. Finally, I have taken my cue from more established researchers, who examine these dimensions with a sensitivity to generation as well as gender, as I hope is reflected in the following description of the project’s research methods.

RESEARCH METHODS
This project follows analytic models provided by Aymer (1997), Benería & Roldán (1987), and Safa (1995). These authors carefully place ethnographic and narrative data within sociohistorical contexts of post-industrial development. The larger, ongoing work from which this paper is drawn examines Providence as a post-industrial city, and its Dominican inhabitants as actors upon a transnational stage. This paper draws most heavily upon the ethnographic, not the sociohistorical, aspects of the project; therefore, the ethnographic data collection and analysis are described in this section.

Shulamit Reinharz has written: “When feminist oral histories cover extensive portions or profound experiences in an individual’s life, they assist in a fundamental sociological task -- illuminating the connections between biography, history, and social structure” (1992:131). The strategies of feminist oral history and participant observation inform the collection of data for this project. I aim to interview a total of fifty men and women, from first and later generations of Dominican migrants to Providence. Through personal and institutional contacts, I have begun a snowball sample like those of Stack (1974), Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc (1994), and others. While this method of respondent recruitment has limitations, it has, according to Basch, at least one distinct advantage: it enables study of immigrants’ social and political networks (1994: 55). The sample capitalizes on this advantage by recruiting as many members of individual respondents’ households as possible and engaging them in in-depth, ethnographic interviews. According to Marshall & Rossman:

The value of the ethnographic interview lies in its focus on culture through the participant's perspective and through a firsthand encounter. This approach is especially useful for eliciting participant's [sic] meanings

\(^5\) Torres-Saillant and Hernández take this example from Bandon, Alexandra. 1995. Dominican Americans; Footsteps to America Series. Parsippany (NJ): New Discovery Books.

\(^6\) This review of the literature ignores some important areas, notably health issues and education, on which very little has been written concerning Dominicans immigrants (or Latinos in general, for that matter).
In pilot interviews conducted thus far, this method has yielded rich and very interesting data, which plumbs the depths of gender and generation as key dimensions of Dominican life in Providence.

In addition to the snowball sample and its resultant ethnographic interviews, participant observation is, “a fundamental and critical method in all qualitative inquiry: It is used to discover complex interactions in natural social settings” (Marshall & Rossman 1995: 80). To this end, I have initiated participant observation in centers of the Dominican community in Providence (e.g. Quisqueya en Acción, Direct Action for Rights and Equality), and in the homes and workplaces of my respondents. The respondents whose interviews provide the data analyzed here are all women. They come from both first and second generations of Dominican migrants to Providence. They represent a rather narrow band in the spectrum targeted by the larger research project: they are all well-educated, work in white-collar jobs, and are young (in their twenties and thirties). For these reasons, the analysis that follows must be presented with serious qualifications about its generalizability.

**ANALYSIS**

 Authorities on Dominicans in the United States place gender and generation at the centers of their analyses. My preliminary data demonstrate the importance of these two dimensions and agree with established scholarship on a number of points. These include (but are not limited to) the following:

1. Women report high levels of satisfaction with their labor force experiences
2. Women make investments of material and human capital aimed at permanent stays in the United States

At the same time, my research so far points to some ways in which Providence Dominicans may differ from their Big Apple counterparts. These include (but are not limited to) the following:

1. Success (as opposed to frustration) by members of the second generation (and some of the first) in white collar work
2. Women’s realization of their stated ideal of financial independence from fathers and husbands
3. Low levels of transnational activity and identity

I will address each of these preliminary findings briefly in this section, then conclude with a summary of this paper and suggestions for continuing this research.

In the review of literature, findings confirm that Dominican women working in New York report an unexpected satisfaction with their work, even where that work represents a decline in status or prestige. My findings to date concur on the point of high levels of satisfaction. However, none of the respondents I have interviewed had work experience in the Dominican Republic to which to compare their New York and Providence experiences. That said, we may consider what some reported. Consider this statement from a woman who arrived in New York from the Dominican Republic five years ago on a Friday. She was at work in a Queens clothing factory the following Monday. She says:

> This is pretty incredible. I ... had to do the deliveries from Queens to Manhattan and I was just arrived. I was kind of scared about it. The owners of the company, they would drive me to the train station and they would give me instructions, like when I get to this stop in Manhattan I should get out, this is the street, this is the building. It was scary at the beginning. But it was challenging, too. I really enjoyed that.

Later in the interview, this respondent speaks about her work experiences in Providence and New York, and introduces race and class elements that are very revealing:

> When I first came to New York, I was really concerned about racism, because that’s what you hear in the news. You only hear the bad things, so I was really concerned and I was so scared of being around white people. I thought, “Oh, they’re going to be racist against me,” or something like that. But then that place where I went to work in New York, I was really shocked when I saw how nice people were. Like, people on the floor were mostly Hispanic, but the owners of the company were White Americans and they would take me in their car to the train station when I was going on deliveries and they would pick me up. These people, they were not treating me any different. They would do it because, well, they had money and I didn’t. So, I think I had a good experience at the beginning that erased the fear that I had. When I came to Providence I was working in the factory and it was kind of the same thing. In the factory you could see more white people working on the floor, more than in New York.

After two months in New York, this respondent moved with her family to Providence, where she worked in a jewelry factory for a short time. One of the things she likes best about Providence, she says, is the greater flexibility of the job market. She has been able to find a job as a bank teller while she pursues a college degree. It was hard to make the decision to leave full-time work to go to school. In her words, “Instead of working and helping my mother, she would have to help me. So it was kind of hard to make that decision.” This respondent seems aware that it was her mother who would bear the brunt of -- and potentially benefit from -- her daughter’s decision. Her discussion of this topic is revealing of certain gender differences:
Both of my parents encouraged me to go to college. They just want me to graduate from college. Sometimes I think my father wants it so much, he really wants it so much, I think partly because of his ego [laughs]. I think there’s a lot of that involved. And my mother went to college in the Dominican Republic, she graduated from college, so she knows from her experience that it’s better.

Other respondents speak to the point, evident in the literature, that the gender ideologies of the men in their lives, their husbands and fathers, brothers and boyfriends, seem to crumble somewhat in the face of new realities. Consider these excerpts from an interview with a young woman who lives in a Providence apartment with her parents, sister, and female cousin:

Right now, my house, here in Providence, is called the Embassy [laughs], because it’s where everybody gets together. So my mother’s house is called the Embassy and everybody else’s houses, my aunt’s, are just Consulates. Always, there are people there, all the time.

I think my mother does most of the everyday things in the house. She does the cooking, she cooks almost every day. It’s rare when we don’t cook in my house, so there’s Dominion food every day, so she goes through all that. Between my sister, my cousin, and I, we share the dishwashing.

My mother’s in charge of the bills, and she hates it. She goes like, “Oh, I want somebody to take over. I cannot deal with these bills!” But the thing is, I was thinking, “I’m not married, I don’t have to deal with that.” When it comes the time to do it, I’ll do it. My father, typical Dominican, he just gives her the money and my mother goes ahead and takes care of everything. She also works full time [in a factory].

About cooking and things like that, my father doesn’t do [anything]. No, no, no, no, no, I don’t like that. It makes me really upset, like, why can women do it but men not? It’s not fair. Typical macho thing. I think when we were in the Dominican Republic it was even worse. Here it’s kind of better. I think even though my father doesn’t do [household] things, he’s more conscious about it. I think he has changed a lot in his thinking. It’s more open, it’s not too much that macho thing. I think he has changes a lot. He even washes dishes once in a while when he feels like it, things that he would never have done before. It’s still bad, but it’s better.

If there is a decision to be made [my father] will get upset if he doesn’t know about a decision that’s been made. When my mother decided to do the petition papers for my brother [to migrate from Santo Domingo], my mother decided on her own and was doing the papers and he got upset because she didn’t inform him. I mean, she has the right to think, also! So, things like that, he wants to be in charge of everything.

On the surface, this narrative is about the household division of labor, and is revealing of “second shift” issues like those illuminated by Hochschild (1989). On another level, though, this respondent addresses issues of generation (she and her sister and cousin contribute only minimally to household tasks), marital status (she is reluctant to participate in household money management until she “has to” by virtue of being someone’s wife), gender (she is indignant about her father’s “macho” uninvolved in household matters), and gender role changes (the mother and father conflict over immigration decision making for other family members). On these four fronts, this narrative, along with others I have elicited from respondents, support earlier findings about gender and generational divisions of labor and ideologies.

As I stated at the beginning of this section, my data do not uniformly agree with those of other researchers. First of all, my respondents all work in white collar jobs (examples include bank teller, paralegal, community organizer, and Americorps operations director). Whether these high-status jobs reflect a bias in my sample, or a function of the greater middle class opportunities to be had in Providence, remains to be seen as more data becomes available. Second, the women I have interviewed so far describe themselves as financially independent from their husbands and fathers. Their independence goes so far as to include, in a few cases, single women living on their own, a rather unusual arrangement for Dominicans according to both the literature and anecdotal evidence from my participant observation. Third, the women in this study so far report very little in the way of transnational activity. They do speak somewhat in transnational terms when discussing their own identities, though their discussions also reflect a panethnic identity such as described by Torres-Saillant & Hernández (1998). It is to the findings on transnational behavior and identity we turn next.

Two thirds of my respondents have returned on at least one occasion to the Dominican Republic since their migrations to the United States, and all of these report some sense of alienation. One, who visited the Dominican Republic on her honeymoon, said,

We went more as tourists, you know? I didn’t call anybody in the family before we went, and I didn’t see anybody while we were there. That caused some problems after we came back to Providence and people realized we’d been there. I felt kind of bad about that, because my mother [who lives in Providence] was afraid that family members in the Dominican Republic would feel like we were snubbing them.

Another respondent worries about her role during an upcoming trip to the Dominican Republic:

Last time when I went I was so concerned about bringing people this and that. Right now I’m trying not to think about it, if you think about it, it gets too expensive and you cannot please everybody. It’s hard. I’m [only] going to be bringing things for my brother and my nieces and his girlfriend.

And finally, one respondent discusses her father’s plans to buy real estate in the Dominican Republic:

My father has been trying to buy a place in her parents’ rural hometown, because they like [the hometown] better than the house in the city. There was a time when, the house in the city, they wanted to sell it, so
Despite Pessar’s cogent and empirically grounded distinctions between Dominican men’s and women’s immigrant lives, her gendered analysis does not extend to Dominican men’s and women’s transmigrant lives; the five factors she cites as facilitating participation in both Dominican and U.S. society apply equally to men and women. Torres-Saillant (1989) criticizes transnationalism as a mentality of transience which gets in the way of Dominican social advancement. If Torres-Saillant is correct, it becomes reasonable to ask questions about differences between men and women as transmigrants. For the purposes of this paper, it is perhaps enough to speculate a bit. First of all, if we accept the notion that women tend to invest more materially and socially in forging middle-class lives stateside, it may be reasonable to expect that their transnational behavior be broader than men’s, in the sense laid out by Itzigsohn et al (1999). Second, women’s self-descriptions reflect North American, rather than Dominican, norms of gender and identity; however, certain factors, namely race and language, interfere with their full attainment of these ideals. So, they appear to speak less of transnational Dominican American selves, and more of panethnic ones. Consider the following:

Before, I used to think of myself as Hispanic, Hispanic. But then I started to notice that within the Hispanic communities, you get some kinds of racisms. So now I talk of myself as, “OK, I’m Hispanic, but I have to define myself as African Caribbean,” because that’s how I look. I’m different from the Hispanic people who have straight hair, light eyes, light skin, things like that, so I like saying that better. It’s more specific.

This respondent developed a strategy of dealing with perceived racism in the Providence Hispanic community that included a sense of “otherness”; specifically, other than both mainstream White culture and other than North American Latino culture. However, nowhere is there a lingering sense of herself as specifically Dominican. It is impossible to say whether this finding will be general to women in the larger study of Dominicans in Providence. Participant observation data collected up to this point indicates that men retain a sense of “Dominican-ness” that their sisters, wives, and daughters either lack or abandon.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper has addressed questions of how Dominican women in Providence configure their domestic, work, and community lives, and how their gender statuses and roles may change as a result of these configurations. We have seen that women’s productive and reproductive roles undergo dramatic shifts as they enter the labor force in increasing numbers. These shifts reshape Dominicans’ domestic dynamics as women use their newfound economic power to enact changes in household power and decision making. Ultimately, women and men arrive at divergent goals for their American lives, with men envisioning a triumphant return to the Dominican Republic and women engineering permanent, upwardly mobile lives in the North. It is interesting that men and women use their labor force participation to realize their specific aims. We have also seen that Dominican men and Dominican women are subject to the vagaries of a postindustrial labor market which features informality, ethnic enclaves, and poorly-paid, insecure jobs, though women face more constraints in this labor market than men.

Transnationalism characterize much Dominican community activity in the United States. This phenomenon affects both behaviors and identities, and can be narrow or broad in scope. While little research addresses gender differences within the context of transnationalism, we do know that transnationalism is much in evidence in the political realm, and that a stark gender contrast obtains there, with women engaging in collective cooperative political activities and men in more hierarchical, formally structured ones.

Preliminary data from this study suggest that Providence Dominicans configure their family, work, and community lives in ways similar to their New York counterparts, especially in terms of labor market satisfaction and household division of labor issues. However, the women interviewed so far for this study demonstrate little interest or involvement in the transnational practices that maintain and extend Dominican identity in the United States. Rather, these women seem intent on developing identities and engaging in activities which contribute to their North American sense of self, even if that sense of self must defined outside the mainstream of White, middle-class culture.

Naturally, this research will benefit tremendously from the inclusion of male voices, and from the incorporation of the experiences of first- and second-generation migrants of various ages. The household-level structure of the projects methodology will amplify these voices as the study progresses. Specifically, the life history analysis of the narratives of older Dominicans in Providence should lend breadth to the findings on gender.

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7 Pessar notes five factors in the increasing importance of transnational behavior. First, advances in transportation and communications technologies enable less binding national boundaries, cultures, and identities than were possible for earlier generations of immigrants. Second, there is a new tolerance of ethnic pluralism and multiculturalism for post-1965 immigrants. Third, immigrants hedge their bets by participating as fully as possible in both Dominican and North American economic life. Fourth, “labor-exporting nations increasingly acknowledge the fact that members of their diaspora communities are important resources which should not be lost to the national polity and society” (Pessar 1995: 70). Fifth and finally, as people of color in the United States, Dominican’s educational and economic achievements may be undervalued by white society, so migrant retain ties to island society where their sacrifices and accomplishments may be better recognized.
role changes. Finally, and emergent theme of this research is the gender-specific nature of transnational behavior and identity. Revisions to the interview guide and other data collection instruments will hone the project’s sensitivity to this important issue.

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