

Identifying with América

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“Mis padres son de la República Dominicana,” I say in my crisp Spanish to another Latina after she asks me where I am from. It is 2005 and I still have to answer this question as a thirty-two-year-old graduate student. She is reluctant to respond as our classmates settle into their seats and the teacher begins the lecture on media and performance. Her eyes survey my face, my body, making me feel like I don’t belong. I was born in the United States, yet she looks at me as if I can’t possibly define myself as Latina like her. “Dominican Republic?” she asks. Can she hear the waves crashing on the *malecón*, the breezes rustling the palm trees? I wonder. If she could only imagine how soothing a *frío-frío* is in the humid heat.

Explaining where I’m from is something I always have to do. Even when I lived in Union City, New Jersey—the Latino Little Italy—as a child, many Latinos mistook me for African American. I wish I’d been born in the Dominican Republic. Maybe the explanation would be easier; maybe I would feel better whenever my origins are questioned because of my chestnut skin and my crown of black ringlets. To say that I lived in my parents’ home country

between the ages of three and six is a more detailed explanation. Perhaps it would be easier on my soul to know exactly what my homeland is so I could ease the discomfort of not being recognized for who I am: the smooth rolling of the *rr* from my tongue, the rhythm of a *perico ripiao* echoing between my ears, the hue of mahogany trees radiating from my skin, and the salt of *el mar caribe* lingering in my tears.

Once again my instinct tells me that naming my parents' homeland does not answer the question of where I am from, nor does it satisfy the requirement. The Dominican Republic is located in between Cuba and Puerto Rico, two better-known countries. Usually at this point in my explanation, I say that my parents' home country shares the island with Haiti. This fact would make my mother's sister-in-law, Tía Margarita, cringe. Like many Dominicans, Tía denies any ties with Haitians. According to Tía, Haitians are black and Dominicans are not. She likes to trace the family lineage back to *la madre patria*; she taught me to consider Spain as the mother homeland.


Tía Margarita never speaks of our African ancestry. No one does. Since colonial times, Dominicans have viewed darker skin as a sign of inferiority. Those who are dark are considered low class, poor, and unattractive. Like Tía, most people I know in Santo Domingo trace their roots to Europe to prove that they are white.

Whenever I go back to the Dominican Republic and stay with Tía Margarita, her mission as a host is to educate me on the Dominican Republic's history. My lessons began at the age of eight when I visited for summer vacation. She took me to the Alcázar de Colón to see how Columbus lived in 1492. We walked through the narrow cobblestone streets leading us to the plaza where the castle stood. Its facade was lined with archways twice as tall as the wooden shacks located on the other side of the Río Ozama. As we walked through la Zona Colonial, I acquired Tía's affinity for this section of Santo Domingo. I wondered if buildings in Spain really looked like this.

I bought miniature white houses with red-tile roofs and wrought-iron bars on the windows as souvenirs of my favorite place on the island to take back to New Jersey.

When I returned to Santo Domingo six years later for Easter and to plan my *quinceañera* party, Tía took me to the port to see *el buque español*. I heard about my cousin Carolinita's engagement to a Spanish sailor whom she met on a similar ship. Tía hoped I would have the same fortune of strengthening our Spanish bloodline through marriage, "*Hay que mejorar la raza.*"

On my visit during Christmas break at the age of twenty, I was taken to El Faro a Colón, the new monument built for the Bicentenario—the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus's arrival in Santo Domingo. The government couldn't resolve the country's energy shortage, yet still constructed a lighthouse as a memorial. Its beams formed the shape of a cross in the night sky as countless neighborhoods remained without electricity for several hours each day. Tía's elite social circle believed that thousands of Spaniards would come to the island to celebrate this occasion. They prepared for the festivities as any country would if they were hosting the Olympic Games. But the crowds never arrived. Looking at the cross in the sky, I thought of how irrational their expectations were. Santo Domingo was a forgotten ex-colony. All of the Spanish history that Tía taught me to value was no longer important to the people of Spain.

 I was twenty-one when I heard a broader history of the Dominican Republic from Papi in 1994. Two days before I left to do a junior semester abroad in Spain, I stayed with Papi in New Jersey, since he had offered to take me to the airport. I rested on his couch without much energy to move. Exhaustion from final exams and working during winter break penetrated my body. The fatigue was sweet though; I was going to Europe. Soon I would attend flamenco shows, drink sangria in *mesónes*, and see Picasso's *Guernica*.