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Chewing English and Spitting Spanish: Josefina Báez Homing Dominican New York

EMILIA MARÍA DURÁN-ALMARZA

ABSTRACT

For more than ten years, Josefina Báez, born in the Dominican province of La Romana in 1960, has been exploring on stage the complexity of Dominican experiences in the United States. In *Dominicanish*, first performed in 1999 and published as a performance text in 2000, Báez's persona embodies the struggles of migrant communities seeking to come to terms with their dislocated sense of identity. Through a rich combination of multiple textual and visual art forms, playfully intermingling elements from different cultural systems, Báez is able to create an inspiring piece of work that far transcends traditional approaches to the formation of ethnic communities and identities in globalized environments. Drawing theories on post-colonial and diaspora studies, and on the concept of transculturation as developed by Latino/a and Latin American Cultural Studies, this paper seeks to bring to light the myriad ways in which the textual and corporeal elements in *Dominicanish* put forward a nuanced understanding of the contingent nature of spatial identities and its ever-changing nature. In the process, notions of home and belonging, linguistic and cultural exclusivism, and racial, gender and ethnic rigid articulations are challenged, exposed and reframed. Báez's performance practice thus becomes a powerful tool to combat assimilationist praxis in global localities.

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RESUMEN

Josefina Báez, nacida en la provincia dominicana de La Romana en el 1960, lleva más de diez años explorando en escena la complejidad de las experiencias dominicanas en los Estados Unidos. En su obra *Dominicanish*, puesta en escena por primera vez en 1999 y publicada como texto en el año 2000, el personaje que interpreta Báez encarna la lucha que enfrentan las comunidades migrantes en busca de la reconciliación con su dislocado sentido de la identidad. Por medio de una rica combinación de múltiples formas artísticas, tanto visuales como textuales, y entremezclando libremente elementos de diferentes sistemas culturales, Báez crea una estimulante obra que trasciende profundamente las aproximaciones tradicionales a la formación de identidades y comunidades étnicas en entornos glocalizados. Partiendo de teorizaciones en el ámbito de los estudios post-coloniales y diaspóricos, y por medio del concepto de transculturación desarrollado en el campo de los estudios culturales latinos y latinoamericanos, este artículo trata de poner de manifiesto las múltiples maneras en las que los elementos corporales y textuales en *Dominicanish* proponen un matizado entendimiento de la naturaleza contingente de las identidades espaciales, así como su cambiante naturaleza. En este proceso, se expondrán y pondrán en cuestión tanto nociones tradicionales de pertenencia y hogar como los exclusivismos lingüísticos y culturales y las rígidas articulaciones raciales, étnicas o de género. La práctica performativa de Báez se convierte, por tanto, en una poderosa herramienta para combatir las prácticas asimilatorias presentes en el mundo global.

Palabras clave: Domínico-americanas/os, transculturación, performance, diáspora, género, etnicidades, raza, identidad, cuerpo, comunidades latinas en los Estados Unidos.

God bless the child travelin' light.
 Here I am chewing English
 and spitting Spanish.
 Báez, 2000¹

1. HOMING *DOMINICANISH*

Dominicanish, a theatrical performance assembled by Claudio Mir in 2000 blending together Josefina Báez's poems, popular culture slogans, references to Indian philosophy, kuchipudi dance, blues and jazz lyrics and music, stages the creation of physical and material glocalities in the colonial and neocolonial clashes of New York City's multicultural neighborhoods. The printed edition of the play, which has been defined as a "performance text," transcends traditional literary genres by combining high and low culture forms in a single volume. Furthermore, and in an attempt to incorporate some of the visual magic of the stage into the printed edition of *Dominicanish*, a flip-book animation presenting photographs of the artist performing kuchipudi movements that is set in motion when the pages of the book are flipped has been included. This disruption of the stillness of the written text works to create a textual and visual pastiche, a hybrid composition that accurately illustrates the perceived fragmentation in the lives of Dominican migrant communities as a result of social and geographical displacement.

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

By appending the suffix *-ish* to the term *Dominican*, she is able to create a witty wordplay combining the different meanings that the suffix *-ish* conveys to nouns and

adjectives in English. As the Oxford English Dictionary notes, adding *-ish* to nouns results in adjectives that indicate the origin or language of the community denoted by the noun, as it is the case with *English* or *Spanish*. In this sense, the term *Dominicanish* refers to the language in which the text is codified — a mixture of American English and Dominican Spanish — and to the transnational ethnic identification of the narrator, a New Yorker of Dominican origin. However, since it also provides the meaning of “in a certain way, approximately” (*Oxford English Dictionary*) as in *greenish* or “having the qualities or characteristics of” (*Oxford English Dictionary*) as in *childish*, the coinage also directly points to the interstitial location that she occupies in relation to ethnicity. For her, being Dominicanish implies being ‘almost Dominican but not quite’ since she came of age not in the Dominican Republic but in Washington Heights, New York’s Dominican enclave par excellence.

Her in-between location with regards to her ethnic identity is further complicated when we consider the use she makes of the otherwise derogative term “Dominican-York.” As Norma Alarcón explains in relation to the term *Nuyorican*, used to designate the Puerto Rican community in New York, these terms offer a critical space to articulate divergences and convergences between the two components of the dyad. In her view, the hyphen or slash that frequently divides the two terms implies “a conscious cultural and political intervention in which the territories on either side of the slash play a role of transformation on the subject posed on the slash itself” (Arrizón 14). For the narrator in *Dominicanish*, her transformation into a Dominican-York involves not only the recognition of her position as a bridge connecting two differing cultural systems, but also getting rid of the negative connotations that the term has acquired in official discourses in the Dominican Republic. In the view of Silvio Torres-Saillant, Dominican-Yorks in the island have come to occupy the “lowest subaltern position” (1999: 20) as a result of their migrant status and, thus,

one cannot proudly assume a Dominican-York identity (...) without positioning oneself as an adversary to that nemesis of us that is the criollo middle class. To speak as a Dominican-York presupposes recognizing an intrinsic marginality. It implies recognizing oneself as the voice of alterity. (1999: 20, my translation)

Paradoxically, this intrinsic marginality that locates the narrative voice in an eccentric position in relation to conventional definitions of Dominicaness, also situates her in the margins of Americanness, since as Ramona Hernández and Francisco Rivera Batiz illustrate in their study “Dominicanos en los Estados Unidos: Un perfil socioeconómico, 2000,” the Dominican community in New York continues to be nowadays “one of the most dispossessed ethnic groups in the city” (36). However, this othering process is not exclusively the result of harsh economic conditions, as Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel explains in her *Caribe Two Ways: Cultura de la migración en el Caribe insular hispánico*. For her, Dominican-Yorks’ intrinsic marginality is linked as well to the fact that their interaction with different worldviews often leads to “bringing into question Dominican ontological discourses so that Dominicanyorks become the other, both in US and insular contexts” (274-275, my translation). This is the case in Báez’s play where alterity is considered not a nuisance but a source of “constant and varied stimuli” (Báez 2000: 7) that allows the protagonist to adopt a position of resistance to both Dominican and New Yorker cultural systems and celebrate her cross-border identity by embracing elements of the multiple subcultures she is exposed to as a transnational migrant in New York City.

It is worth examining at this point the central role that the city of New York plays in regards to the protagonist’s ethnic identification since, by defining herself as a Dominican-York, she is signaling her sense of belonging not to the American nation as a whole but — as it is the case with other ethnic communities in the city such as Nuyoricans or Cubanyorks — as part of this urban center. This transgression of the traditional space of the nation as the basis for the formation of ethnic identities points to the importance of the city of New York in the creation of Caribbean and Latino identities, particularly in the case of the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico where, as Agustín Laó-Montes explains the metropolis has become a “symbolically central territory in the national imaginaries” (2001: 13). For this author, the city of New York represents “a transnational enclave, a translocal crossroads whose location stands both below and beyond the U.S. nation state” (Laó-Montes 1997: 181) enabling the creation of glocalized identities that claim their own space in the U.S. metropolis.

In this light, Miguel D. Mena claims in his article “Y con ustedes, Josefina Báez, de La Romana al infinito,” that in order to get to know the Dominican Republic “in its most intense borders” one must travel to New York. This idea is present in several other studies that explore the intense relationship of the Caribbean islands with the city of New York in the past decades, as it is the case of Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel’s *Caribe Two Ways*, where she argues that “given the intensity and continuity of migrations between the Caribbean and New York, it is not surprising that [many] have identified this city as one more island in the Caribbean archipelago.”² In her view, the city represents “a geographic, economic and symbolic extension of the Hispanic Caribbean that reconfigures classic definitions of insular experience in order to incorporate it to an alternative cartography delimited by culture and its displacements.” In this sense, the Big Apple can be seen as one more Caribbean island where “a transnational and multiethnic culture is constituted.” For Martínez-San Miguel, these transnational cultures establish “a problematic dialog with both US multicultural discourses and celebratory definitions of Caribbeanness,” questioning the validity of the overarching assumptions in those ideological frameworks (Martínez-San Miguel 322-330).

From this perspective, despite the fact that, as a world city,³ New York occupies a privileged position in the production of hegemonic discourses, this same condition enables the creation of transnational and transcultural borderland spaces “with [their] own institutions, forms of domination and hegemony, social movements, cultural genres, and social struggles” (Laó-Montes 2001: 18). The city itself can be seen as an enormous borderland where Hispanic Caribbean and North American national and cultural discourses are being defined and articulated. In the view of Martínez-San Miguel,

Living in New York, walking its streets, imagining the contour of its ways of identification and belonging already implies asking oneself about the problematic position that this city has occupied inside the imaginaries of an U.S., American and Latin-American identity. From inside, right from the metropolis’ interior, there emerges a series of experiences that make a coherent and harmonic definition of Anglo Americannes impossible. It is, then, a city that is defined from ethnic coexistence as another form of belonging to those micro-communities from diverse countries that define the New York experience. (471)

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

At this multidimensional interstice embodied by the city of New York itself, the narrative voice struggles to come to terms with her alienated identity and to reconstruct her sense of belonging and at-homeness torn apart as a result of the experience of migration. This illusion of safety and protection that the concept of “home” traditionally conveys is, however, transformed in the diaspora, as sociologist Avtar Brah explains. In her view, homeness acquires in this context a dialogic nature since,

On the one hand, ‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of locality. (...) The concept of diaspora places the discourse of ‘home’ and ‘dispersion’ in creative tension, *inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins*. (Brah 191-92; emphasis in original)

This understanding of home as “the lived experience of locality” (Brah 192) offers the unnamed narrator in *Dominicanish* the possibility of creating her own physical and emotional home outside traditional spaces. For her, “home” becomes a hybrid place situated in the imaginary spot where “here” (New York/ present) and “there” (Dominican Republic/past) converge (Bammer in Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta-Sternbach 155), thus signaling the confluence of narratives of “home” and “self” in her search for her “lost” or “new” identity. In this context, her transnational home becomes a geopolitical borderland space situated at the intersection of identity politics and the politics of location where, in the opinion of Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporta-Sternbach, “transcultural subjects are free to inhabit multiple spaces simultaneously, to cross both invisible and real boundaries, and most important to imagine themselves differently” (154-156).

In the play, this is made explicit by the narrator herself who asserting, “Home is where theater is” (Báez 2000: 37) expresses her acknowledgment of the contingent nature of territorial and spatial identities and its ever-changing nature. For her, “home” has become a portable site that can be embodied in multiple locations. In the opinion of Josefina Báez, “Home is where you are born, where you are, where you have been. It is what you carry with you. **I am my home.** I am also what I do and what I do is theater” (Báez 2007; my emphasis). By situating her home right on the stage, and transforming it into a physical, social and psychic space, Báez moves away from traditional narratives on home in different ways. On the one hand, the association of the feeling of homeness with the physical mobility of the professional stage implies rejecting the understanding of the home as a patriarchal institution where gender hierarchies are created and maintained. This position is shared by Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty who argue in their article “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do With It?” that “home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance” (196). Consequently, by detaching the notion of home from the physical building where the traditional family nucleus lives, Báez is able to transcend the private/public sphere division that works so well to hide those “histories of oppression and resistance” Martin and Mohanty refer to, and advocates the transformation of homes into creative spaces where personal and collective struggles can be voiced.

On the other hand, given the fact that the concept of home is also intimately related to that of “homeland,” by situating her home in portable locations such as the body or the stage, she distances herself from nationalist discourses based on fixed origins and territories, and adopts a cross-border and transnational identity that allows her to counteract the pressure to assimilate into mainstream cultural systems, as discussed above. Furthermore, the symbiotic coalescence of home and body in Báez’s imaginary takes us to the discussion of the prominent role that the body of the performer plays on stage. The human body, that as Rosi Braidotti points out is “an inter-face, a threshold, a field of intersecting material and symbolic forces, (...) a surface where multiple codes (race, sex, class, age, etc.) are inscribed” (2000: 1) acquires particular significance in the context of solo performances as it becomes the primary medium of representation.

In their study *Stages of Life: Transcultural Performance and Identity in U.S. Latina Theater*, Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporta-Sternbach examine the works of contemporary Latina performers to conclude that these theatrical manifestations “constitute a genre of its own” (95) given the peculiarities they present. For these critics, Latina solo performances are a unique “postmodern representation in a hybrid medium that encompasses drama, comedy, multimedia, parody, and cultural critique” (97). As they explain, these monologues tend to draw primarily from autobiographical materials to create a “collage of personal experiences” (98) to be performed by the author/writer herself as a one-woman show (97). Consequently, in this context, as Sandoval and Saporta point out, “speaking the text necessarily signifies speaking (with/through) the body” (96), and therefore, the body of the performer becomes a discursive text in itself whose symbolic meaning/s need to be decoded by the audience as part of the show.

2. STAGING THE TRANSCULTURAL BODY

In *Dominicanish*, the body of the performer / protagonist, inscribed in the collisions, clashes and fusion of various cultures, functions as an indicator of the transculturation processes that give way to the construction of her body and identity as borderland spaces. The term “transculturation,” coined by Cuban cultural critic Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s in an attempt to counteract Malinowski’s static notion of acculturation, challenges the passivity implicit in Malinowski’s model by highlighting the dynamics of resistance and accommodation to different cultural systems in the “contact zones.”⁴ Drawing from Ortiz’s theory and combining it with more recent contributions to this model from Post-colonial and Borderland Cultural Studies like those of Silvia Spitta, Gloria Anzaldúa, or José David Saldívar, Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta-Sternbach apply the concept of transculturation to the study of the works of Latina playwrights in the U.S. Despite the fact that their research focuses on the works of Puerto Rican, Cuban-American and Mexican American authors, their model of analysis is very useful for the study of transcultural identities in other Latina communities with whom they share the experiences of migration and displacement. In their model, the processes of transculturation must be analyzed from different

perspectives as they manifests themselves in a variety of ways: as bilingualism; as material culture, including the body; as the dramatic action; as geographic and physical spaces; and as discursive locations (Sandoval and Saporta 33). All these dimensions are present in *Dominicanish* where, as stated above, transculturation functions as the framework under which the protagonist's cross-border identity develops, and the performer's body, as the medium through which the narrator speaks her discourse, reflects the impact of processes of transculturation.

In this regard, one of the first elements that captures the audience's attention is the performer's outfit, as she appears on stage dressed in an austere black cocktail dress, with a white pearl necklace and black short heel shoes. This attire, combined with handcrafted South Asian Indian earrings and a braided hairstyle, functions as a powerful marker of the transcultural character of the subjectivity she is about to stage. Furthermore, the use of the ancient Indian kuchipudi dance as the base for the performance contributes to the creation of her complex transcultural ethnic location in different ways. On the one hand, by integrating a South Asian traditional dance into a play about Dominican identity, Báez blatantly transgresses the traditional spaces where Dominicanness is enacted. Even if, as cultural critic Ramón Rivera-Servera contends, "Baéz does not utilize kuchipudi gestures for their iconography" (157), her staging of this dancing style that originated at the beginning of the 17th Century in the South East Indian region of Andhra Pradesh (154) poses a challenge to the traditional East-West dichotomy. Besides, for an audience not necessarily familiarized with the aesthetics of the dance, the mingling of kuchipudi movements with Theatre Biomechanics⁵ results in a precise technique of corporal expression that evokes the movements of string puppets. This acting technique allows Báez to capture the sense of alienation and displacement experienced by migrant subjects whose body and verbal languages are often dissociated as a result of their affiliations to divergent socio-cultural spheres.

This "disjunction between content and expression" that, for philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is characteristic of people living in a "language that is not their own" (19-20) is performed both aesthetically and linguistically in the play. Thus, if

visually, a North American audience would at first sight associate the narrator's black body with an African American identity, this perception abruptly changes when she utters the first words, as her accent points to a completely different ethnic location. By making fun of the perceived "mispronunciation" of English words the audience is introduced to "Dominicanish" as an interlanguage in which the linguistic references are to be retrieved from both Dominican Spanish and American English, thus alluding to the ethnic interstitial location she occupies:⁶

Every sin' is vegetable
 ...
 Wednesday sursdei zersdais
 ...
 A as in Michael
 M as in apple. (Báez 2000: 21)

The wordplays in this excerpt, arising from phonological and lexical transferences between the two languages the narrator is in contact with, hint at the feeling of dislocation she experiences when she arrives in the U.S. By freely crossing the semantic boundaries between English and Spanish throughout the play, Báez is able to create a complex set of meanings to display the protagonist's struggle to master a new cultural and linguistic system. In the quote above, there are a few examples of the ways Báez plays with language to account for the narrator's cultural dislocation. For instance, if an attempt to decode the first sentence from its literal meaning might leave the audience puzzled ["Every sin is vegetable" (2000: 21)], it takes on a completely different light when the presence of phonological transference from her native Spanish is considered. In this case, the word "sin" does not imply offense to a religious or moral law, but its meaning rests at the intersection of Dominican Spanish and English consonant production. Since neither the sound /θ/ — commonly represented by "th" in writing in English — or the sound /ɲ/ — usually represented by the cluster "ng" — exist in Dominican Spanish, the word "thing" /θiŋ/ undergoes a process of alveolarization both in its initial and final consonant [θ>s; ɲ>n] that results in something similar to "sin"/sin/. This shift in pronunciation, combined with the process of lexical transference exemplified at the end of the quote where the A for "Ángel" (*angel*) in Spanish stands

for Michael, and the initial M for “manzana” (*apple*) stands for its English translation, exposes the dissociation of the signifier and the signified in the protagonist’s mind as a result of cultural and linguistic collisions which at the same time functions as an enactment of her experience of cultural displacement.

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

I thought I would never learn English.
 No way I will not put my mouth like that
 No way jamás ni never no way
Gosh to pronounce one little phrase one must
 Become another person with the mouth all
 twisted Yo no voy a poner la boca así como
 un guante⁷. (Báez 2000: 22)

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

In a cloud of smoke I found my teachers.
 In an LP jacket I found my teachers
 ...
 Los hermanos Isley
 The Isley Brothers
 ...
 Repeat after them
 ...
 Last Saturday my teachers sang in Soul Train
 Now I don’t care how my mouth look I like
 what I’m saying. (Báez 2000: 26-27)

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

groups, her language skills improve so dramatically that her schoolteachers are left astonished by her mastery of poetic language:

Mister Juarez, My ESL teacher and later Mrs.
Kisinsky, my monolingual teacher were
amazed, 'cause I had the vocabulary *found*
in wet tongues and hookie party goers. And
I, believe or not, was none of the above.
Me, the Dominican miracle in 84th street in
Brandeis representin'
Writing phrases and sentences in perfect syntax
Filled and full of sensual images. (Báez 2000: 33; emphasis in original)

The ironic remarks in this quote represent a sharp criticism to bilingual programs in public schools where the expectations for students' achievement are frequently set so low that successful learners are viewed as "miracles" in a failing education system. Besides, given the central role that elementary education plays in the early stages of social identity formation, it is essential to take a closer look at how the experiences in the American education system may affect the creation of transcultural identities in the U.S. It is in school where young students learn "what it means to be American, a good citizen, and a productive member of society" (George and Trimbur 103) through the study of American Literature and History among other subjects. In this sense, schools become key agents for acculturation, and thus, for Latino/a and other so called "minority students" the educational system might be interpreted to operate "as an instrument of the dominant culture," as Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporta-Sternbach argue (49). For this reason, and in an attempt to resist the pressure to acculturate to the dominant culture inflicted in school, the protagonist in *Dominicanish* turns to the music and lyrics of The Isley Brothers to counteract the perceived white middle-class bias in the education she receives in school:

SAT scores doubled but in no university catalog
I found my teachers: The Isley Brothers.
I did no see a class, department,
major, minor, sororities, fraternities
groovin' with soul. (Báez 2000: 34)

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

Higher education took me to places of pain and
pleasure History in black and white
Distinguished teachers: Pearl Bailey, Earth
Fantasy, Wind September, Reasons and Fire,
Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong and the dearest
of all, my favorite Ms. Billie Holiday. (48)

Her vindication of African American aesthetics and cultural knowledge further complicates her articulation of her transcultural subjectivity and inserts her narrative in the sphere of what Agustín Laó-Montes calls “the Afroamerican diaspora” (2007: 314) which he uses in contrast to “African American” to refer to the myriad black communities established in the North, Central and South Americas. In his view, “Afroamerican subjects-peoples are intertwined diasporas in their history, ethnic composition, cultural expressions, and political projects” (2007: 324), and by imagining herself as part of the U.S. African American community, Báez’s persona stages a view of Afro-North America as a “shifting historical formation, as an on-going process continuously re-composed by a diverse constellation of African diasporas re-located from the US, the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe and the African continent” (Laó-Montes 2007: 324). Her identification with transnational black politics culminates in her assertion, “Con afro black is beautiful. Black is a color. Black is my color” (Báez 2000: 26), a Civil Rights’ Movement motto by means of which she engages in the development of an understanding of the Afroamerican diaspora not as a homogeneous formation but rather as a

montage of local histories interweaved by common conditions of racial, politiceconomic, and cultural oppression and by family resemblances grounded no only in commensurable historical experiences of racial subordination, but as in cultural affinities and similar (often shared) repertoires of resistance, intellectual production, and political action (2007: 314)

as Agustín Laó-Montes rightfully argues. By doing so, she is at the same time navigating away from the dominant Dominican discourse on race that has created a fictive national ethnicity around the “ideal” of a racial *mestizaje* between the white Spanish colonizers and the taíno natives of the Dominican Republic, thus obliterating the African roots of the majority of the country’s population.⁸

However, despite of the important role that African-American culture plays in the early stages on the process her identity formation, as time goes by she will feel the urge to reconcile her black racial identity with her Dominican heritage. Therefore, after these first phases where she takes a position of resistance to the strain to assimilate to white dominant culture by identifying herself as part of the African-American community, she will eventually return to the urban, working-class New York neighborhood of Washington Heights — the primary Dominican enclave in the city— in search of those components of her Dominican self that were obliterated when she started her formal education. In the view of Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta-Sternbach, since schooling frequently “involves the imposition of English and the subsequent erasure of ethnic, ancestral values” (49), the Dominican community and Washington Heights — or Quisqueya Heights as this area is usually nicknamed in clear reference to the Dominican origins of the majority of this area’s population⁹ — function as borderland spaces where Dominican-Yorks are able to keep in touch with their Dominican heritage. In the view of Jorge Duany,

Washington Heights serves as an intermediary point of settlement, a place where Dominicans can speak Spanish, meet fellow Dominicans, attend mass in Spanish, shop in *bodegas*, listen to *merengue*, and remain encapsulated within Hispanic culture (46).

In this sense, the Dominican community and *el barrio* — the ethnic neighborhood — play a critical role in the formation of transcultural identities in the U.S. As for other Latino/a communities in the U.S., Dominican *barrios* “have functioned as reterritorialized spaces where it is possible to maintain one’s culture and to resist assimilation [thus becoming] source(s) of cultural resistance” (Domínguez Miguela 59). This is the case in Báez’s performance, where it is through the walks along the streets of the *barrio* that the narrator feels confident again to express herself in Spanish and to include references to the Dominican subculture into her discourse, and this is marked by the shift to Spanish and the incorporation of references to Latino musical styles:

Suerte que la 107 se arrulla con Pacheco¹⁰
 Pacheco tumbao añejo¹¹
 Pacheco flauta Pacheco su nuevo tumbao el
 maestro el artista Tremendo Cache

compartido en cruz¹²
 Juntos de nuevo como al detalle Tres de Café y
 dos de azúcar¹³ Con el swing del tumbao y
 reculando como Ciguapa^{14,15} (Báez 2000: 42)

But, although her reconnection with her Dominican heritage advances her a step further into the creation of her *Dominicanish* identity, this celebration of her Dominican heritage and culture is not uncritical. In her “Letanía de la decencia,” one of the poems that serves as source for the performance text, and that is included as an appendix to the printed edition, Báez challenges some of the assumptions and beliefs that shape women’s roles and acceptable behaviors in Dominican and Dominican-American societies:

Me chulé en el hall
 Metí mano en el rufo
 Craqueo chicle como Shameka Brown
 Hablo como Boricua
 Y me peino como Morena
 ...
 Me junto con la muchacha que salió preñá
 Salgo con mi ex
 Hablo con el muchacho que estaba preso.¹⁶ (Báez 2000: 43)

In this quote, the narrator explicitly positions herself against the prevalent sexist and racist standards in Dominican communities that work to prevent women from becoming independent and strong female subjects. By doing so, she is able to incorporate gender as an analytical category in her poetic examination of the formation of transcultural Dominican identities in the U.S. As the excerpt from the poem above suggests, by being exposed to this “litany of decency” from an early age, Dominican girls learn that it is inappropriate to assume a sexually active role in relationships, to adopt the looks of African-Americans, or to establish close links with other Latino/a communities, morals that the narrative voice openly defies.

From this perspective, exile and migration have had a positive effect on the protagonist since her transcultural experience has provided her with the tools to recognize the racism and sexism underlying some of the popular beliefs in Dominican and Dominican-American dominant ideologies. As many other women migrants, she seems to be experiencing what Michel Pêcheux calls “disidentification”¹⁷ with their

culture of origin, a move that allows her to reconstruct her dislocated identity free of learned prejudices. This process of disidentification works in close connection with transculturation and translocation processes as she embraces some of the cultural practices and values existing in any of the other subcultures she is in contact with as an inhabitant of a borderland space. In the view of Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta-Sternbarch,

For those who inhabit the margin or border — spiritually, physically, or metaphysically — disidentification signifies flexibility, straddling, oscillation, and liminality in a constant juggling of identities as a “survival strategy” [Muñoz 1999: 5] within the dislocations and contradictions of the subjects’ cultural presence. (6)

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

Now I am another person
Mouth twisted
Guiri¹⁸ guiri on dreams
Guiri guiri business
Even laughing
Laughing in Dominicanish
There is no guarantee
Ni aquí ni allá¹⁹
Not even with your guiri guiri papers. (Báez 2000: 47)

This paragraph, which sums up the philosophy conveyed throughout the performance, alludes to the intrinsic instability of personal identity: by defining herself as a permanent foreigner (“guiri”) and stating that uncertainty is part of everyone’s life regardless of geopolitical location (“neither here nor there”), implying that the construction of one’s subjectivity is never a complete process but “always on the way to the home of constancy” (Báez 2000: 7; my translation), the narrative voice reverberates the idea of a “nomadic subject” who in the opinion of Rosi Braidotti is “a figuration for the kind of subject who

has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. This figuration expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity” (1994: 22). Her nomadic understanding of personal subjectivity, in combination with her idea of home as a portable location discussed above, results in Báez performance in a vindication of those physical and psychological interstitial spaces — borders — where migrant subjects dwell as spaces for aesthetic creation and alternative identitarian definitions. As Silvio Torres-Saillant notes, this is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the play, since it offers “an open ontological frame” where everything that is present in the life of migrant communities can be considered to take part in the formation of Dominican nationhood in and outside the island (2004: 17). Her transcultural approach to ethnic identity, together with her rejection of all fixity in identity formation, becomes in this context a powerful tool to challenge assimilationist practices. It is in this sense that *Dominicanish*, the term and the play, become the metaphorical border where the narrator is able to perform her transcultural identity free of prejudices; an interstitial location where the here and there collide and where she is able to establish her portable home without playing alliance to any fixed nationality. The city of New York is therefore the one glocality where she continues to grow while struggling to live her life “chewing English and spitting Spanish” (Báez 2000: 49), as the last words of the play go.

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NOTES

¹ Báez 2000: 49; emphasis in original.

² All translations from Spanish are mine unless otherwise stated.

³ I am drawing from Agustín Laó-Montes usage of the term “world city” that he characterizes as being main loci of “economic, political, and cultural power in the modern world city” (“Introduction” 18).

⁴ Mary Louise Pratt uses coins this term to refer to those “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (173). In *Dominicanish*, the city of New York would function as a contact zone where transnational and neocolonial relations of power are enacted.

⁵ This acting technique developed by Vsevolod Meyerhold in Russia in the 1920s puts an especial emphasis in the development of precision in movement on stage. Its aesthetics evokes the movements of robots or string puppets.

⁶ Interlanguage is a transitional language developed by second-language learners in their process of acquisition of the target language, reflecting transferences from the structure, vocabulary, and phonology of their native language into the one they are learning.

⁷ “I won’t put my mouth like a glove” (my translation).

⁸ In relation to race and ethnicity in the Dominican Republic, see De Costa-Williams, Miriam, ed. *Daughters of the Diaspora. Afro-Hispanic Writers*. Kingston / Miami: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003; Howard, David John. *Coloring the Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Dominican Republic*. Oxford: Signal Books Limited, 2001; Rodríguez, Nestor E. *Escrituras de desencuentro en la República Dominicana*. Mexico DF: Siglo XXI Editores, 2005; Torres-Saillant, Silvio. “The Tribulations of Blackness. Stages in Dominican Racial Identity”. *Callaloo* 23.3 (2000): 1086-1111.

⁹ Quisqueya is the Taino Indian name for the Hispaniola, the Caribbean island where the Dominican Republic is located.

¹⁰ Johnny Pacheco is one of the most influential figures in salsa music. Born in the Dominican Republic, his family moved to New York when he was a kid, where he would later become an internationally renowned star and one of the architects of the Fania record label.

¹¹ One of the styles of salsa music.

¹² It refers to Celia Cruz, one of the most well-known salsa singers, with whom Pacheco collaborated in various occasions throughout their careers.

¹³ “Tres de café y dos de azúcar” is one of the most famous songs by Pacheco.

¹⁴ Mythical women who are believed to inhabit the mountains in the Dominican Republic and whose feet are turned backward to avoid being followed.

¹⁵ “Luckily 107th Street lulls with Pacheco / Pacheco tumbao añejo / Pacheco flute / Pacheco his new tumbao / the master the artist / Tremendous Cache / shared in Cruz / Together again / perfect ensemble / Tres de Café y dos de azúcar / With tumbao’s swing and / walking backwards like a Ciguapa” (My translation).

¹⁶ “I made out in the hallway / I messed around in the rooftop / I crack gum like Shameka Brown / I speak like a Puerto Rican / and I do my hair like a Black woman / ... / I hang out with the girl who ended up pregnant / I date my ex / I talk to the guy who was in jail” (My translation).

¹⁷ Pêcheux, M. *Language, Semantics, and Ideology*. trans. Harbans Nagpal. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982, pp. 157-59.

¹⁸ “Guiri” is an informal word for foreigner or tourist in Spanish.

¹⁹ “Neither here nor there” (my translation).