Black and Latino: Dominican Americans negotiate racial worlds

Benjamin Bailey
By Benjamin Bailey

As a group whose members are both Hispanic and largely of African descent, Dominican Americans must negotiate distinctive issues of identity in the United States. Up to 90 percent of Dominicans have sub-Saharan African ancestry (Haggerty 1991), which would make them African American by historical, US one-drop rules (Davis 1991; Harris 1964). African-descent Dominicans range in phenotype, in a smooth continuum, from individuals who match stereotypes of African phenotype to those who match stereotypes of European phenotype. Though the phenotypes of many second-generation Dominicans match those associated with black and white American identities in the United States, few second-generation Dominican Americans think of themselves in US black/white racial terms. Rather, they think of their race as "Dominican," "Spanish," or "Hispanic," and their Spanish-language use and Latino cultural practices make this ethnolinguistic identity situationally salient to outsiders (Bailey 2002; Moya Pons 1996; Torres-Saillant and Hernandez 1998). Everyday enactment of a Dominican American identity thus involves negotiating multiple and conflicting ascriptions of identity and resisting US black/white racial categorization, a fundamental form of social organization in the United States (Bailey 2000; Feagin 1991; Omi and Winant 1994; Rodriguez 1994).

Social categorization systems such as race are rooted in social history, but their historical, contingent bases are commonly veiled, giving them the appearance of a natural order in the present. In the case of Dominican immigration to the United States, individual migrants and their children confront and negotiate differences between historical US and Dominican racialization practices in their everyday lives (see Mittelberg and Waters 1992). This process brings historical differences in racialization practices into sharp relief in the present. The negotiation of these contrasting systems
by individual Dominican Americans illuminates racial formation processes in the United States that are otherwise highly naturalized and can highlight links between historical, macrosocial dimensions of race, and individuals' agency in negotiating such structures.

These Dominican American identity negotiations are representative, in some ways, of new framings of social difference in the United States that result from large-scale, ongoing immigration from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia. For post-1965 immigrants, many forms of social differentiation—those based on language or national origins—are much more salient in everyday life than the perceived presence or absence of African ancestry.2 By the late 1990s, over 20 percent of the US population consisted of first- and second-generation immigrants (Rumbaut and Portes 2001a). As the post-1965 immigrant population grows in the United States, such immigrants and their children are reframing notions of race and what constitutes significant social difference, particularly in the geographical areas where they are present in large numbers, thus reshaping color-line negotiations and the meanings of race in the United States (Bailey 2001).3

Dominican American enactments of identity illuminate contradictions in the historical US black/white racialization system particularly clearly for two reasons: (1) Dominican Americans, as a group, seemingly straddle the categories of black, white, and Latino; and (2) Dominican Americans maintain understandings of race and social categorization that directly contradict popular US discourses on race.

In terms of phenotype, individual Dominicans variously match traditional US criteria for inclusion in the categories "black" or "white," but all terms of language and cultural heritage, they match criteria for assignment to the popularly and officially recognized category "Hispanic." The multiple and crosscutting ways in which Dominican Americans fit these categories undermine the assumptions of discreteness and fundamental difference upon which categories of race are constructed. Dominican American enactment of ethnolinguistic identity problematizes the constructed category African American particularly clearly because African-descent race in the United States has historically been treated as equivalent to African American ethnicity (Waters 1991). The Spanish language of Dominican Americans—in addition to cultural practices involving food, music, religion, residential patterns, and transnational relations—makes their Hispanic ethnicity highly salient, which directly undermines the popular US construction of black identity as ahistorical, monolithic, and primordial.

Dominican immigrants also bring with them ways of understanding their African and European ancestry that are directly at odds with the ways in which such ancestry has historically been understood and has historically shaped social organization in the United States. In the United States, a white majority have maintained a color line for centuries, and popular notions of race are dominated by dichotomous categories of "black" and "white," which are popularly seen as representing unbridgeable difference. In the Dominican Republic, in contrast, the majority of the population range across a continuum of phenotypes encompassing both African and European ancestry, and there is little sense of social identity associated with perceived relative degrees of African and European ancestry (Davis 1994).

In this chapter, I emphasize the subjective and performed dimensions of social categories such as race. Although race and ethnicity are popularly seen as natural categories that capture the essential nature of members of a group, social scientists since the 1960s have emphasized that ethnic and racial categories—and reality more generally (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Schutz 1967)—are socially constructed. Race, as such, is not a static thing but part of an ongoing process of social differentiation, with different configurations and meanings across time and space. References of the English word "race" have varied even within the past century in the United States: various immigrant groups in the early 1900s, such as Jews, Italians, and Slavs, were referred to as races (Waters 1990), for example, whereas now they are more commonly described as ethnic groups.

In a seminal article, Frederick Barth (1969) argued that ethnic groups are defined by the boundaries that groups construct between themselves, rather than the characteristics of group members. Social categories are thus about the processes through which individuals and groups create, maintain, or diminish social boundaries, rather than about the avowed content of those categories. This formulation foregrounds the subjective, social reality of individual actors, in that it is their judgments and activities, rather than static characteristics of individuals, that serve to constitute categories. Social identity becomes a function of two subjective processes: "self-ascription"—how one defines oneself—and "ascription by others"—how others define one (Barth 1969:13).

On the surface, such a formulation appears to minimize the role of history and structure in the performance of identity, but social history and hierarchy are omnipresent as everyday, Gramscian "commonsense" understandings of the world, as embodied history or habitus (Bourdieu 1990). Individuals only ascribe identities to themselves that are imaginable in a particular social and historical context, and they are only ratified in identities (through other-ascription) that social history makes available to them. The social categories to which individuals ascribe themselves and to which they are ascribed by others are thus linked to historical social processes, and negotiations of identity take place within the parameters that history has imposed in a particular time and place.

Dominican (American) Understandings of Race
Second-generation Dominican understandings of themselves as Dominican or Spanish, rather than black or white, have roots in traditional Dominican
understandings of race and identity. In the Dominican Republic, there is no binary division among Dominicans into social categories based on the perceived presence or absence of sub-Saharan African ancestry, and Dominicans do not have a notion of race that differentiates among Dominicans in the way the folk notion of black/white differentiates among Americans (Dally 1998; Fennema 1987; Hoetink 1967, 1985; Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral 2000; Moya Pons 1996). There is no sense of ethnicity or group identity based on or symbolized by relative degrees of African or European ancestry. For Dominicans, Dominican nationality, Dominican ethnicity, and Dominican race are more or less the same thing (Davis 1994; Del Castillo 1987).

Dominicans on the island see their essential identity as relatively unrelated to individual phenotype. When I surveyed fifteen Dominicans in Santiago, Dominican Republic, asking, "¿Cuál es tu raza?" (What race/people are you?), they answered, "domincano/a" (Dominican) without regard to individual phenotype, and most treated this expression of identity as a statement of the obvious. This categorical identification as dominicano/a occurred despite the placement of the question in my survey immediately after a question referring explicitly to skin color: "¿Cuál es el color de tu piel?" (What color is your skin?), which elicited one answer of "blanco" (white), one of "moreno" (dark, black), and thirteen answers of some form of "indio" (Indian-colored). Although Dominicans recognize and label differences in phenotype, different phenotypes are not the basis for ethnic, racial, or social groupings. Following a pattern with parallels in other Latin American countries (Rout 1976), individual phenotype is much less relevant for social identity than individual education, income, and regional origins and whether one comes from a rural or urban background.

Regardless of phenotype, few Dominicans on the island think of themselves as being black (negro), a term that they typically reserve for non-Latino, African-descent peoples such as West Indians, US African Americans, and Haitians. In the United States the "one-drop" rule has made individuals with perceived, recorded, or imagined African ancestry count as "black" (Dominguez 1986), but in the Dominican Republic, a very different one-drop rule is in effect: perceived or imagined European ancestry makes an individual not black.

These traditional Dominican ways of conceptualizing Dominican race and identity directly inform the understandings and identity enactments of second-generation Dominicans, who resist black/white racialization. For the Dominican Americans whom I interviewed and recorded in Providence, Dominican "race" does not refer to distinctions based on or symbolized by phenotype but to linguistic and national-origin distinctions, much closer to dominant US notions of "ethnicity." In both interview and more discursive contexts, members of the second generation used the same set of labels—Spanish, Dominican, Hispanic, or Latino—to identify their race and their culture or ethnicity. When asked specifically how they identified their race ("If someone asked you, 'What's your race?' what would you say?"), individuals described their race as "Spanish" or "Hispanic" and sometimes as "Dominican" or "Latino," but never as "black" or "white," regardless of phenotype.

For Dominican-born individuals such as Wilson (age seventeen, arrived at age seven), race is nothing more than where one was before coming to the United States:

**BB:** What does "race" mean to you?

**Wilson:** If they're asking, "What race are you?" I just say what I am. Dominican, Spanish. It means like where you're from.

For US-born individuals such as Martin (age seventeen), race is typically defined in terms of where one's parents or grandparents were before they came to the United States:

**Martin:** Where you're originally from, like your parents and your grandparents and things like that, that's what I take for your race.

Some adult Dominican Americans are conscious of the disjunctures between their understandings of race and the historical US system. Rafael (age twenty-eight), for example, was a highly educated professional who described his race as "Latino" but recognized that it was a distinctive way of conceptualizing race in the larger society:

**BB:** If someone asked you, "What's your race?" what would you say?

**Rafael:** Latino.

**BB:** What do you understand when you hear the term "race"?

**Rafael:** The first thing that comes to mind is black and white. Because ... typically that's where ... that's the way things were characterized in American history. Either black or white. And as you know, they've had ... if you had any type of black blood, you were considered black. That's what I think about when I hear the word "race." Where that leaves me as a Latino is kind of outside of that category. I look at it more as, "Where did your ancestors come from?" ... So when I think about race, I think about color. Because I think that's the traditional way. But when I think about race when someone asks my race, I think about, "Where do you come from?" I group it more, I think, almost with ethnicity, to some degree.
This concept of race highlights the historical and cultural specificity of US notions of race, both popular and academic. Such Dominican American understandings of race are at odds with dominant US understandings, which privilege phenotype (as a marker of imputed descent) and collapse ethnic, cultural, and historical distinctions among African-descent peoples.

An Ethnolinguistic Basis for Race
The Spanish language of the Dominican immigrant community is a key to claiming and enacting identities outside the black/white racial dichotomy. In terms of ascription by outsiders, it is a defining criterion for assignment to a widely recognized, preexisting social category in the United States. In terms of everyday immigrant life, it enables full participation in a thriving ethnolinguistic community with its own churches, restaurants, stores, Spanish-language media, and community organizations, a world that exists in many ways parallel to and separate from Anglophone society. This thriving community validates the customs, language, and beliefs of the first generation, reinforcing a common cultural memory and identity for the second generation. The presence of a vibrant and visible local Dominican community—within a vibrant and growing national Latino community—is key to the second generation’s maintenance of Dominican frameworks for racial categorization in the face of dominant US phenotype-symbolized racialization practices.

The significance of the Spanish language for countering phenotype-racial identity ascriptions and communicating an ethnolinguistic identity in everyday encounters is evident in both (1) Dominican Americans’ explanations of how outsiders know that they are Dominican/Hispanic rather than "black" or "white"; and (2) the common proof procedure that Dominicans use to counter others’ assumptions that they are black or white American: they show that they can speak Spanish.

Martin (US-born, age seventeen), for example, used Spanish strategically to differentiate himself from white Americans:

*Martin:* I don’t really look Spanish... People don’t think that I’m Spanish until I tell them I speak Spanish, or whatever. If they just look at me, “Oh, it doesn’t look like he’s Spanish.”

*BB:* Do Dominicans tease you and say, “Oh, you’re white”?  
*Martin:* No—sometimes that’ll happen. Sometimes they don’t know I’m Spanish, and they’ll say something or whatever and I’ll say something back in Spanish but not directly to them, but just so they can hear it, though.

A much larger percentage of Dominican Americans are regularly perceived to be African American. Even in Providence, where (African-descent) Caribbean Hispanics outnumber non-Hispanic African-descent groups, many Dominican Americans are assumed to be African American until they are heard speaking Spanish:

*BB:* If somebody asks you, “What are you?” what do you say?

*Janelle* (US-born, age seventeen): I usually say Spanish, Dominican. I’ll usually say Dominican first, “cause most people... most people think I’m black though. A lot of people think I’m black. A lot of people!...

*BB:* Can you think of a specific time when someone thought you were black?

*Janelle:* I was in the gym, and usually in school I don’t really talk in Spanish, and I was talking to some kid in English, and some girl, I guess she was listening, and I said a word in Spanish, and she goes, “Oh my god, you’re Spanish.” No, she goes, “You know Spanish.” She thought I was just a black who knew Spanish. I was like, “I am Spanish.” She’s like, “Oh my god, I thought you was Cape Verdean or Black.” I was like, “No.” A lot of people think I’m black. I don’t know, it’s usually just little things like that, just people be like, “What are you, black?” I’m like, “No, I’m Spanish.”

In Janelle’s reported exchange with an African American classmate, “Spanish” is treated not just as a language but also as an ethnic/racial identity. Janelle and her interlocutor treat the social category “Spanish” as parallel in type to the folk-racial category “black” but mutually exclusive from it. In local terms, if one is Dominican or Spanish-speaking, one doesn’t count as “black,” regardless of phenotype. An individual only counts as black and Spanish in this local context if he or she has a Spanish parent and a non-Hispanic African-descent parent.

This local system of classification does not necessarily privilege identities based on phenotype—specifically, perceived degrees of European and African ancestry—over those based on other social criteria such as language or national origins. Janelle’s African-descent, or “black,” phenotype remains constant, but she no longer counts as black when she speaks Spanish and claims a Spanish identity. Race is thus treated not as a static attribute of individuals, but rather as a locally and linguistically achieved identity. This agency is particularly striking in resistance to black/White racial ascription, which is the type of social identity ascription over which individuals have historically had least control in the United States (Mittelberg and Waters 1992; Smedley 1993).
The Interactional Negotiation of Race

I videotaped one instance in which a Dominican American explicitly negotiates his racial identity in everyday, naturally occurring interaction with peers. In this segment of interaction (transcribed below) during a high school class, a student of Southeast Asian descent, Pam, tells an African-descent Dominican American, Wilson, "I never thought you were Spanish" after seeing him converse in Spanish. She had assumed he was African American but then came to realize that he was Spanish when she heard him speak Spanish. As a joke, Wilson and a Dominican confederate, JB, pretend that Wilson is black or African American and not Spanish. Although Wilson never identifies himself as black or African American (his self-ascription as "Spanish" or "Dominican," above, was typical in my interactions with him), he and JB know that Wilson is regularly perceived to be African American. This enables them to try to fool Pam by getting her to believe that Wilson is black, a social category attribution that is implausible from a Dominican perspective. The humor of this put-on depends on tensions and disparities between Dominican and US sociocultural frameworks for understanding race and social categories.

When Pam cites Wilson's speaking of Spanish as evidence that he is Spanish rather than black, JB and Wilson initially deny that he can speak Spanish and then devise scenarios that could explain his apparent Spanish use. They falsely claim, for example, that Wilson's father is black and that his mother is black and Spanish and was born in the United States. (Wilson was born of Dominican parents in the Dominican Republic and came to live in Providence with his father as a seven-year-old.) Wilson and JB are engaged in an adolescent put-on, but at the same time they are negotiating ethnic and racial categories and the criteria for defining a person as "black" or "Spanish." (In the following dialogue, bracketed text indicates words spoken in overlap or a translation of the immediately preceding Spanish. Parentheses indicate uncertainty about the accuracy of transcribed words or material that could not be heard clearly enough to transcribe. Double parentheses indicate nonverbal, visual, or background information.)

((Wilson has finished explaining to JB, in Spanish, the function of the wireless microphone that he is wearing.))

Pam: Yo, the first time I saw you, I never thought you were Spanish.

((short pause))

Wilson: [Who?]

JB: [He's] black.

Pam: I never-

Wilson: 'Cause I'm black.

JB: ( )
race/ethnicity. Pam, a teenager of Southeast Asian descent, is using it as a social category that she explicitly juxtaposes with African American race/ethnicity: “Your father’s Black, your mother’s Spanish?” "Spanish" is a local social category based on linguistic and cultural criteria that is treated as equivalent in type to traditional US phenotype-based racial categories such as black and white.

Social classification based on linguistic and cultural heritage may capture the local social reality at this high school much better than black/white classification. The US categories of black and white developed out of a particular centuries-long social history in the United States. The historical relations between white Americans and African Americans are not of primary importance to the vast majority of students at this school, where over 80 percent of the students are immigrants or the children of immigrants. Their families have only been in the United States since the late 1960s or later, that is, the post-civil rights era (or in the case of some of the Puerto Rican students, since the 1950s).

Binary racial categorization based on phenotype is less immediately relevant in this setting than students’ immigrant languages and cultures. Fewer than 10 percent of the students at Central High School are non-Hispanic white, and only 16 percent are non-Hispanic black, many of them immigrants. In this largely immigrant context, Wilson’s immigrant ethnolinguistic identity is a more useful guide to significant attributes about him than his phenotype. At Central High School, such a Spanish identity might suggest that one speaks Spanish at home, eats Caribbean Latino food, socializes with other Spanish speakers, goes to Spanish nightclubs and Spanish-language Mass, has multiple, ongoing ties to Latin America, translates for parents, and so on. Such a bilingual/bicultural immigrant identity is likely familiar to Pam and may have strong parallels in her own life.

Although Wilson’s phenotype remains constant, his racial identity is locally constituted and negotiated through language. Such negotiations de-naturalize popular notions of race as a static and essential attribute of individuals. In this case, Wilson’s achievement of a Spanish identity in an inter-ethnic encounter highlights both the agency of an individual to resist the hegemonic racial structuring of society and the subjective nature of identity constitution, as his identity is achieved through congruent self-ascription and other-ascription.

Implications for Racial Justice of Such Microlevel Identity Negotiations
According to Michael ami and Howard Winant (1994), race is a system of inequality (rooted in Western imperialism and, more immediately for most African Americans, in US slavery) that makes reference to skin color or phenotype. This system is not static but processual: racial categories are constituted, challenged, inhabited, and reproduced in racial formation (ami and Winant 1994). Following poststructural theories that link individual agency to social structure (Giddens 1984) and power to discourse and symbolic representation (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Foucault 1982; Williams 1961), ami and Winant argue that race is a matter of both social structure and cultural representation. Race exists in concrete social structures such as segregation and inequality in schooling and labor market participation, as well as in cultural representations, such as the (every-day) assignment of individuals to particular social categories and attribution of group social characteristics to members of those categories (1994: 56, 59-60). Our commonsense racial understandings (cultural representations) help us both to interpret existing racial structure and to rationalize ongoing structural inequality. Social structural dimensions of race both reflect racial understandings and provide ongoing material evidence to support or reconstitute such racial understandings.

According to ami and Winant, in the post-civil rights era United States, cultural representations of racial difference have become increasingly important for maintaining the racial organization of society. This racial organization was long enforced through direct corporeal coercion—for example, control of African American bodies with chains and whips and later, executive branch enforcement of segregation and Jim Crow—but racial formation in the post-civil rights era is driven by more hegemonic, symbolic means.

It is in this context—in which hegemonic cultural representations and "commonsense" racial ascriptions maintain racial organization—that Dominican American negotiations of identity have implications for racial justice. Dominican American enactment of identities outside the black/white dichotomy does not have direct effects on material inequality in US racial structure, but such identity enactments do counter hegemonic racial understandings, particularly in sociogeo graphical contexts with high concentrations of immigrants who fall outside the black/white dichotomy.

Being able to control racial representations of oneself or one’s group marks a securing of symbolic power in the face of a racial system that relies on symbolic means for the maintenance of inequality. Successfully contesting the phenomenological, symbolic boundaries of race can also be a key to subsequently confronting its more static and structural dimensions. Symbolic boundaries are, in important senses, prior to more static, social boundaries, in that it is only when symbolic boundaries are widely recognized and agreed up that they can translate into more fixed social boundaries and patterns of exclusion (Lamont and Molnar 2002). Dominican American enactments of race call into question the notions of race in the United States that are otherwise commonsense. When the subjective, phenomenological bases of race are undermined, the underlying inequality that is the basis of race is brought into sharper relief, and the clash between such inequality and US ideals of equality and democracy becomes starker and less tenable in public discourse.
A White/Nonwhite Color Line
Successful resistance to the black/white dichotomy does not, in and of itself, represent the achievement of racial equality for the children of Dominican immigrants. Most Dominican Americans who successfully claim and enact identities outside the dichotomy are still excluded from the racial category white, with its attendant privileges. In the following exchange from an interview during a break at school, Janelle (seventeen, US-born), Jose (seventeen, arrived at age eight), and I (thirty-four, US-born, Anglo-American) grapple with various ascriptions of identity for US-born Janelle. Although Jose and Janelle agree that she is "American" in one sense and "Dominican" in another, Janelle points out that when people ask her, "What are you?" they do not want her to answer that she is "American."

BB: If someone asks, "What's your race?" what would you say?
Janelle: I would say Hispanic.
BB: If a person says, "I'm American," what group do you think they belong to?
Janelle: "American" to me would be white, but I consider myself American even though I would say Spanish.
BB: If a person has Dominican parents but was born here and grew up here, should they say they're American or should they say they're Dominican?
Janelle: See, that's what I think is American. You born here, the fact that you was born here, no matter what your parents are.
BB: So what should those kids say?
Janelle: What should they say? I say Dominican, but ... I know I'm not really Dominican, my parents are.
(Jose and Janelle discuss whether Janelle is really Dominican.)

Jose: You're American.
Janelle: I know I'm American, but-
Jose: You're American, but you got the blood of Dominican.
Janelle: But when people say, "What are you?" they usually want like "Dominican." I'm saying that's what they want, or "Puerto Rican," not "I was born here."

This interaction highlights a number of competing ways in which Dominican Americans think of themselves and are seen by others. Notions of race, citizenship, and belonging overlap in the exclusion Janelle experiences from the unmarked category "American." For Janelle, citizenship is racialized: "American" implies a white identity, which Janelle does not claim or enact. Even though she was US-born, thus fulfilling a defining and sufficient criterion for citizenship, she situationally excludes herself—and is excluded by others—from the category of "American." The very fact that Janelle faces the question, "What are you?"—and that she understands people to be relatively uninterested in her US birth and citizenship—implies a marked racial status for which a certain type of account needs to be given.

For some Dominican Americans, this exclusion can lead to explicit political solidarity with black Americans. Ana (US-born, twenty-nine, college graduate), for example, saw her race as "Hispanic." She did not match stereotypes of African American phenotype, and she did not report ever being perceived as African American, but she knew that white Americans would not include her in the category white.

BB: If someone asked you, "What is your race?" how would you answer?
Ana: Depending on the options. If you have the options-
BB: ... let's say someone is just talking to you ... 
Ana: What race are you? Hispanic. Now as far as the forms are concerned, when-and this is a discussion I had with someone, maybe a couple of years ago—you know when you have the list of races-white, black, Asian, Indian, other—when you only have those options, I would check off black.
BB: You would?
Ana: I would. I wouldn't check off white. My skin color is not white, so an American would not believe that I'm white anyways.

Like Janelle, above, Ana is US-born, but she sees herself as situationally excluded from the full privileges of citizenship and belonging, which are reserved for white Americans.

Although Dominican American claims of Spanish or Hispanic identities represent the symbolic power to speak for oneself and reject common-sense categories, they also reflect the hegemonic racial structuring of the United States at a more subtle level. Pan-national labels such as "Spanish," "Hispanic," or "Latino" are US constructions (Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral 2000; Oboler 1995; Rumbaut and Portes 2001a) that reflect and reproduce exclusion from the racial category white and its attendant privileges. The claim and enactment of "Spanish" identities can thus reproduce white privilege by reconstituting a white/nonwhite color line.

Conclusion
Dominicans form only one part of the larger, post-1965 immigrant stream, but their identity negotiations suggest future directions of US racial formation processes. Like their Caribbean, Latin American, and Asian compatriots,
Dominicans come from a part of the world that was once colonized by Europeans; most Dominicans do not count as white in the dominant United States racial hierarchy; and they bring with them systems of social categorization distinct from the ones that have been historically dominant in the United States. As post-1965 immigrants and their children and grandchildren comprise an ever-larger percentage of the US population over the next decades, US constructions of race and identity will necessarily shift to accommodate groups whose identities and understandings of social categories are only partially a function of pre-1965 US social history.

The Dominican American racial understandings and practices that are documented in this chapter serve to illuminate racial formation processes in the United States that are otherwise veiled. Although academics have emphasized since the 1960s that race is a social construction, race can seem like a natural order of the world to many Americans, for whom it is a commonsensical organizing principle of society, visible in patterns of residence, marriage, association, and behavior. Similarly, although poststructuralist theorists have emphasized that relationships between individual social actors and social structure are reciprocal, it is often difficult to discern the agency of social actors because they commonly reproduce existing patterns of social relations.

The notions of race maintained by many Dominican Americans and their everyday enactment of Spanish racial identities, in contrast, highlight the processual, constructed nature of racial categories and individuals’ agency in the (re)construction of categories. In proposing and maintaining a different way of understanding European and African descent, Dominican Americans collectively undermine the commonsense nature of received US racial categories. On an individual level, by resisting black/white ascription, Dominican Americans highlight the agency of individual social actors to respond to sociohistorical circumstances and reshape the available macrosocial categories, at least at the local level.

Being able to represent oneself in one’s own terms marks a securing of symbolic power in the face of a US racial system that has increasingly come to rely on symbolic means for the maintenance of inequality. Such negotiations thus represent an achievement of a degree of racial justice at the local level. Contesting the phenomenological, symbolic boundaries of race is also a necessary, preliminary step to confronting its more static and structural dimensions.

While Dominican American claims of Spanish or Hispanic identities represent the symbolic power to speak for oneself and reject commonsense US categories, they may also reproduce the hegemonic privileges of whiteness in the United States. When African-descent Dominicans successfully enact non-black identities, it denaturalizes the category black, but it does not alter or call into question the privileges associated with whiteness. The very agency that such Dominican Americans exhibit in claiming a racial identity outside the traditional system may simply be the insidious, inadvertent collaboration of the oppressed with their oppressors that is characteristic of hegemonic systems. Dominican American negotiations of identity may thus represent part of a shift of US racial organization from a black/white color line to a white/nonwhite color line.

**Notes**

1. I use the term “Dominican American” specifically to refer to US-raised Dominicans whose parents immigrated from the Dominican Republic. I do not include in this category adult Dominican immigrants or third- and fourth-generation Dominicans whose grandparents or great-grandparents immigrated.

2. The watershed event defining this new wave of immigration was the enactment of changes in US immigration law in 1965. Highly restrictive immigration quotas that were based on nationality and favored northwestern European countries were abandoned in favor of increased quotas based on hemisphere, not country. The result of these changes in immigration law was a new wave of immigration beginning in the late 1960s that represented the largest influx of immigrants to the United States since the 1880-1920 period.

3. Over two-thirds of the US immigrant population are concentrated in California, Texas, Florida, and greater New York. While representing over 20 percent of the total US population, immigrants and their children represent a far greater proportion of the population of many metropolitan areas, both in these magnet states as well as in many other destination states.

4. Informants were mostly male, ranging in age from their early teens to early twenties. I approached them at a public basketball court in the upper/upper-middle class neighborhood of Villa Olga and on the street in the more working-class Pueblo Nuevo neighborhood.

5. The term “indio” in the Dominican Republic differs both in denotation and connotation from the term “indio” in the many Latin American countries where it refers to contemporary indigenous groups and is considered pejorative. In the Dominican Republic it does not refer to a contemporary ethnic/social group but to a range of skin colors/phenotypes that do not count as “blanco” (white). The majority of Dominicans describe their skin color as some form of indio, and it is unmarked both as a phenotype and a term.

6. Frank Moya Pons (1995) attributes the relative lack of racial hierarchy in the Dominican Republic in part to historical periods of extreme poverty. The class, or power, hierarchy of the country was so flattened during these times that there were no power differentials to be mapped onto skin color. Both fairer-skinned and darker-skinned Dominicans ate the same food, did the same work, lived together, and so on.

7. Dominican understandings of their color, race, and nationality have been constructed in contradistinction to Haiti, which shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic, both historically and in contemporary times (Moya Pons 1995).

8. The data in this chapter come from fieldwork in Providence, Rhode Island, and the Dominican Republic between July 1996 and July 2000. Providence had over 15,000 Dominicans, according to the 2000 census, and they were the largest Latino group in the city. Data collection methods included ethnographic observation, audio-recorded interviews, and videotaping of naturally occurring interactions in school, home, and community contexts. In addition to interviewing over thirty high school
students, fifteen adult members of the second generation, and various administrators, teachers, and graduates, I repeatedly observed six primary subjects at school before videotaping them throughout a school day and in one family or community context.

9. While it is common in the United States to speak of race as “based on” skin color, it is more accurate to think of it as based on historical power differentials, with skin color merely symbolizing these differences.

10. For non-Latino immigrants of African descent, there is either no distinct ethnolinguistic community (e.g., among West Indians) or a much smaller, less vibrant one (e.g., among US Haitians).

11. I use the terms "Spanish," "black," and "African American" in their local, ernie senses, following the usage of participants in this interaction. The terms "black" and "African American" refer only to non-Hispanic, African-descent individuals. "Spanish" refers to individuals of Latin American descent. Although "Spanish" individuals may be phenotypically indistinguishable from "blacks," they do not belong to the same social category in this local context.

12. Wilson mentioned other people’s confusion about his identity to me a number of times in interview situations:

A lot of people confuse me for an African-American most of the time. They ask me, “Are you black?” I’m like, “No, I’m Hispanic.” and they’ll be like, “Oh I thought you were black or something.” Most of the time I’ll be talking with them, chilling, or whatever. They’ll be thinking that I’m just African American. Because sometimes the way I talk, my hair, my skin color, it’s just that my hair is nappy. I use a lot of slang. You can confuse a lot of Dominicans as African Americans by their color. So that’s why a lot of people just ask me, “I thought you were black, I thought you were this.”