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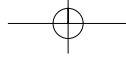


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# Dominican migration to Puerto Rico: A transnational perspective

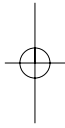
JORGE DUANY



## ABSTRACT

This essay provides a panoramic view of transnational migration from the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico. To begin, the author sketches the historical background of the exodus, underlining the ties between the two neighboring countries since the days of Spanish colonialism in the Caribbean. The main economic and political causes of the recent Dominican diaspora are also described. Second, the author examines the migrants' regional and socioeconomic origins in the home country as well as their settlement patterns and modes of economic and political incorporation into the host country. Third, several Dominican transnational





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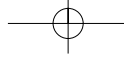
For years, the secondary concentration of Dominicans abroad has been in Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory with a higher standard of living but a geography, history, culture, and language similar to the Dominican Republic. Dominicans began to migrate en masse after the assassination of longtime dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo (1961), the coup d'état against constitutional president Juan Bosch (1963), and the civil war and U.S. military occupation of Santo Domingo (1965). These political events set in motion a complex series of socioeconomic forces leading tens of thousands of Dominicans to Puerto Rico over the past four decades. Although the Island has often served as a springboard to the U.S. mainland, a bustling Dominican community has emerged in San Juan, displacing Cubans as the leading sector of the foreign-born population in the 1980s. In 2000, San Juan had the second largest number of Dominicans outside the Dominican Republic, after New York City. Their demographic, economic, social, political, and cultural significance for contemporary Dominican transnationalism cannot be overlooked.

This essay provides a panoramic view of transnational migration from the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico. To begin, I sketch the historical background of the exodus, underlining the ties between the two neighboring countries since the days of Spanish colonialism in the Caribbean. I also describe the main economic and political causes of the recent Dominican diaspora. Second, I examine the migrants' regional and socioeconomic origins in the home country as well as their settlement patterns and modes of economic and political incorporation into the host country. Third, I analyze several Dominican transnational practices in Puerto Rico, particularly their community organization through various political parties, hometown clubs, and other voluntary associations. Finally, I identify six issues for further study: the immigrants' cultural identity, second generation, transnational organizations, impact on public services, remittances, and businesses.

## Historical background

### TRANSNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

Close links between what are now the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico date back to pre-Columbian times, when Arawak peoples originating in the Amazon basin of South America settled both territories. In the late 15th and early 16th centuries, Spain conquered the two places and remained in control until the 19th century. A small but constant flow of people in both directions occurred between the 16th and 19th centuries,



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TABLE 2  
The Dominican-born population of Puerto Rico, 1960–2000

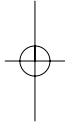
| YEAR | NUMBER | PERCENT OF ALL<br>FOREIGN-BORN |
|------|--------|--------------------------------|
| 1960 | 1,812  | 17.7                           |
| 1970 | 10,843 | 13.4                           |
| 1980 | 20,558 | 29.0                           |
| 1990 | 37,505 | 50.0                           |
| 2000 | 61,455 | 56.1                           |

Sources: U.S. Department of Commerce □1961, 1973, 1984, 1993□U.S. Bureau of the Census □2001□

### Political factors precipitating the exodus

Most scholars agree that political forces largely drove the first stage of Dominican emigration during the 1960s (Georges 1984; Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Torres-Saillant and Hernández 1998). The earliest groups to leave the Dominican Republic after 1961 were primarily people linked with the Trujillo dictatorship, especially conservative political leaders, government employees, and members of the ruling class. Among those who briefly sought refuge in Puerto Rico in 1962 was former president Balaguer. A year later, a civic-military coalition overthrew the recently elected president Bosch, provoking a second migratory wave of liberal and leftist elements. Bosch himself was quickly flown into San Juan, where he had previously lived in exile. The 1965 civil war and U.S. invasion culminated a cycle of political violence in the Dominican Republic, which led to the export of political dissidents to the United States and Puerto Rico. As several authors have documented, the U.S. Embassy in Santo Domingo gave hundreds of exit visas to persons deemed radical or subversive to the newly established regime, presided over by Balaguer for three consecutive terms (1966–1978). Ambassador John Bartlow Martin openly facilitated the migration process as part of U.S. foreign policy to stabilize the Dominican Republic and avoid “another Cuba” (Hernández 2002; Mitchell 1992).

Political factors have continued to play a role in the Dominican exodus, even during periods of relative democratization. Table 1 shows that migration to Puerto Rico has tended to peak in years of presidential elections in the Dominican Republic. For instance, Balaguer’s reelection in 1966, 1970, 1974, 1986, and 1990 spurred migration to Puerto Rico. When Balaguer died in 2002, many expatriates in San Juan felt relieved because of his prominent role under the Trujillo dictatorship and subsequent repressive tactics. Today the immigrant community is highly



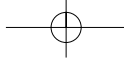
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The main contrasts between Puerto Rico-bound and U.S.-bound migration can be attributed to geographic, economic, and cultural reasons. An airplane trip from Santo Domingo to San Juan lasts only about forty-five minutes, and even an illegal trip in a makeshift boat (*yola*) across the sixty-mile Mona Channel usually takes between twenty-six and twenty-eight hours, depending on weather conditions and travel routes. Furthermore, the ferry service between San Juan and Santo Domingo (and formerly between Mayagüez and San Pedro de Macorís) provides cheap transportation for passengers, cars, and other heavy items between the two countries. One of the reasons Dominicans often mention for settling in Puerto Rico is that it is much closer to the Dominican Republic than the United States, and many plan to go back home sometime in the future (Romero Anico 1984). Moreover, the Puerto Rican economy continues to demand cheap labor, particularly in the service, construction, and agricultural industries. Compared to the U.S. mainland, the Island provides proportionally more opportunities for low-wage and unskilled employment, especially in the urban informal sector. Culturally, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic have much in common, from similar Caribbean dialects of Spanish, to a shared Catholic heritage, to popular tastes in food, music, and sports. A transnational lifestyle is easier to sustain for Dominicans in Puerto Rico than for those living in the continental United States.

### Undocumented migration from the Dominican Republic

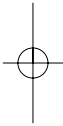
Because Puerto Rico is so near to the Dominican Republic, and because it has become more difficult to travel to the United States without government authorization, undocumented migrants are increasingly likely to stay in Puerto Rico rather than move on to the mainland (see Enchautegui 2000). In 1996, U.S. immigration officials estimated that 34,000 undocumented immigrants—mostly from the Dominican Republic—were living in Puerto Rico, compared to 75,000 undocumented Dominicans in the continental United States (*Migration News* 1997; U.S. Department of Justice 1998). According to these figures, the ratio of undocumented to documented Dominicans is almost six times higher in Puerto Rico than in the mainland.

The first recorded illegal trip from the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico took place in 1972, when a small group of Dominicans tried to cross the Mona Passage in an unseaworthy vessel (*yola*). Since the 1980s, the U.S. Coast Guard



### Migration

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## Transnational origins and destinations

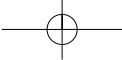
### REGIONAL ORIGINS

Table 4 compares the migrants' place of birth and last residence in the Dominican Republic, according to our survey of Dominicans in Santurce. Slightly less than half were born in the four largest cities, with about a third in Santo Domingo, the capital. Another third were born in the Cibao region, one of the largest and most prosperous rural areas of the Dominican Republic. However, the proportion of migrants who had lived in Santo Domingo was 12 percent larger than those who were born there. The proportion of those who were born and resided in Santiago, San Pedro de Macorís, and the southeast was about the same. Hence, most Dominicans had urban experience before moving to Puerto Rico, although many were born in rural areas and small cities. Our data show that the Dominican exodus is basically bifurcated between Santo Domingo and the Cibao.

TABLE 4  
Region of origin of the Dominican Population in Santurce, Puerto Rico (in percentages)

| PLACE           | BIRTHPLACE | PREVIOUS RESIDENCE | PLACE       | BIRTHPLACE | PREVIOUS RESIDENCE |
|-----------------|------------|--------------------|-------------|------------|--------------------|
| MAIN CITIES     |            |                    | OTHER AREAS |            |                    |
| Santo Domingo   | 33.5       | 45.5               | Cibao       | 31.9       | 31.8               |
| Santiago        | 4.2        | 1.8                | Southeast   | 14.5       | 10.0               |
| La Romana       | 4.2        | 5.5                | Southwest   | 1.3        | 1.8                |
| S.P. de Macorís | 3.2        | 0.0                | Other       | 7.1        | 3.6                |
| SUBTOTAL        | 45.1       | 52.8               | SUBTOTAL    | 54.8       | 47.2               |
|                 |            |                    | TOTAL       | 99.9       | 100.0              |

Source: Duany 1990. Note: The percentages in the Birthplace column do not add up to 100 because of rounding.



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Even undocumented Dominicans in the Puerto Rican coffee industry have a predominantly urban background (Pascual Morán and Figueroa 2000: 17). However, most Dominicans in Barrio Capetillo come from the eastern provinces of the Dominican Republic, especially the rural zones of Miches (Peralta 1995). These zones are known to send a large number of undocumented Dominicans to

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| 2000   |  | % OF ALL<br>DOMINICANS |
|--------|--|------------------------|
| NUMBER |  |                        |
| 382    |  | 2.2                    |
| 22     |  | 1.1                    |
| 7      |  | 1.0                    |
| 8      |  | 0.9                    |
| 5      |  | 0.3                    |
| 8      |  | 0.3                    |
| 3      |  | 0.2                    |
| 4      |  | 0.2                    |
| 9      |  | 0.2                    |
| 183    |  | 14.9                   |
| 1,131  |  | 21.4                   |
| 4,455  |  | 100.0                  |

of Santurce,

**TABLE 6**  
**Main areas of residential concentration of the Dominican-born population in**  
**San Juan, Puerto Rico, 2000**

| NEIGHBORHOOD  | AREA OF SAN JUAN | NUMBER | PERCENT OF RESIDENTS<br>WHO ARE DOMINICAN |
|---------------|------------------|--------|-------------------------------------------|
| Barrio Obrero | Santurce         | 3,144  | 27.6                                      |
| López Sicardó | Río Piedras      | 1,196  | 8.7                                       |
| Quintana      | Hato Rey         | 1,044  | 12.0                                      |
| Capetillo     | Río Piedras      | 995    | 44.7                                      |
| San José      | Hato Rey         | 933    | 4.8                                       |
| María Moczó   | Santurce         | 846    | 39.4                                      |
| Calle Loíza   | Santurce         | 742    | 34.3                                      |
| Herrera       | Santurce         | 624    | 32.7                                      |
| Gandul        | Santurce         | 598    | 27.9                                      |
| Buen Consejo  | Río Piedras      | 595    | 21.6                                      |
| Seboruco      | Santurce         | 545    | 26.7                                      |
| Las Palmas    | Santurce         | 544    | 19.4                                      |
| Las Casas     | Santurce         | 531    | 7.8                                       |
| Figueroa      | Santurce         | 511    | 25.7                                      |

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce □2003□

#### ECONOMIC INCORPORATION

Census data collected between 1970 and 1990 (the most recent occupational data are not yet available by national origin) confirm the presence of two main waves of Dominican immigrants in Puerto Rico. As the Dominican sociologist José del Castillo (1989) has pointed out, a largely middle class and legal wave migrated from the Dominican Republic during the 1960s, whereas a mostly working class and increasingly undocumented flow has occurred since the 1980s. In 1970, Dominican immigrants had a higher proportion of high-status workers, such as managers and professionals, than natives of Puerto Rico (see table 7). An early demographic study even described Dominicans in Puerto Rico as an occupationally “select group,” a “privileged” minority, and “an elite from an educational viewpoint” (Vázquez Calzada and Morales del Valle 1979: 18, 31, 33). This characterization coincides with other

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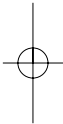
POLITICAL INCORPORATION

The immigrants' incorporation into Puerto Rican politics has not been well documented, partly because the Island's Electoral Commission does not release breakdowns of voting patterns by national origin. However, Dominican community leaders have begun to participate actively in Puerto Rican political campaigns, supporting both pro-Commonwealth and pro-statehood candidates for governor in the last elections (Iturrondo 2000). In 2000, a Dominican woman, Claribel Martínez-Marmolejos, was elected to the San Juan municipal legislature, but not as a spokesperson for the Dominican community. In a recent election held to replace a local representative, the Dominican candidate Pedro Ruiz obtained only 10.7 percent of the votes in San Juan (Rosario 2003). Unlike Dominicans in New York, Dominicans in San Juan are not well represented in municipal and state assemblies.

At this point, the ideological preferences of Dominicans in Puerto Rico seem divided. Until recently, the immigrants were primarily concerned with the politics of their homeland rather than with their host society. Accordingly, they were basically organized around the three major political parties of the Dominican Republic (the PRD, the PLD, and the PRSC), not those of Puerto Rico. In any case, most have not become U.S. citizens and therefore cannot vote in local elections, referenda, or plebiscites. Between 1972 and 2002, only 12,465 Dominicans were naturalized in San Juan (table 9). This figure represents 10.5 percent of all Dominicans admitted to the Island since 1966. The recent constitutional amendment allowing for dual citizenship in the Dominican Republic may soon increase the naturalization rate of Dominicans in Puerto Rico as well as in the continental United States. It remains unclear when Dominicans will have a decisive impact on municipal politics, especially in San Juan.

TABLE 9  
Dominicans naturalized as U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico, 1972–2002

| YEAR | NUMBER   | YEAR | NUMBER   | YEAR | NUMBER     | YEAR | NUMBER     |
|------|----------|------|----------|------|------------|------|------------|
| 1972 | .....123 | 1980 | .....332 | 1988 | .....710   | 1996 | .....0     |
| 1973 | .....142 | 1981 | .....502 | 1989 | .....512   | 1997 | .....223   |
| 1974 | .....177 | 1982 | .....404 | 1990 | .....6     | 1998 | .....952   |
| 1975 | .....125 | 1983 | .....211 | 1991 | .....512   | 1999 | .....1,373 |
| 1976 | .....176 | 1984 | .....231 | 1992 | .....1,208 | 2000 | .....305   |
| 1977 | .....256 | 1985 | .....305 | 1993 | .....1,116 | 2001 | .....301   |



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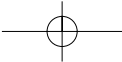
### SOCIAL CLUBS

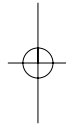
According to anthropologist Eugenia Georges (1984: 22–23), Dominican social clubs in New York “have as their overtly stated objective to bring members together for informal socializing, as well as more formally organized activities such as competitive sports, raffles, dances, lectures, and so on.” Dominicans have established several recreational associations in Puerto Rico, such as La Casa

TABLE 10

Main Dominican organizations in Puerto Rico, ca. 2000

| ORGANIZATION                                                                               | YEAR<br>FOUNDED | MAIN<br>LOCATION | CURRENT<br>REPRESENTATIVE   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>POLITICAL PARTIES</b>                                                                   |                 |                  |                             |
| Social Christian Reformist Party (PRSC)                                                    | 1963            | Santurce         | Martín Taveras Guzmán       |
| Dominican Liberation Party (PLD)                                                           | 1973            | Río Piedras      | Ismael Luna                 |
| Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD)                                                        | 1966            | Santurce         | Rolando Acosta              |
| <b>HOMETOWN ASSOCIATIONS</b>                                                               |                 |                  |                             |
| Amigos de Cotuí                                                                            | ?               | Santurce         | Cristina Salas de Saviñón   |
| Amigos de Jarabacoa                                                                        | ?               | ?                | Generoso Hernández          |
| Asociación de Veganos                                                                      | 1996            | Santurce         | Frank Capellán              |
| Asociación Hijos y Amigos de Puerto Plata                                                  | 1994            | ?                | Rosa Torréns                |
| Asociación Hijos y Amigos de La Romana                                                     | ?               | ?                | Luis Antonio Island Eusebio |
| <b>RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATION</b>                                                               |                 |                  |                             |
| Asociación 21 de enero                                                                     | 1980            | Río Piedras      | Reynaldo Cruz               |
| <b>SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CLUBS</b>                                                           |                 |                  |                             |
| Asociación Cultural Antillana                                                              | ?               | ?                | ?                           |
| Centro Cultural Dominicano                                                                 | ?               | Santurce         | ?                           |
| Casa Dominicana del Oeste                                                                  | 1977            | Mavagüez         | Paulina Concepción          |
| Club Cultural Dominicanos Unidos                                                           | 1973            | Santurce         | Fernando Rodríguez          |
| Comunidad de Confraternidad Dominicana                                                     | 1992            | Trujillo Alto    | Francisco Cabrera           |
| Fraternidad de Dominicanos Radicados en Puerto Rico                                        | ?               | Cayey            | ?                           |
| <b>CIVIC AND PROFESSIONAL GROUPS</b>                                                       |                 |                  |                             |
| Asociación de Ingenieros, Arquitectos y Agrimensores Dominicanos Residentes de Puerto Rico | 1980            | ?                | José Acevedo Alfam          |
| Asociación de Investigadores y Profesores Universitarios Dominicanos en Puerto Rico        | 1986            | Río Piedras      | César Lozano                |





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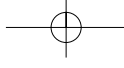
includes a wide range of people, some commercial, and some targeted engineers, architects, and artists to create jobs as the Concilio Nacional de Dominicanos. Dominicans are fewer, weaker, and less organized than such groups in the United States. Organizations have been formed in the communication, March 16, 1993, and the United States. The United States is in the host country. The United States is integrating into the United States. Third, the constant presence of the United States and the United States and followers. The United States is against the creation of a new United States or their civil rights.

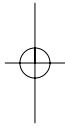
legalize their status and eventually “ask for” their sons and daughters, who remain back home under the care of grandparents, uncles and aunts, and other close kin.

For many Dominican women, the migration experience represents a significant rupture in their traditional family structure. In our sample, Dominican women headed 56 percent of all households, with or without husbands present. Barely half of all Dominican households were nuclear families; the rest were extended families or single-person households (Duany 1990). In many cases, husbands and children were temporarily separated from their wives and mothers as a result of migration. Thus, migration is often the cause or the effect of marital disruption and divorce. Such shifts in gender and family roles are primarily due to women’s incorporation into the paid labor force, as well as changing fertility patterns, and frequently lead to more egalitarian relations between men and women within the household. As a result, men are more likely than women to plan to return to the Dominican Republic, where they can reestablish traditional male authority patterns. Dominican women in Puerto Rico as well as in the continental United States tend to postpone going back home, because they feel they might lose their more autonomous position as wives, mothers, and workers (see Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Guarnizo 1995; Pessar 1995). Many Dominican women recognize that Dominican men are *machistas* who believe they have the right to control women, and resist their subordination to male domination (Hernández and López 1997; Ricourt 2002).

#### THE PROBLEM OF RACIAL IDENTITY

Elsewhere I have documented the difficulties faced by most Dominicans in Puerto Rico on account of their skin color (Duany 1998). The main problem is that the vast majority of Dominicans consider themselves *indios* (literally “Indians,” figuratively brown-skinned), whereas most Puerto Ricans classify them as black or mulatto. Several authors have pointed out that Puerto Ricans tend to represent Dominicans as darker-skinned than themselves, underline their Negroid facial features and hair texture, and treat them accordingly (Cruz Caraballo 1998; López Carrasquillo 1999; Martínez-San Miguel 2003). This contradiction between the immigrants’ public perception and self-concept is one of their key impediments to full integration into Puerto Rican society. Hence, Dominicans often experience the intense stigmatization, stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion to which all people of African origin are subjected in Puerto Rico and other countries. The racialization of Dominican immigrants permeates their incorporation into Puerto Rican society—from finding jobs and housing to schooling and marriage.





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Puerto Rico have n their socio- es have examined o, such as their da Martínez-San esentations aspora in Puerto is concluded that tivity in the some Dominican onal culture to to the United aphic fieldwork is ce of transnational

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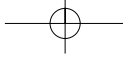
Piedras in March 2003, but without official links to the New York organization.) Does this mean that transnational forms of organizing are less effective among Dominicans in Puerto Rico than in the continental United States? If so, how can community leaders strengthen their capacity to represent the immigrant population vis-à-vis the host as well as sending societies? What are the costs and benefits of promoting transnational grassroots organizations among the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and the United States?

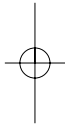
#### IMPACT ON PUBLIC SERVICES

Very little research has been conducted on Dominicans' use of government services in Puerto Rico, although much public apprehension about Dominican immigration on the Island hinges on these topics. A recent report by Puerto Rico's Education Department found 3,581 Dominican-born students in the Island's public schools, mostly in San Juan (Cámara de Diputados 2002: 55). In some schools in Santurce, more than 28 percent of the students are Dominican (Cruz Caraballo 1998). The increasing presence of Dominican students (as well as the children of return migrants from the U.S. mainland) poses a great challenge to the Puerto Rican educational system. Among other things, it raises the issue of cultural diversity within the Island's population and suggests the need to update the curriculum, textbook materials, teaching and counseling strategies, and extracurricular activities. Under the former Secretary of Education, sociologist César A. Rey, who has collaborated with our research on Dominican immigrants, the Department of Education has begun to incorporate the topic into public school activities. However, no official statement on educational policy toward the immigrants has been made. Unfortunately, Dominicans are routinely scapegoated for their supposed abuse of government services. Future researchers should look closely at the immigrants' reliance on the public health system, including their folk medical beliefs and practices; their public housing patterns; and their degree of welfare dependence in Puerto Rico.

#### REMITTANCES

One aspect of the transnational ties forged by Dominican migrants that has received increasing attention in academic and policymaking circles is the money they send back home. Several studies conducted in Puerto Rico have found that Dominicans devote a large share of their income to maintain their families in the





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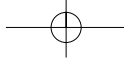
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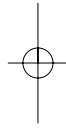
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their growing numbers, they have not attained a proportionate degree of political empowerment, partly because most are either undocumented or have not become U.S. citizens. Economically and politically, the Dominican population is still marginal to Puerto Rican society, but not to Dominican society. Increasing reliance on remittances is the clearest sign of the migrants' continuing presence back home.

Transnational ideas and practices characterize much of the daily life of Dominicans in Puerto Rico. The three major political parties from the Dominican Republic continue to attract large followings among the immigrants, dividing their ideological loyalties and fragmenting their sense of community. Class, regional, gender, racial, and legal differences contribute to the further splintering of Dominican associations, both formal and informal. Nonetheless, many Dominicans have managed to reconstruct their cultural identity in a transnational context. The growing Dominican presence in Santurce and Río Piedras has visibly transformed the physical and cultural landscape of several neighborhoods, which now vie for the title of "Little Santo Domingo" or "Little Quisqueya." The Dominican influence in Puerto Rico is most evident in popular language, music, religion, and food preferences, although these should be studied in more detail. The immigrants have also made recent inroads into the local mass media—in radio, television, and the press—that help them to preserve their social and cultural ties to the Dominican Republic.

In short, Dominicans in Puerto Rico are key players in the construction of a dense transnational field among the Dominican Republic, the United States, and other countries. Among other things, they represent a significant proportion of the multimillion-dollar remittance market, as well as investments for small businesses, construction, and tourism in the Dominican Republic. They regularly raise large amounts of funds for Dominican presidential candidates at the same time that they have begun to participate in Puerto Rican elections. They travel frequently between San Juan and Santo Domingo, especially during Christmas vacations and other ritual occasions, carrying gifts, letters, cassettes, and bags full of merchandise to be resold back home. They constantly circulate capital, goods, and information, as well as values, images, and identities, between their home and host countries. In sum, Dominicans in Puerto Rico have contributed substantially to redraw the symbolic contours of their nation-state through a wide variety of transnational practices.





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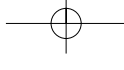
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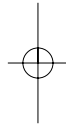
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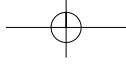
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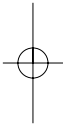
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