

**THE CHALLENGE OF IDENTITY:  
THE DOMINICAN EXPERIENCE IN CALIFORNIA**

by

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## **THE CHALLENGE OF IDENTITY: THE DOMINICAN EXPERIENCE IN CALIFORNIA**

This inquiry examined the stories of four generations of Dominican women in a single family who immigrated to California. The use of storytelling in collecting oral histories of each woman was a powerful tool. It embraced the collective and collaborative process among and between the women, made space for authentic voice, and allowed the academic process of research to be present without getting in the way. This research began with the question of identity within physical space, the identity of the principle researcher, a Dominican American woman living in California questioning issues of race, ethnicity, and culture, and the perception of living silently between two worlds and belonging to neither. To understand this dilemma, it was important to understand the stories of the women who came before her in order to uncover the history of how she came to be Dominican in America. It was also important to compare the stories of her sisters—to find out if they too felt that they lived a bicultural existence—and if so, what this meant to them. The ultimate goal was to predict what will happen to the subsequent generations of children in this family through the stories of the researcher's oldest niece.

The elder women in this study, who are known as *Abuela* and *Mami*, migrated to the United States from Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic in the early 1950s. They will be identified as the immigrant generation and not as first-generation American, even though they both were naturalized. As neither of them identify as American or Dominican American, I acknowledge their self-identity. They do, however, represent the first and second living generations in the family. The racial, political, and social climate in the United States from the 1950s through the 1970s was significant in understanding the process of migration and assimilation, and the shaping of cultural identity. It was due to the aforementioned issues that I situated a significant amount of this research in immigration and migration theory.

The three sisters, myself included, were identified in this study as *Hermana*, *Gemela* and *Yo*. Our stories were significant in revealing a more contemporary understanding of what happens for first-generation American born individuals in navigating between a Dominican culture and American identity. Finally, the second generation American born, or the fourth living generation, is represented through *Sobrino*, the youngest in the group, yet the most important link in holding the future of this family. Her children represent the fifth living generation in the family.

### U.S. Immigration Policy

It is important to begin this study with a look at U.S. immigration policy to understand the social, political, and racial context of migration and the immigrant experience. Immigration policy has been a national debate ensuing with the immigration and naturalization laws of the 1790s, which state that naturalization is authorized for “free white persons,” a racial requirement lasting until 1952 (Crawford, N.D.). Prior to 1965, U.S. immigration laws discriminated against persons from non-European countries (Manrique & Manrique, 1999). From 1798 to 1965, the laws included: The Alien and Sedition Acts 1798, for foreigner deportation; The Chinese Exclusion Act 1882; list of undesirables ineligible for immigration 1891; first language requirement [English] 1906;

Gentlemen's Agreement 1907 (stating that Japanese laborers can not travel to the U.S., but can work in Hawaii agricultural industry); literacy requirement 1917; Asia as a barred zone 1917; national-origins quota system for Northern Europeans 1921; Johnson-Reed Act 1924, to preserve America's racial composition; token quota for Chinese immigration 1943; Internal Security Act 1950, which bars admission to foreigners whose activities might be subversive to national security; and the McCarran-Walter Act 1952, to retain the national-origins system and internal security restrictions. Racial and ethnic biases not only made it challenging to enter the U.S., but also helped to create a system of institutionalized racism and white supremacy. The status quo was that the dominant group enjoyed the privileges of exclusive White Anglo Saxon Protestant–America.

The 1960s produced a change in racial politics and policy. The Civil Rights Movement gave rise to Affirmative Action in employment practices and college admissions policy, Black Liberation ideology in cultural movements, and Ethnic Studies courses in college curricula. People were exercising their birthrights through cultural and ethnic identification. The largest wave of immigration, the one responsible for the Latinoization of the U.S. came after the struggles of this great movement towards civil rights in America. (Suarez-Orozco & Paez, 2002) It became easier for Latino immigrants to enter the U.S. in 1965 based on the elimination of the racial criteria and adding the family reunification provision (Crawford, N.D. ; Pessar, 1995; Goris-Rosario, 1994), even though there was an annual quota of 20,000 per country (Crawford, N.D.; Grasmuck & Pessar, 1991). The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 gave amnesty to 3 million undocumented residents and simultaneously punished employers who hired illegal immigrants. The Immigration Act of 1990 raised the limit for legal immigration to 700,000 people per year. There's a paradoxical nature to immigration and naturalization laws that imply certain [individuals] need not apply. Once immigrants gain entry, the query of identity is amassed from public forms and questionnaires, within institutional systems, and in housing, political and economic environments. I question the motives for this inquiry. Is this for the purpose of cultural and ethnic subjugation or to keep the dominant culture at the apex of social, political and economic systems?

Dr. Stanley Renshon (2001), in a report published through the Center for Immigration Studies in Washington, DC argues,

The United States traditionally has accepted immigrants with the assumption that they, and their children, would eventually become anchored to an American identity. This assumption has increasingly come under attack from those who reject American's inclusionary pluralism in favor of a "multicultural manifesto" that equates assimilation with domination . . . in a democratically pluralist country like the United States is it important to have a primary one [culture]. Is democratic inclusionary pluralism compatible with the cultural primacy of certain core American traditions like individualism, opportunity, merit, and responsibility?

He concludes it's not only important, but also necessary.

In a press release Dr. Steven Camarota (2001), director of Research for the Center for Immigration Studies, was quoted as saying,

We are currently in the midst of a huge social experiment. No country has ever attempted to incorporate and assimilate 31 million newcomers into its society, and the experiment is by no means over. If current policies remain unchanged, at least

13 million legal and illegal immigrants, and probably more, will likely settle in the United States over the next decade.

Does this imply that there are currently too many immigrants and the experiment is failing due to acculturation, ethnic enclaves and/or cultural retention?

In a Census 2000 brief issued May 2001, 281.4 million residents were counted, of which 35.3 million or 12.5% were Hispanic (Guzman, 2001; Grieco & Cassidy, 2001). This excludes the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and the U.S. island areas. One-half of all Latinos live in two states, California and Texas, with 11.0 million or 31.1% living in California. Los Angeles, and San Diego were ranked two and seven respectively, among the ten largest U.S. cities in total population and Hispanic population. San Jose, California was ranked eleven. Furthermore, East Los Angeles, Santa Ana, El Monte, and Oxnard, all California cities, were listed among the ten cities with the highest percent of Hispanic populations—100,000 or more (Guzman, 2001).

Within this growing Latino immigrant population, Dominicans are one of the fastest growing immigrant groups in the United States (Pedraza & Rumbaut, 1996; Pessar, 1995). Dominican migration began at the turn of the century with Dominican women emigrating in the late 1910s (Goris-Rosario, 1994). By the early 1930s there were probably fewer than 1000 Dominicans in New York. During the Trujillo reign (Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, was president of the Dominican Republic from 1930-1961), emigration to the U.S. occurred on a very small scale: from 1931-1940 the Dominican population grew by only 150; between 1941-1950 it increased by 5,627; and from 1951-1960 9,897 Dominicans came to the U.S. Between 1961 and 1970, a massive migration wave began with 93,292 Dominicans migrating; accelerated waves migrated in the 1970s and 1980s with 148,135 between 1971 and 1980, and 252,035 between 1981 and 1990. The years 1991 to 1998 produced 300,065 Dominican migrants to the U.S. (Castro & Boswell, 2002; Goris-Rosario, 1994). The 2000 Census reported 765,000 Dominicans living in the United States making up 2.2 percent of the U.S. Latino population, fourth after Mexicans, Puerto Rican and Cubans respectively (Castro & Boswell, 2002); Guzman, 2001). The later numbers have been disputed by Castro, Boswell, and the Dominican American National Roundtable, who ascertained that the U.S. Dominican population estimate is 1,014,879 using U.S. Census-Current Population Surveys CPS 97, 98, 99 and 2000. John Logan (2001), director of Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research at the University of Albany, calculated Dominicans at 1,121,257, a 109% growth from the 1990 Census.

Dominican populations are primarily concentrated in New York with an estimated 650,000, followed by New Jersey with 143,000 and Florida with 107,000. California ranks 8<sup>th</sup> on the list with 9,637 Dominicans counted in 2000, behind Massachusetts 73,646, Rhode Island 25,187, Pennsylvania 20,804, and Connecticut 13,326 (Logan, 2001). While one-half of all Latinos live in California and Texas, they rate eight and nine, respectively, with Dominican populations. Research on five generations of Dominican women is necessary because it gives voice to the immigrant experiences of a group of women who have been largely excluded from research studies on immigration. Research on the Dominican experience in California is extremely limited, as is the articulation of Dominican women's experiences. This study examines the experiences of four generations of women in a Dominican family living in California with five living generations.

## Personal Context: My Story

How do you identify racially? That is a complicated question, and not fun when you are living through it.  
Itzigsohn & Dore-Cabral, 2000, p. 225

I never knew I was different until I was identified by my third grade teacher as being Black on a questionnaire she was filling out for all the students in my class. It was 1968, Compton, California. Some students were asked to identify their ethnicity and given a choice, i.e., Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, other. I wasn't given a choice, I was identified based on the color of my skin; although I knew who I was, I wasn't given the opportunity to self-identify. "Yo soy Dominicana, my family is Dominican." "What's that?" one of my classmates asked; that was not an option given. "That's who I am," I replied to the student and to my teacher. "Where is that?" A question familiar to me; when I explained the Dominican Republic I would initiate a geography lesson. "It's an island in the Caribbean, on the other side of Haiti, next to Jamaica, between Cuba and Puerto Rico." The looks were even more confused, not only from the student who asked the question, but from all of my classmates and probably my teacher as well. She informed me that Dominican was not an option and I would have to be classified as Black. "What are the other choices?" I asked, not trying to be difficult, but my grandmother always told me that I was Dominican. "Tus Padres son Dominicanos y tu tambien," she would tell me. My teacher read off the options as they appeared on her questionnaire: White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and other. Now I was confused. I couldn't identify with any of the options given so I told her I would ask my mother and let her know when I came to school the next day. When my mother arrived home from work I asked her, "Mom, what am I?" The perplexed look on her face said it all. "What do you mean?" she asked. I began the story as it happened in my class that morning. "You are a person," she said outraged. "If anyone asks you again, you let them know you are a person and if they want to put something on their form they can mark Other." Well, that was her answer, but not mine. I knew I was not Other, I was Dominican, just like my grandmother told me. (Mañon, 2004, pgs. 9-10)

This story would stay with me for over 25 years and lead me on a personal journey of self-exploration to my dissertation: *The Experience of Immigration and Acculturation of Four Generations of Dominican Women in California*. This was a personal exploration that acknowledged the impact of immigration and acculturation around issues of growing up in California in a family with Dominican roots, cultural and gender identity, raising children, and subsequent generations. The data for this inquiry were story: my story and five other stories. My intention was to focus on the experiences of these women to understand how culture changes over time and becomes altered among generations. My aim was to create a space in which stories could be shared and

meanings discovered; to understand the essence of each woman's life, who she is within the family, and her identity as a Dominican woman living in California.

I have witnessed my mother's cultural identity shift from being Dominican to American and back to Dominican, depending on the advantages and/or constraints of her environment and societal situation. I observed my grandmother's challenges in maneuvering through and understanding American culture, and her explanations of how things are different in the Dominican Republic, in [her] country. I have learned to live in two cultures, having a strong identification and understanding of my own biculturalism, while at the same time experiencing both my mother and grandmother's quests for acceptance in a land not their own. I experienced my twin sister's comfort, pride and command of having an African American identity in both her professional and personal life, and what I perceived as a limited need to identify with or acknowledge her Dominican roots. I watched my older sister transform, at will, from American to Dominican in social environments, and display with pride the Dominican flag on her car and cook Dominican food at family gatherings. I questioned if my sisters acknowledge living in the same realms of biculturalism as I do; realms that offer empowerment and freedom of identity, while providing strategies to maneuver between two worlds. I now acknowledge my niece bringing forth our family's fifth living generation, her children, my grandnephew and grandniece; I wonder if identifying as Dominican is important to her, or if it's easier just being American.

Every time I travel from the U.S. to Santo Domingo, I reclaim my roots; my roots that extend to Mama Africa via Santo Domingo. The place my Abuela constantly reminds me of, "Tu eres Dominicana." As I question my place in the world, I question, "Where do I really belong? Am I too American to be Dominican, too Latina to be African American?" Caught in between two cultures, two countries, wanting one, and not claiming the other. During a trip to Santo Domingo, flying from New York I was once again reminded of this complexity. My Americanness was even more prevalent. I dared not enter into the conversations of the Dominicans from New York waiting for the flight based on my fear of being exposed. An Americanized Dominican, whose Spanish was extremely limited. Most Dominicans on the East Coast spoke Spanish, especially those who traveled back and forth between New York and Santo Domingo. Maybe I should have flown directly from California. Next came my encounter on the plane. As the flight attendant passed out embarkation cards to Dominicans on the plane, she strolled down the aisle asking, "Dominicano/Dominicana?" My heart sank as I quietly answered no, but knowing in my heart the answer was yes. I understood she was really asking "where you born in the Dominican Republic?" In that moment, as I traveled to the place of my parents, grandparents, and most of my cousins' birth, my American identity rose to reclaim me. I would have to buy a tourist visa to enter, thus identifying as a tourist. Once again being placed between two cultures, yet belonging to neither. (Mañjon, 2004, pgs.11-12)

This inquiry was a look at the impact of immigration and acculturation on successive generations of women in a single family that immigrated to the United States. The principal researcher in collaboration with co-researchers examined their own stories

to understand the role immigration and acculturation had on the cultural fabric of family life and their individual and collective identities. The researchers collectively embarked on a journey of identifying what it meant to be Dominican in California by investigating the immigration experiences of *Abuela* and *Mami*; illuminating personal and professional stories of *Hermana*, *Gemela* and *Yo* on what it meant to grow up in family with Dominican roots; and looking at the next generation through the inclusion of *Sobrina's* experiences.

#### Purpose of the Study

Anyone subjected to the intellectual debates on immigration of the past twenty years might easily conclude that immigrant assimilation is a thing of the past. At one extreme, right-wing nativists fear a collapse of the nation's common culture, asserting that today's immigrants are unwilling to become part and parcel of the nation's social fabric. At the other end of the spectrum, left-wing academic multiculturalists argue that today's immigrants should not be expected to assimilate into the culture they themselves have absorbed . . . Contemporary immigrant families overwhelmingly do what newcomers have always done: slowly, often painfully, but quite assuredly, embrace the cultural norms that are part of the United States.

Rodriguez, 1999

The purpose of this research was to explore the effect on four generations of Dominican women in a single family of immigration to the United States and acculturation into American culture. This exploration included sharing stories and being in dialogue with co-researchers; creating sacred and safe space through ritual; and re-examining beliefs and assumptions of identity in clarifying what it meant to be *Dominicana*. In examining my story, and the stories of my co-researchers, of what it is to be Dominican in America, we explored the differences and similarities in our experiences, relationships, successes, and challenges in our lives. Using organic inquiry (Clements, Ettl, Jenett, & Shields, 1997) as a tool to collect and share stories, my intention was to understand what role immigration and acculturation have had on the cultural fabric of family and to understand my own translation and transformation of identity. Organic inquiry is a new research methodology rooted in transpersonal psychology, spirituality, and feminist research. Its uniqueness and strength is that it allows for the inclusion of academic rigor with nontraditional collaborative methods such as nonacademic co-researchers and the use of fiction and poetry in building theory.

My protracted search to uncover my ancestral identity and reclaim my self-identity has produced a pursuit for an appropriate label. As Dominican writer Nelly Rosario (2000) explores her own identity in America, she reveals, "After twenty-seven years it's still hard for me to believe that I am that buoying woman . . . Who the hell am I, really, I ask all the time, and with more probing, who do I want to ultimately become?" (p. 156). Suarez-Orozco and Paez (2002) also focused on bicultural identity and being Latino/a in America. They elucidate, "Significant numbers of Puerto Ricans and

Dominicans are said to live dual lives- engaging in a double consciousness, cultivating dual loyalties, living serially between their islands and the mainland” (p. 6).

According to Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral (2000), Dominican immigrants face the tasks of finding a place within the American symbolic racial and ethnic classification systems and of forging an assertive self-identity and group identity. They further explain, Immigrants can choose among different identities in order to gain access to certain material benefits, to achieve what they perceive as higher social recognition, or to recreate an imagined community that will provide them with a sense of understanding and control of their social reality. (pp. 226-227)

Oboler (1992) argues that there is a generation of Latinos/as who were born or raised in the United States and who grew up between two cultures, belonging simultaneously to both and to neither of them and experiencing discrimination as Latinos/as.

My own transformation was a consequence of this investigation. I have been emergent in my quest for an understanding of my cultural identity. Questions I contemplated include: Am I Dominican, American, or both? How should I identify, as Latin American, Latina, Raza, Afro Caribbean, African American? What is my racial construct, Hispanic, Black, Mulatto? If my first language is English, does that make me more American than Dominican? I often self-identify as being Latina, Afro Latina, Dominicana, or Raza. My own process of transformation was not interchangeable; it was an introspective look and understanding of who I am. As I explored where I came from, I look to the stories of the generations before me. My transformation included understanding my family history, learning my parents’ language, spending time with my family in the Dominican Republic, cooking Dominican food, and being an active participant in Dominican cultural activities.

Waters (1999) described how first generation immigrants from the West Indies identify themselves according to their national origins. She further described the dilemma facing the children of these immigrants. Their parents voice opinions about American Blacks including the responses of Whites regarding foreign-born Blacks. In many cases, because they lack their parents’ accent and other identifying characteristics, other people, including their peers, are likely to identify them as American Blacks.

Hence, this inquiry process was one of discovery—to discover the journeys and stories of my family, to understand how those journeys affected my life experiences and the experiences of those before me. This process was also a discovery for my co-researchers to define their experiences and for all of us to explore our collective experiences.

#### Birds of Passage: Immigration and Migration

I’ve often heard *Mami* refer to Dominicans as “Birds of Passage.” Finally asking her where that came from and what it meant, she explained, it was a common term used because Dominicans come and go so much. What I have come to understand, from watching family members’ movement patterns, we [Dominicans] live and work here, send money to family members in the Dominican Republic, visit when we can and ultimately, some of us do go back to live.

The examination of Latino migration and immigration in U.S. history focuses primarily on labor migration, followed by family reunification and escape from political

persecution (Grasmuck & Pessar, 1991; Pessar, 1997; Carrasco, 1998; Hendricks, 1974; Guarnizo, 1997). We are told that America, the land of the free where opportunity awaits, provides possibility for those who seek a better life, economically, socially, educationally and politically. For some that is the case, but for many that opportunity has many stipulations. With a global economy and mass media to perpetuate the myth of those opportunities that await one, many immigrants feed into the hype only to arrive in America and encounter very hard work and minimum wages. Even for those with college degrees and work experience, the land of opportunity may not always present the optimum prospect. Unless, of course, your social, educational, political, or economic status provide you the luxury of moving into a class and race structure reserved for the upwardly mobile in this society. My in-laws immigrated to this country in 1989 as political exiles from Surinam, South America, all with college degrees from Holland and professional work experience as teachers, government workers, and health professionals only to find jobs as nannies, newspaper deliverers, and janitors. Within my own family history, my great grandparents were landowners and entrepreneurs, only to come to their demise due to political differences with the Trujillo regime, which ultimately caused their emigration.

The immigration policy debate in this country has a very interesting history marked by discussions of labor economy, particularly focused on Latinos in the U.S. According to Gilbert Paul Carrasco (1998) during periods of labor shortage, Latinos were a welcomed work force. But in times of labor surplus or economic stress, their presence was not wanted.

Americans, led by various nativist organizations and movements such as the Know-Nothing Party in the 1850s or, more recently, U.S. English or California's "Save Our State" campaign, have blamed immigrants for the country's economic woes. Such xenophobic bigotry has resulted in calls for anti-immigrant legislation (including restrictions on immigration for whichever group was targeted at the time), attempts to deny public services (including elimination of bilingual education for school-aged immigrants and the American citizen children of undocumented immigrants), and, ultimately, deportation. (p. 77)

California's history is of particular interest, as it has become a much sought after destination for immigrants. Carrasco (1998, pp. 79-84) further details Latino migration to the U.S. from the Gold Rush with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 to Modern Labor Programs under the Mc-Carran-Walter Immigration Act of 1952. He chronicles Mexican laborers working in gold mines and on sugar beet farms under low-paying, dangerous, and discriminatory practices leading to restrictive legislation directed against them, even though they were skilled laborers in most cases. During World War I through the Great Depression, Asians and southern and eastern Europeans were kept out, allowing Mexicans in through the foreign-born labor program—the Immigration Act of 1917. The Great Depression pushed them out again through unemployment or jobs that were taken by Anglos, and the denial of welfare benefits. With the end of the Depression and the beginning of World War II, the U.S. once again found itself in need of foreign labor.

Cognizant of the deportation and repatriation of Latinos during the Great Depression, the Mexican government, to protect its citizens from harsh treatment and discrimination, entered into a formal agreement with the United States. The

Mexican Labor Program, or the Bracero Program as it is more commonly known, was first implemented on August 4, 1942. (Carrasco ,1998, p. 80) Unfortunately, the formal agreement was not adhered to by agriculture or the U.S. government and Mexican migrant labors were once again exposed to unfair and racist treatment. After the war, the labor shortage ended and the Bracero Program ended in 1947.

Continuing the cycle, the outbreak of the Korean War created a new labor shortage and another bracero program–Public Law 78–in 1951. However, the end of the first bracero program of 1947 did not yield an exodus back to Mexico for undocumented workers, nor did Public Law 78, which ended in 1964. Due to the rise in undocumented workers in industrial jobs the U.S. Attorney General ordered a crackdown on illegal immigration and a massive deportation drive, “Operation Wetback” (Carrasco, 1998, p. 83). More than 3.7 million Latinos were deported between 1954 and 1959, including American citizens of Mexican decent. The McCarran-Walter Immigration Act of 1952 made it possible to continue importation of Mexican farm workers to ensure adequate laborers. This Act also established the “H-2 Program in which the U.S. Department of Labor had the power to admit foreign labor for temporary jobs if able, willing, and qualified domestic workers could not be found” (p. 84). In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act legalized undocumented workers in the U.S. who had been working here from January 1, 1982 through May 4, 1988.

Nicholas Capaldi (1997) articulates a contemporary debate that juxtaposes immigration with national identity, conflicting philosophical political visions, and political stereotypes. He argues that there are two dimensions to this debate: factual and normative. The factual debate includes immigration definition, differences in legal vs. illegal, and definition of a refugee, an alien, and political asylum. The focus on the normative debate is fundamental to the values of the U.S. and its impact on immigration policy, assimilation of immigrants based on such values, the traditional role of immigration history, present policy, and the influence of immigration policy on other domestic public policy. “Who we think we are and what we think we are trying to do as a nation determines what kind of immigration policy we should have” (p. 10). He further ascertains that the U.S. subscribes to the fundamental norm of ‘liberal culture’.

The kind of culture that emerged in Western Europe in the post-Renaissance and post-Reformation period and eventually spread to North America and beyond. Individual rights, rule of law, a republican or representative form of government, and a free market economy can identify this culture. The moral framework incorporates: 1. a claim to universality; 2. the assertion of the fundamental moral worth of the free and responsible individual; and 3. the recognition of the role of the family as the key institution in nurturing a free and responsible individual. (Capaldi, 1997, p. 11)

He further broaches the issues of global culture, unity and parameters of diversity within that unity. In looking at immigration within this framework, he raised the question, “What are the implications for immigration of the foregoing vision of the United States of America?” The beginning of U.S. history gave preference to Northern and Western European immigrants. The nineteenth century accepted over ten million immigrants, mostly of Irish and German Catholic decent. The anti-immigration movement of that time came from the Protestant Anglo-Saxon communities. This gave rise to the Native

American Party of the 1850s thus influencing the expression 'nativist' (Capaldi, 1997). Exclusion of certain groups is part and parcel of the U.S. cultural fabric, using the threat to liberal culture as a scapegoat and formulating the assumption that "everybody naturally wants to be like us [WASP] or would have no difficulty in becoming like us" (p. 18).

Arguments to eliminate immigration include isolationism, the obligation to protect itself in a hostile world and to advance its own national interest, and the nativist, which argues immigration is to be opposed because the cost, stresses, and strains, primarily cultural, political, and economic threaten the balance of liberal culture (pp. 19-20). Arguments to augment immigration include: reform of immigration policy to increase certain groups of people to live up to the goals of liberal culture by gaining parity between minority and majority groups, and multiculturalists, who deem liberal culture as a bad thing.

Individualism, the rule of law, free market economies, and limited government are values that reflect accidental historical features of northwest Europe used to dominate and oppress peoples both within the borders of the U.S. and throughout the world. If the U.S. has a mission in it to disappear as a sovereign entity to be replaced by a world government, such as the United Nations but without the Security Council, in which all cultures, not nations, are to be respected.

Immigration should be permitted and encouraged in order to change totally the composition of the current population to reflect and better implement planetary heterogeneity. From this point of view, there may be no such thing as "illegal" immigration. (Capaldi, 1997, p. 20)

Although Dominican migration began at the turn of the twentieth century (Goris-Rosario, 1994), massive migration occurred between 1962 and 1966 (Torres-Saillant & Hernandez, 1998). Class structure, family ties, immigration policy of both receiving and sending countries, and political movements further examine how and why migration happens.

A massive migratory movement from a given society into another generally occurs as a result of several variables. It does not depend entirely on the will of the migrants . . . Depending on the specificities of the political moment, they [societies] may implement measures that seek either to curtail or to foment a migratory flow. Irrespective of what exactly may have activated the movement in question, or whether or not the home and the host countries have been completely aware of all its implications, it is unlikely that the mobility of people across national borders could develop without the consent, either formal or informal, of the gatekeepers of both societies (Torres-Saillant & Hernandez, 1998, pp. 36-37).

As with the Bracero Programs between Mexico and the U.S. mentioned earlier, the Dominican government and the U.S. also engaged in migration policy.

Visas and passports were widely issued to Dominicans seeking labor opportunity in the U.S. and to dissidents.

In the Dominican Republic the acquisition of a valid immigrant visa, and, to a lesser extent, a tourist nonimmigrant visa, has come to have cultural valuations not intended by the issuing country. Not only is it a formalized acknowledgement the holder possesses certain minimal prerequisites, but for some politically

oriented individuals it represents an escape hatch in case of difficulties. The need to leave the country is not necessarily confined to periods of great national crisis; it may also be necessary for individuals whose private political fortunes are suddenly endangered. (Hendricks, 1974, p. 57)

Patricia R. Pessar (1995) emphasizes the *candena* or the chain that links one immigrant to the other” (p. 11) as a way that Dominicans navigate the complexity of migration. She further explains how this process transcends the status of legal or illegal migration practices “to reunite the socially and culturally meaningful Dominican family” (p. 12). In my own family, my mother often talks about the ‘clannishness’ of our family and the unspoken expectation of all her children to be present to receive a relative coming from the Dominican Republic.

Grasmuck and Pessar (1991) discuss the dynamics between households and international migration. Citing work by Castells, 1975; Sassen-Koob, 1978; Sjaastad, 1962; and Rothenberg, 1977, they explain, “Studies of migration have generally focused either on macro-level trends in the political economies of labor exporting and labor-importing societies that stimulate migration, or micro-level processes influencing individuals’ decision to relocate” (p. 133). In more recent studies, the household as the basic unit of inquiry is being included (Weist, 1973; Dinerman, 1978; Wood 1982; Roberts, 1985). To further explain the household unit in the discussion on migration, two perspectives are included in the literature; the household as a moral economy exhibiting social solidarity and income-pooling among members in a single household and the role households play in developing survival strategies and economic gain (Grasmuck and Pessar, p. 133).

According to Folbre (1988), the household as a moral economy is organized according to principles of reciprocity, consensus, and altruism among members. The household as homogeneous unit implies that preferences must be shared and members’ economic resources must be pooled (Fapohunda, 1988; Becker, 1981). Wood defines the household as “a group that ensures its maintenance and reproduction by generating and disposing an income fund” (1981, p. 339). The critique of this perspective is its portrayal of households as passive social units whose members are collectively victimized by the market economy and its disregard of the moral economy (Grasmuck & Pessar, 1991, p. 136).

In the second perspective of survival strategies, the household adjusts itself to the larger socioeconomic and ecological system. Members of the household are seen as developing strategies to alter the effects of their social and physical environment (Wood, 1982; Pessar, 1982; Massey, Alarcon, Durand, and Gonzalez, 1987). These strategies can be characterized by economic motives of the household to survive. Roberts (1985) writes, “The household, when its size and composition allow, engages in a strategy of risk minimization through the allocation of its labor to different economic sectors and regions” (p. 7). So we see here that migration becomes contingent on a household’s consumption needs and productive capacity (Grasmuck & Pessar, 1991).

The primary dialogue of migration and immigration can be understood in accessing why individuals move across and between borders, how they are incorporated into their host societies and why some decide to return to their homeland (Brettell & Hollifield, 2000). To best understand these dynamics, migration theory employs an

interdisciplinary approach, which includes anthropology, sociology, economics, political science, law, history, and demographics. The areas most relevant to this inquiry incorporate an anthropological and sociological emphasis in attempting to “capture the experience of being an immigrant and the meaning, to the migrants themselves, of the social and cultural changes that result from leaving one context and entering another” (Brettell & Hollifield, 2000, p. 4).

In continuing to frame the questions, James F. Hollifield (2000) states that “international migration is the exception rather than the rule” basing this on the statistics of “only 125 million people live outside their country of origin” (138). He goes on to ask, “Why then should we bother to study it [migration], if most people are born, live and die in the same geographic area?” The answer, “international migration provokes a sense of crisis and has been steadily increasing as a result of social and economic forces that seem to be beyond the control of states and communities” (Massey, 1998; Sassen 1996). A variety of explanations given include the fear of the other or of those who are different (Barth, 1969; Levi-Strauss, 1952). Strain on resources and brain drain if the brightest and most talented people leave their home countries (Bhagwati, 1976). On the other hand, if those leaving are destitute, least educated, and have low levels of human and social capital, then they may pose a treat for the receiving society (Hollifield, 2000). Overpopulation and overcrowding can strain urban infrastructures and cause environmental damage, while saturated urban labor markets can drive down wages, hurting those who are at the bottom of the social ladder (Bouvier, 1992). Highly developed welfare states fear that immigrants will be a drain on the social service, health and education infrastructure, welfare, health care, and education, etc. (Borjas, 1990). On the other hand, one can look at migration in more positive outlooks such as providing remittances for sending societies and an influx of human capital and entrepreneurial talent for the receiving society (Chiswick, 1982; Russell, 1986; Simon, 1989). Whatever the case, the focus becomes the abundance or scarcity of resources, social or human capital of migrants, and the integration process into the receiving society (Hollifield, 2000).

### The Question of Identity

The question of identity as it pertains to the immigrant in America is divided between the pull to assimilate into the culture of the host society or the push to maintain one’s national and ethnic identity. Scholars, artists, cultural workers, politicians, and community leaders have all debated this issue and have postulated theories, ideologies, terms, and processes which include assimilation, Americanization, acculturation, integration, meting pot, cultural pluralism, cultural separatism, cultural diversity, multiculturalism, and nationalism. Mary C. Waters (1999) explores the issues of identity at they pertain to West Indian immigrants. She examines how the immigrant will self-identify and how people in the host country will identify that person. There is a difference between racial and ethnic identity choices, especially for Black Caribbeans, with intergenerational dynamics and identities of second-generation children of immigrants living a bicultural existence between their parent’s nationalistic identity and their own hyphenated American one. For Latinos of African ancestry in this country, these are all very salient issues.

In the New American book series, Torres-Saillant and Hernandez (1998) discuss the invisibility of Dominicans in most reference publications that claim to account for the ethnic groups that make up America and more specifically sources dealing with the Latino populations in the U.S. Dominicans were omitted from the chapter “Spanish-speaking Americans” in a book entitled *Spanish-Speaking People in the United States*, a guide to media and materials and from the bibliographic compendium *A Comprehensive Bibliography for the Study of American Minorities*. These resource materials all included Mexican Americans, Hispanos of New Mexico, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and in one instance designated Filipinos as Hispanics (p. 101). Bailey (2002) gives us a glimpse of how Dominican American high school students identify their race, culture and ethnicity. When asked, “What are you?” “What’s your race?” or “Where you’re from?” they answered to all—Dominican, Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino (pp. 156-157). Question of identity is very complicated and does not always fit into the ‘either/or’ construct or even the generic Hispanic category. It is very confusing to come to a new country or grow up in one in which your identity is non-existent. My own identity has been pushed and pulled in various directions. One day I’m Hispanic, the next I’m Latina, at home I’m Dominican and out in the world I’m perceived to be African American. To understand the identity question from both the immigrant and the host country, it is necessary to understand the process, objectives and outcomes of assimilation and acculturation.

#### *Assimilation*

Assimilation has come to be known through the metaphor of the “melting pot” a term coined by the playwright Israel Zangwill in 1908 (Salins, 1997). This metaphor suggests that all immigrants melt down their cultures, traditions and languages to become one ‘alloy’ that is best described as American. So, as one immigrates to this country, in order to participate fully as an American citizen and enjoy the benefits thereof, one must fully and totally become American. Horace Kallen argued that assimilation was “unrealistic, cruel and harmful to force new immigrants to shed their familiar, lifelong, cultural attributes as the price of admission to American society” (as quoted in Salins, 1997, p. 45). He offered instead the concept of cultural pluralism as a way “to provide conditions under which each [group] might attain the cultural perfection that is proper to its kind” (Gleason, 1980, p. 43). This concept was introduced in 1916, eight years after the publication of Zangwill’s *The Melting Pot* (Kallen, 1924). Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan (1963) in *Beyond the Melting Pot* suggested that the ‘melting pot’ was not working and ultimately that it did not happen. Then we observe sociologist Henry Fairchild (1992), also a critic of assimilation, who explained that natives were also changed by assimilation.

. . . saw no reason that native Americans [Caucasians] should give up any part of their cultural attributes to ‘melt’ into the alloy. If true assimilation were to occur, immigrants would have to abandon all their cultural baggage and conform to American ways. It is the immigrant who must undergo the entire transformation; the true member of the American nationality is not called upon to change in the least (p. 176).

During the 1920s and 1930s, the United States aggressively embraced assimilation through an Americanization movement. One such example can be

understood in the following example of a stage production at the English school in the U.S. for immigrant workers:

On the stage of Henry Ford's English school for immigrant workers was represented an immigrant ship. In front of it was a huge melting pot. Down the gangplank came the members of the class dressed in their national garbs and carrying luggage such as they carried when they landed in this country. Down they poured into the Ford melting pot and disappeared. Then teachers began to stir the contents of the pot with long ladles. Presently the pot began to boil over and out came the men dressed in their best American clothes and waving American flags. (Zunz, 1985, p. 55)

More recent day counter metaphors include: "rainbow coalition" by civil rights activist Jesse Jackson; "gorgeous mosaic" former New York Mayor David Dinkins; "salad bowl" former Congresswomen Shirley Chisholm; and "kaleidoscope" former chairperson of the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform Barbara Jordan (Salins, 1997, pp. 46-47). The common premise that these counter metaphors share is that ethnic groups can live together based on two conditions: 1) immigrants and Black Americans should never have to give up any of their original cultural attributes; and 2) there never can or will be a single unified national identity (p. 47). These metaphors could also be viewed as supporting cultural pluralism, a variety and diversity of individual and separate cultures successfully coexisting in one society.

Introduced as an ideological framework by Horace M. Kallen in 1915 as a philosophical debate to the 'melting pot' and assimilation theory (Gordon, 1964, Salins, 1997, Pantoja & Perry, 1993). Gordon (1964), talks about cultural pluralism as a theory of assimilation in his book, *Assimilation in American Life*. He chronicles the 1800s German migration to the Midwest and Texas with anticipation toward a German state within the union and Irish organizations' unsuccessful petition to Congress for separate land in the West (pp. 132-133). While neither of these was supported, ethnic societies were still formed in which language and familiar institutions such as ethnic churches, schools, newspapers, recreation groups, informal networks of cliques and confinement of marriage within the ancestral group were maintained. Germans used their language as a weapon to ward off Americanization and assimilation, Swedes and Norwegians isolated themselves on prairie farms and villages, and Irish were segregated in slums of northeast urban centers. "Thus cultural pluralism was in fact in American society before it became a theory" (p. 135). Salins (1997) suggests "cultural pluralism is not an alternative theory of assimilation; it is a theory opposed to assimilation" (p. 47). He defines Kallen's views as stopping short of contemporary multiculturalism, which calls for a larger homogeneous American society, while multiculturalists demand certain ethnic rights and concessions. He further suggests that although the melting pot metaphor was created to support assimilation, it did not work because of the exaggeration to "extinguish" the immigrant's ethnicity.

Ethnic coexistence without integration undermines the objectives of assimilation." At the same time, he also responds to the cultural pluralist metaphors as profoundly insidious. "If the ethnic strands of the fabric, the greens of the salad, the fragments of the mosaic, do not interact and identify with each other, no meaningful assimilation is taking place. (Salins, p. 48)

## Acculturation

### *Mother May I?*

I put on my masks, my costumes and posed for each occasion. I conducted myself well, I think, but an emptiness grew that no thing could fill. I think I hungered for myself.

Alma Villanueva, (Montoya, 1998, p. 435)

Acculturation has come into my being as an in-between space, a safe place to co-exist within the dominant culture. Not completely letting go of your culture to become absorbed in the culture of the host society, but taking on what's needed to survive and at the same time, not being totally controlled by it. Putting on a 'public self', as Margaret E. Montoya, (1998) explains in *Masks and Acculturation*. As she explained her morning rituals with her mother combing her hair and braiding it tight so she would not look *grenudas* [uncombed], she writes,

As I put on my uniform and my mother braided my hair, I changed; I became my public self. My *trenzas* [braids] announced that I was clean and well-cared -or at home. My *trenzas* and school uniform blurred the differences between my family's economic and cultural circumstances and those of the more economically comfortable Anglo students. (p. 436)

My mother also talked about wanting to look like the American girls at school so she wouldn't be different. Now, she celebrates her difference, her accent, her dark skin, and her straight hair.

Montoya continues to explain her acculturation process and the public disguise needed to navigate her environment, which wasn't hospitable to a Latina in 1955 New Mexico.

Presenting an acceptable face, speaking without a Spanish accent, hiding what we really felt—masking our inner selves—were defenses against racism passed on to us by our parents to help us get along in school and in society. We absorbed the necessity of constructing and maintaining a disguise in public. We struggled to be seen as Mexican but also wanted acceptance as Americans at a time when the mental image conjured up by that word included only Anglos. (p. 437)

My mother, having had the same experience in the 1950s, decided that it would be easier to raise us as Americans in 1960 and 1961. Her process would be English only spoken to the children, while she spoke Spanish to my grandmother and relatives. At the same time we grew up hearing both Dominican and American music and eating both Dominican and American food. She wanted all her children to be college educated, the ultimate trophy of the assimilated Latino. The impact for me was a very defined bicultural existence. I was Dominican-American, the hyphenated one, and could become either one at will, with the exception my lack of Spanish language proficiency.

To support their academic progress, Latinos have encouraged their children to speak English well and have tolerated other aspects of acculturation, such as changes in friends, clothes, and recreational preferences. Students learn to adopt

masks of the dominant culture, which avoid the negative values ascribed to traditional Latina/o culture. Latina/o history is replete with stories about those who changed their names, lost the Spanish language and with it any trace of a Spanish accent, or deliberately married out of the culture. In short, some did whatever was necessary to be seen as not different by the majority. (Montoya, 1998, p. 438)

So, acculturation becomes the masking of our ethnic and racial differences, while at the same time “withholding a precious part of our past behind our constructed public personas” (p. 439). Bill Ong Hing (2000) mentions the immigrant acculturation. He explains,

While the race assimilationists tend to focus on the theory that America is a white, European-based society that should stay that way, the culture-based critics of immigration tend to focus on acculturation. Study after study demonstrates that the vast majority of immigrants take on cultural traits of the host community. Some traits replace old ones, but most are simply added. (p. 153)

While he does not believe in the complete acculturation of all immigrants, he does state that through mass global media, most adult immigrants are exposed to American culture before they arrive here and adhere to U.S. cultural habits and customs.

Many young Asian and Latino immigrants, in particular, aggressively strive to be ‘American.’ They are eager to learn English, to get a job, to work hard; in short they seek to achieve a part of the American dream. Their aspirations are similar to those of the Jewish, Irish, and southern and eastern European immigrants who came in earlier years. (Ong Hing, 2000, p. 153)

Cultural assimilationists complain that new immigrants will not adopt to “American” cultural traits and that they “threaten to dilute our Western cultural heritage” (p. 153). Ong Hing confirms that immigrants do indeed affect American culture, but that American culture also affects them—and more. He refers to this sentiment as an ignorance of how culture has been developed in America. “Not as some monolith unmoved by the waves of immigration in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, but as an ever-evolving understanding of what it means to be American” (p. 154). He also points to the other attributes that affect change in the U.S. culture—improved technologies, social movements, and economic developments.

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) discuss the second generation or the children of immigrants’ acculturation process. This is experienced when the children become proficient in the English language and understand how to maneuver within the American culture. There is a role reversal between the parents and the children with the parents becoming dependent on their children’s knowledge and understanding of the environments and situations. Working class European immigrants, in the first part of the twentieth century, accepted this as a “normal process of assimilation to America” (p. 53). “Children of Italian, Russian, and Polish laborers raced past their parents to take jobs in the expanding industrial economy of the time, set themselves up in business, or claw their way into the corporate world” (p. 53). According to Portes and Rumbaut, second generation Asian and Latinos youth today are not experiencing the same benefits due to different economic and social contexts than what was available to European youth at the turn of the century. To explain the significant consequences of the acculturative gaps

across generations, Portes and Rumbaut have articulated three outcomes of acculturation: consonant acculturation, dissonant acculturation, and selective acculturation.

Consonant acculturation is based on both parents and children losing native language and culture at the same pace. This is most common when the parents possess resources to support the cultural evolution of their children. Success is not always the projected outcome of this situation as “acceptance into the American mainstream may be blocked by discrimination” (p. 54). Dissonant acculturation happens when language and customs of immigrant’s children is replaced by the dominant culture, while the parents’ is not. This leads to role reversal, especially when the parents become dependent on the children for communication and maneuvering through the system. It also undercuts parental control and places the children at risk (p. 54). Selective acculturation happens when the cultural shift among both parents and children is very slow due to ethnic community visibility and support. Language and cultural retention is the norm, with Intergenerational conflict much lower. This is the strongest base for preservation of parental authority. “This happens because individuals and families do not face the the cultural shift among both parents and children is very slow due to ethnic community visibility and support. Language and cultural restrains of acculturation alone, but rather within the framework of their own communities” (Portes, Rumbaut, 2001, p. 54).

The question of identity therefore becomes one of, where do I come from? This has always elicited a response in me that points to my recent ancestry–Dominican Republic, even though I was born in the U.S. and speak English. The responses from my siblings and nieces vary from American, African American, Black, Latino, Hispanic, and Other.

The answers given are often expressed in a metaphorical language of kinship (e.g., homeland, fatherland, mother tongue, blood ties) with reference to a ‘birth connection’ to nation and family—to an imagined common origin or ancestry. In this regard, nativity variables (where one was born, where one’s parents were born) are clearly important to ethnic and national self-definitions. For children of immigrants, they are also variables that can significantly complicate a clear-cut answer to basic questions of ethnic self-definition, particularly when the parents’ country of birth differs from that of the child and (in cases of interethnic marriage) from each other. ( Portes, Rumbaut, 2001, p. 161)

#### Distillations of the Stories

As I reflect on the meta question of this inquiry, “What is the deeper, spiritual, intuitive impact of immigration and acculturation on subsequent generations, as a result of my family’s immigration to the United States?” the women reveal through their stories the multiplicity of transformed and new identities that emerge within the Diaspora. The homeland culture becomes diminished and ultimately removed as the generations advance in the host society, especially those with limited connection to a homeland or significant community. Subsequently, there is recognition of what is lost and a desire to retain or regain a Dominican cultural consciousness.

The telling of stories illuminates issues of identity through personal experiences of immigration, assimilation and acculturation over time, and the negotiation of situations that produce a complexity of stereotypes and ignorance. Assimilation and acculturation can be seen in both the migrant generation and the American born generations. Most

prevalent was *Mami's* determination to become "Americanized" in order to "fit in with the other girls" at her new school upon arriving to the U.S. She explained how she "felt different, looked different, and didn't speak the language." Her process of assimilation from Dominican to American and the process of acculturating back to being Dominican over time was significant because it revealed the impact of immigration through the use of oral history and narratives in highlighting the lived experiences. In *Abuela's* stories, we don't see the definitive assimilation process as we do with *Mami*. Her experience can be correlated to selective acculturation in which she only adapted to her new environment by consciously choosing when to use American cultural norms and when to use her Dominican nuances. This was explicated in her story of consciously going into a "white only bathroom" in 1953 as a non-White person. Although she understood and spoke English, she chose to use only her Spanish, thus allowing her access into an environment specifically reserved for others.

The acculturation of the three sisters, *Hermana*, *Gemela* and *Yo*, which was the reverse of *Mami* and *Abuela*, happened at different times, on different levels. As *Mami* proudly explained her success in raising "American" children, as measured by their success in navigating through the educational systems and becoming professionals, i.e., doctor, accountant, and professor. She also talked about regrets of not raising us Dominican out of fear of the "Dominican culture clashing with the American culture" and the perceived difficulty of holding both cultures. Consequently, her daughters searching for identity within their Dominican ancestry, found different ways to maintain a bicultural understanding using their American or hyphenated Dominican identity when appropriate or needed. This can be found in *Gemela's* story of losing a scholarship because her parents weren't Black American, and challenging the decision based on her cultural understanding and identification with an African American construct. A definitive acculturation process is not clearly articulated by *Sobrina*. Her Americanness is the foundation of her identity, even though she grew up in a family with Dominican roots. She reveals her dislike of Dominican food, and claims "I'm real Americanized." She is aware of her Dominican heritage, identifies with being both Hispanic and Black [American], but will not choose sides if confronted.

This inquiry adds to the discourse on immigration and migration theory and to Dominican women identity in literature. While significant research on immigration and migration focus on labor issues, family reunification, and political persecution, from the immigrant and her children's perspective, this study examines the lived experiences of four generations of Dominican women while comparing the different paths they took in constructing their identity and their personal changes over time. They developed strategies to alter the effects of their social and physical environments. *Abuela* travels with her guardian angel, an African genie, and reminder of her home [Dominican Republic]. She bought it at the airport in 1953 as she was migrating to the U.S. *Mami* decorates her home with Dominican dolls and hangs her Dominican flag with pride. *Hermana* entertains by cooking Dominican food and displays a Dominican flag on her car window. *Yo* uses every opportunity to travel to New York and Santo Domingo to be with family and enjoys dancing *Merengue*. Survival was equated to economic gain, especially for *Mami*, which was translated to her daughters. She stressed going to college and learning the ways of the dominant culture. "You have to know the way they [Americans] do things," she would remind us.

As visibility of Dominicans and Dominican Americans are rare in reference publications on the Latino immigrant experience, especially the experience of Dominican women on the West Coast, this inquiry and further research will add to a growing body of work, both theory and literature, on Latina immigrant experiences as well as to the history and literature of the African Diaspora in which the Latina experience, specifically the Afro Latina experience, is rarely seen. As Latino/as are approaching the new minority majority in the U.S. and Dominicans constitute the fastest growing Latino group, there is a need to understand the differences and similarities of ethnic groups within the Diaspora. By examining multiple generations, we can begin to compare and understand issues of class, race, gender, identity, spirituality, history, and language. As seen in the stories of *Sobrina*, bi-racial and bicultural understanding of identity were often intermixed, as opposed to the generation before her whose identities were clearly delineated as Dominican in America, Latino or other. Having a bicultural understanding while not identifying as bi-racial and correspondingly knowing their Dominicaness and utilizing their bicultural consciousness to move in African American environments when needed.

This study contributes to the interdisciplinary nature of examining the experience of identity by using organic inquiry. This methodology allowed for relationship building among the women, use of other media such as film and video to elicit memory and meaning, and the creation of space, which allowed the women to enter the experience with comfort and ease. When it came time to plan the weekend process, each woman assumed ownership of the inquiry and volunteered to coordinate a component of the weekend. It also allowed for co-facilitation during dialogues and processes such as collective alter building, which provided a means for exploration of different topics such as spirituality, family history, and raising children. Due to the personal nature of the women's experiences, the methodology contributed by securing a space that welcomed intentionality and authentic voice.

The stories were collected over a two-year period beginning with one-on-one sessions and moving into group processes. The lead researcher, anticipating her own discomfort in using an academic process to enter into the personal lives of family members, began the preparation two years prior to data collecting by introducing processes of interviewing, ethnography and audio and video taping to selected members of the group. A significant component to the individual story telling sessions during the initial phase of the inquiry was to familiarize each women with the equipment that would be used such as a DAT recorder and video camera, and to collect examples of stories that would be told during the group process. This was important as it allowed various media formats to be used while analyzing the data and in producing different formats for distribution of the work.

#### Importance of this Inquiry

This inquiry was important because there are large populations of immigrants living in this country, all facing the difficulty of maintaining their cultural identity. They continuously contemplate assimilating into the mainstream culture. The pressure to assimilate and become American citizens is immense. Many immigrants in this country pursue basic resources including access to health care, education, and employment. In the wake of 911, anti-affirmative action legislation, such as: California Proposition 187,

which was approved by voters in 1994, denied illegal immigrants health care, education and welfare benefits. Proposition 209 enacted in 1997, was a State ban on all forms of affirmative action; Proposition 54 failed as a 2003 ballot initiative, which would have barred the State from collecting race data.

In a commentary written by Carola Suarez-Orozco in “Latinos Remaking America” (Suarez-Orozco & Paez, 2002), she explains, “immigration does not affect only the first generation. The rippling effect of migration shapes generations well beyond that initial journey. The process of migration inexorably changes the family.” The diffusion of ones’ cultural identity weakens many families and obliterates family histories. A growing number of American-born children and grandchildren of immigrants do not speak their native language, nor do they understand the richness of their cultures. Immigration inevitably has an impact on those who come here and a deeper impact on the generations after them who choose to stay.

I’ve known other families who, after immigrating to this country, quickly assimilated into the dominant culture for various reasons. Within my own family, I experienced varying levels of acculturation and assimilation. When I travel to the Dominican Republic, my family members are surprised by my willingness to use my broken Spanish and dance Merengue, the national dance form in the Dominican Republic, because it is expected that I don’t know or choose not to know anything about my culture since I was born in the United States. My amalgamation with family in the Dominican Republic led me to a deeper curiosity concerning my own family here in America and of a larger Dominican community in California. I wanted to know if we were different from other Dominican families, and if I could fit into a larger Dominican community, here and/or abroad.

As I examined my original personal assumptions, my argument for cultural pluralism becomes more defined. Immigrants should have a right to their language, customs and traditions. As the United States becomes closer to majority of minorities with African Americans, Latino and Asian populations combined exceeding White populations; it becomes inherent that new constructs of identity will surface in our society. The melting pot theory has not created a homogeneous culture of pure Americans, and simultaneously, immigrants are forced to fit into this “melting pot,” by systems that oppress and subjugate them, at the expense of losing their cultural identity and traditions. Upon witnessing the stories through this process, I concur that immigration into the United States was not necessarily a benefit for immigrants if they were required to acclimate to the dominant or homogeneous culture for the purpose of survival. When faced with harsh political and economic realities, people immigrate to the United States because they feel it will be a better place. Immigrants who spend an extended amount of time in the United States don’t return to their country of origin, mostly due to economics and family ties. They do, however, when afforded the opportunity, practice a tradition of transnationalism, passing between the host country and the country of origin. The rhetoric on cultural diversity is so diverse in theory that in practice American institutions do perpetuate systems, which do not value the culture of others in which cultural difference and its importance is diminished. Finally, the assimilation process takes away from family strength, stability, and a shared history, causing disassociation from one’s own cultural identity, which at times produces alienation for an individual and other family member.

These issues may be intellectual and political debates, but for many families, they represent harsh realities and sometimes psychological and spiritual damage to individuals, families, and communities. This inquiry aimed to explore not only the experience of immigration, but also the impact on family, culture, and traditions. Many immigrants in this country experience the difficulty of maintaining their cultural identity and experience the pressure to assimilate into the dominant culture. It was my intention to give voice and strength to those who seek to maintain their cultural identity and traditions while in this country.

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