

Chelsey's Piece: My Navigation Through My Black Identity as a Dominican Woman

Chelsey Minerva Sarante
Denison University

Abstract

My vitiligo became visible at the age of nine, and through this piece, I discuss my navigation of identity considering my race, ethnicity, culture, skin color, and skin condition. I tackle the questions of what defines *Blackness*—is it skin-tone or culture? If skin tone defines Blackness, does that make me culturally homeless, longing for a home of "in-between"? Within Dominican culture, Blackness and any variation of it are negated, has been for decades, and is engrained in the minds of many, if not all, Dominicans. This piece shows how I reclaim as a Dominican, despite my light skin, due to my vitiligo. This is all to demonstrate that Blackness is not defined merely under the constraints of skin tone. The diaspora does not allow for such a simple definition of Blackness equating to dark skin due to the complex history of diaspora for Indigenous, Black, and white peoples. Blackness includes culture, experiences, *and* skin tone. In addition, Dominicans as an ethnic group must learn to accept all parts of ourselves, though we have been taught to hate our Blackness. Claiming our Black identity shows strength and resilience.

Keywords: Black, diaspora, Afro-Latinx, Afro-Dominican, anti-Blackness, internalized racism

Chelsey Minerva Sarante is a Dominican-American woman born and raised in the Bronx, NY, and is currently a senior at Denison University, majoring in Communication and Black Studies. Chelsey has spent time throughout her undergraduate career navigating her identity through transparent conversations with others and with herself while being at a predominantly white institution. *Black Rage Journal* inspired this piece, a journal on Denison's campus revived in 2020 for Black students to express themselves.



Figure 1: My grandfather, "Bolo" and I, circa 2001–2002

My vitiligo, a skin disorder, started when I was nine years old. Mamí said it was when I was seven, but I noticed it when I was nine while on a trip to the Dominican Republic. I remember clearly saying, "*Mami, Mami, mira toda las marcas blancas queen tengo en mi brazo, ¿qué es esto? ¿Qué está pasando?*" ("Mommy, Mommy, look at all these white marks on my arm, what is this? What's happening?"). From that point forward, I began phototherapy and other treatments. It spread everywhere until my skin didn't produce any melanin at all. This was when my "identity crisis" began.

I knew there were different racial groups among Dominicans. I grew up in a neighborhood with Brown, Black, and light-skinned Dominicans. As the Dominicans would say, my grandfather was *Moreno* ("Black"), and my stepfather and uncles (Figure 1). When learning to dance bachata, merengue, and típico, or the Reggaeton from my parents, I noticed the similarities in these types of Latin and Afro-beats. I would look

around in *Fondo Negro* and see everyone dancing.¹ Everyone dancing was Black. When I was younger, I would talk to my Black friends, and we'd compare our parents and experiences. We would sit in between our mother's legs while they did our hair together. Through music, complaining about parents, and playdates (how kids normally do), I realized that my experiences were Black. Though I thought our races and experiences were different, they aren't and never were. But because of my vitiligo, I felt like I couldn't call myself Black. My skin was not black or brown, but it wasn't white either.

When I acknowledged my Blackness, others wouldn't acknowledge it the way that I would. I would always feel that there would be certain aspects of the Black experience that I was excluded from because of my vitiligo. Does my vitiligo disqualify me from being Black? Is my "Black Card" revoked? My grandmother would always say *mi Negrita* ("my little Black girl"), but that would always confuse me more. I lived the Black Dominican experience whenever I visited my family. When I ask about their ancestry, they would never say *Moreno* or *Africano* (Black or African) but always say *de España* ("from Spain"), anything that would bring them closer to whiteness.

Mi Negrita.

In Kingsbridge, I was never challenged to think beyond my ethnicity.² "What are you?" "I'm Dominican," was always my answer. When the other Dominicans were told, "You're Black," their response was always, "I'm not Black, I'm Dominican." Nobody ever told me I was Black. Just like the meme, always in denial to a certain extent. If I told my mom, "*Soy Negra, soy Morena*" ("I am Brown, I am Black"), then she would say, "*No, tu eres Dominicana*"

("No, you are Dominican").

I didn't know the difference between race and ethnicity; I never needed to in the hood. Saying "I'm Dominican" was enough. Yes, I'm light-skinned as hell, but that doesn't mean anything. My 3B, 3C, 4A -hair with my full lips and other features helped me realize that: Yes, I too am Black, and Dominicans are racist as fuck. Tryna separate Black and Dominican when IT DOESN'T WORK THAT WAY.

Me telling my mother she's Black, and her retaliating with, "No, I'm mixed." "You're mixed with what, ma? With Black."

She stayed silent. Looking at her father, my grandfather, he's Black and Dominican. She sits here and tells me that she's not Black and that I'm not Black. She tells me not to date a Black man because I'd be "damaging the race," even though her father was Black.

The more I learned about the history of the Dominican Republic and how Christopher Columbus landed on La Hispaniola and started the slave trade on the island, I began to understand that the majority, if not everyone, from the Dominican Republic is some type of mixed. And when I say "mixed," I ain't talking mixed with white. I mean mixed with Blackity Black-Black. Trujillo's reign continues to affect the mindset of many Dominicans. My grandmother had four kids with a Black man, yet she still tells me, "Not to damage the race." My mother is married to a Black man but never calls him Black.

"*Tu papá no es Negro, es Moreno.*" ("Your dad is not Black, he is Brown").

What is the difference? What is the difference if any white person were to look

at him and call him a *Black* man?

My relationship with my identity is not linear.

I didn't start identifying myself as Afro-Latina until I came to Denison. Saying "I'm Dominican" was not enough anymore. Claiming my Afro-Latina identity was a way that I could acknowledge my Black identity while not negating the Dominican culture that I grew up with, the Black culture I grew up with, and the combined Dominican AND Black culture I grew up with. This was a way to express my true self without having anyone negate it for me. My mother will not be there to tell me, "*No, tú no eres Negra, mi blanquita.*" ("No, you are not Black, my white girl").

Mi Negrita

I can fully embrace my curls without my mother nagging me to straighten them; I can fully embrace my curves without my mother figures riding me to lose weight or stop dancing a certain way. I can fully embrace my Blackness. I have learned that Blackness is more than the color of one's skin, though that is most evident. Blackness is also shown through culture, through experiences, through knowledge, through the ancestral knowledge that you can *feel*, and the spirit that is embedded in you; through the knowledge shared by your mother (even if she denies her Blackness) in conversations, physical touch, and experiences together.

Dominicans need to unlearn our internalized racism, and our racist parents and elders need to be held accountable. This acceptance of self despite the constant erasure of our identity from our Black parents shows resilience and power in our generation. To teach ourselves to love our Blackness and proudly wear it, claim it, and

defend it in the faces of those that negate it.
We are Afro-Latine; to call us revolutionary
is an understatement.

Footnotes

¹ *Fondo Negro* is a town in the countryside of the Dominican Republic near the city of Barahona, Dominican Republic.

² *Kingsbridge* is the "hood" I was raised in, in the Bronx, NY. Near the 1 train and the 4 train. Uptown. All the way uptown.