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"Together We're Strong:" Cross-Cultural Solidarity in Angie Cruz's *Dominicana*

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I examine how Dominican American author Angie Cruz's novel *Dominicana* (2019) uses the bildungsroman genre to point to cross-cultural solidarity, or different communities working in tandem, to contest hegemonic discourse. Cruz's take on a bildungsroman has an interesting inflection that juxtaposes learning and unlearning in two different societies (Dominican and American) where lessons do not inform each other. Because Cruz's lead protagonist's sense of Self develops alongside her civic engagement, I argue that it is useful to think of *Dominicana* as a feminist bildungsroman. Along with her brother-in-law César, Ana searches for change through relationality and intercultural empathy as vehicles towards larger community engagement that shares a common plight. Due to her peripheral positionality as an undocumented, non-English-speaking Person of Color in 1960s New York, Ana finds a location of identity within an alternative community of African American and white protestors, whose intersection is of class and political beliefs. My goal is not to overlook or minimize differences between groups, differences that have, at times, been contentious, but rather to emphasize that Cruz's sense of belonging is guided by increased engagement in alternative communities that share in her alienation. Utilizing a theoretical lens grounded in the works of Lorgia García Peña, Jill Toliver Richardson, Rita Felski, Amy Cummins and Myra Infante-Sheridan, I conclude that for Cruz, intercultural empathy and alternative communities are viable paths toward resisting the American national community that presents itself as an unattainable model of assimilation.

KEYWORDS: Cross-cultural solidarity, Intercultural empathy, Alternative communities, Feminist bildungsroman, Angie Cruz

Loosely based on her mother's immigrant experience, Angie Cruz's fictional *Dominicana* (2019) narrates the survival of an adolescent confronted with myriad forms of oppression. Sent by her family from rural Dominican Republic to New York as a fifteen-year-old bride, Ana Canción's arrival represents the family's hope for a better life as she commits to sending remittances while planning for the family's eventual migration. However, the setting of the novel, 1965 New York City, proves to be an unwelcoming environment to immigrant persons of color without command of English. Moreover, Ana's homelife provides little sanctuary. Her husband Juan, who is twice her age, abuses and rapes her, and she has little recourse to resist the patriarchal forces impacting her life. In this article, I examine how Angie Cruz uses the bildungsroman genre to point to cross-cultural solidarity, or different communities working in tandem, to contest hegemonic discourse. My goal is not to overlook or minimize differences between groups, differences that have, at times, been contentious, but rather to emphasize that Cruz promotes intercultural empathy as a path for Ana to find a sense of belonging upon increased engagement in alternative communities that share in her alienation.

Because Ana's sense of Self develops alongside her civic engagement, it is useful to think of *Dominicana* as a feminist bildungsroman. In *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (1989), Rita Felski explains

that "the feminist bildungsroman combines the explorations of subjectivity with a dimension of group solidarity which inspires activism and resistance rather than private resignation, and makes it possible to project a visionary hope of future change" (140). Along with her brother-in-law César, Cruz's main protagonist searches for change through relationality and intercultural empathy as vehicles toward larger community engagement. To that end, my analysis hews closely to Jill Toliver Richardson's, who identifies a pattern of Cruz's protagonists seeking alternative communities in *Soledad*. According to Richardson, this is because "alienation results in an outsider status for individuals who must find a location of identity within an alternative community or remain as outsiders" (20). As a recently-arrived immigrant with no command of English and an abusive husband, Ana feels isolated from a sense of community, particularly because the national community that is largely white and English-speaking, is constructed on an exclusionary white-Black binary of difference. In "Establishing a Chicana feminist bildungsroman for young adults" (2018), Amy Cummins and Myra Infante-Sheridan state that "Ethnic American" writers employ the bildungsroman to show that "collective affiliations and groups are important to the development of character" (21). Because of Ana's peripheral positionality, she finds a location of identity within an alternative community of African American and white protestors,

whose intersection is of class and political beliefs. This solidarity, in opposition to the American national community, contests hegemonic power as a means to create a space for belonging.

Cruz's *Dominicana* is a singular inflection on Dominican American literature because it offers the viewpoint of an undocumented immigrant woman who moved to the US for reasons beyond Trujillo. Raquel Corona's "Breaking the Silence" (2021), acknowledges the importance of Cruz's novel as a unique story that "has yet to be told in Dominican American literature" because "the story captures this immigrant bargain and the reality of how these negotiations come to fruition: often, birthdates and even names on official government paperwork are fictitious, new, created for the purpose of the immigrant journey." This is a drastic change from canonical Dominican American works like Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991) and *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) or Junot Díaz's *Drown* (1996) and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* tells the story of a wealthy Dominican family who flees to the United States with the help of the CIA to escape the Trujillato, the thirty-one-year period in which dictator Rafael Trujillo terrorized much of the Dominican Republic. Though they endure hardship in their new country, they arrive with the permission to be there and the middle-class status that Cruz's Ana Canción does not have. *In the Time of the Butterflies* takes place on the island and the protagonists are in direct conflict with Trujillo. Díaz's *Drown* tells of two Dominican brothers through a masculine lens. Yet there are comparisons between *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Dominicana*. Not only does part of both novels take place after the fall of Trujillo, but Oscar Wao's mother Belicia, a person characterized for her dark skin, also leaves for New York City as a teenager like Ana. Although the two experience a similar struggle to realize the American dream, differences abound as well. Namely, Belicia flees to New York because of the Trujillato. Immigrant status distinguishes them too: Belicia is not undocumented like Ana is, leaving the latter with limited options. In that sense, Cruz's Ana foregrounds an intersectionality of gender, race, class, age, and legal status that is unusual in Dominican American literature. Additionally, Cruz continues to push the narrative past the Trujillato by setting the novel after his death.

Not only does *Dominicana* challenge notions of community and identity within the United States, but it also asserts the need to rethink how Dominicaness is constructed on the island and in the diaspora. In *The Borders of Dominicanidad* (2016), Lorgia García Peña refers to texts with similar objectives as "transnational interventions in contesting hegemonic notions of dominicanidad." (*The Borders* 17). Moreover, she explores new articulations of dominicanidad, specifically through narratives emerging from the Dominican diaspora, where a plurality of perspectives, particularly those of "women, migrants, peasants, blacks, LGBTQ, and the disabled" confront the Dominican archive that has historically silenced them (*The Borders* 17). The novel's importance then, as I will elucidate below, is in its ability to articulate dominicanidad through its embrace

of certain historical silences: Blackness, womanhood, and an undocumented, lower-class status.

Critics reviewed *Dominicana*, short-listed for the Women's Prize for Fiction, favorably, praising it as a novel of resiliency.³ More critical reviews, such as Hephzibah Anderson, noted that the novel "could be set almost any time, any place." Anderson's point is worth remembering, though perhaps not for the intended reason. The novel's significance is that it is applicable to today's current events, a commentary that little has changed in approximately fifty years: women are still raped and abused, police brutality is prevalent, and undocumented immigrants are easy targets. Surely this was Cruz's intention, as she alludes to in two pieces: a non-fiction essay, "What We Deserve" (2019), whose publication precedes *Dominicana* by less than two weeks, and an interview she did with playwright Andrea Thome. In the former, Cruz likens a childhood photo of her mother, the inspiration for her fictional novel, to that of Magdalena Gómez Gregorio, whose father was deported by ICE. Cruz comments that:

My mother was eleven, Magdalena's age, when my father first proposed to her, promising her a better life. What did she know? He was old enough to be her father. It's possible that Magdalena's father migrated to protect his daughter. My mother's family was in such desperate financial circumstances that sending her away was better than keeping her, no matter what awaited her in the United States. In a flash, the innocence of both Magdalena and my mother was stolen. They were pushed into adulthood by forces greater than themselves, to fend for their lives" ("What We Deserve").

In making this connection, Cruz emphasizes the marginalization that young immigrant women face, especially if they are undocumented. I refer to a marginalization that precipitously ushers them into adulthood because they are women in a patriarchal system, and because they are of color in a system built on racism. Cruz's message is precisely Anderson's critique: this still happens in 2020, as it did in 1965. The author further exacerbates her investment in *latinidad* with Thome when she recognizes that contemporary events influenced her when writing the novel:

While writing the book, I thought a lot about the news regarding the border, Puerto Rico, the climate crisis—there's so much to think about— but I also noticed how what we focus on or care about is strongly connected to our personal investments. For example, for some "outsiders," they may see what's happened in Puerto Rico and think, wow *they* really are fed up, but for us, the Latinx community, many of *us* are like, *sí se puede*.

Employing a binary of *we/they* enables Cruz to align herself with larger political movements of *latinidad* across the United States so

that her dominicanidad does not prevent her from having a stake in political unrest in Puerto Rico or issues along the border that mostly affect Mexican and Central American migrants. For Cruz, *Dominicana* has its distinct historical setting in which she engages with Vietnam, the Harlem Riots, the assassination of Malcolm X, and the US occupation of the Dominican Republic. However, the novel's positive reception comes from its ability to echo current events like the Ricky Renuncia protests in Puerto Rico or universal themes like physical assault on women.²

The reviews of *Dominicana* focus largely on the same themes: immigration, abuse, and the American dream. To that end, the novel tells of a young woman's arrival in New York and her eventual liberation from her husband as she finds a sense of belonging amid upheaval in both the Dominican Republic and the United States. Curiously, reviewers overlook Cruz's attempts at cross-cultural solidarity. Through Ana (and César), Cruz explores ways in which dominicanidad is shaped in the diaspora through interactions with other ethnic communities. In *Narratives of Migration and Displacement in Dominican Literature* (2012), Danny Méndez refers to the process of emotional creolization:

The affective structure accompanying the mechanisms of diasporic identity construction that draw from different levels of history: firstly, from the legacy of racial and ethnic cultures defining the Caribbean region as a whole; secondly, in combination or confrontation with the mixture of ethnic groups present in the United States; and thirdly, from their particular kin or family lineage of accommodations, oppressions, class positions, and displacements (7).

Méndez's theory plays out clearly in *Dominicana*, from Ana's internalized racial discourse that she brings from the Dominican Republic to the United States, to intergenerational dialogues with family members. What interests me is how Ana develops her identity in the diaspora through interactions with African Americans so that Cruz's conceptualization of dominicanidad privileges Blackness.

Cruz's investment in building understanding and strengthening ties between groups is instrumental to her career. During a podcast discussion with Dan Kubis, she remarks that the writers that have had the greatest impact on her work are African American writers, not Latino or Latin American:

I feel closer to an African American literary tradition than I do to, let's say, a Latin American literary tradition. It doesn't mean that I don't read a lot of the Latin Americans and that I don't appreciate them in the same way that I read European writers and writers from all over the world, but if I think about my aesthetic, and what informs, or what has informed a lot of my work, it's truly African American literature.

In an earlier dialogue with Silvio Torres-Saillant, Cruz again pays homage to the African diaspora and its relation to the Dominican Republic: "I never think of us as disconnected from the African experience. I mean we are African diaspora and it is just that we have suffered different geographic displacements" (113). Still in another conversation with Nelly Rosario, Cruz reflects on a special issue of *Callaloo* that was dedicated to the Dominican Republic:

Callaloo, being dedicated to the African Diaspora, including Dominicans, was a reality check for all those Dominicans calling themselves Indios or white. Or on a more positive note, the Dominican issue was like a homecoming. *Callaloo* offered us, black-identified Dominicans, a place to connect/dialogue with our extended family throughout the Americas. Being a light-skinned Latina, it's always been like, 'You're not black; you're white.' And then you have this journal for African-American writers, you think "I belong in this world" (744).

I point to these instances across different platforms and years to stress Cruz's resolve to represent her Afro-Latinidad as well as the ways in which cultural production from the diaspora influences her work. *Dominicana* is one example that buttresses this larger theme throughout her career by showing that immigrants' bonds with other communities of color can be a subversive alternative to institutionalized racism and at the same time, a vehicle for reconceptualizing dominicanidad. In "The Dominican Diaspora Strikes Back" (2010), Juanita Heredia argues that the acknowledgment of African heritage has translated "into the birth of an Afro-Dominican diasporic renaissance, especially in Afro-Dominican letters in the United States and African diasporic literature at large" (208). Likewise, Torres-Saillant points to the role of US racial discourse as a means to cultivate Dominican agency both on the island and in their host nation:

Whatever suffering Dominicans have endured on the foreign shores to which despair has driven them, they have also learned to see themselves more fully and more fairly, particularly in matters of race. The long struggles for equality and social justice by people of color in the United States have yielded invaluable lessons from which Dominican people in the diaspora and in the native land have drawn and may continue to draw empowerment" ("The Tribulations" 143).

Cruz's works participate in this agency by showing protagonists who confront their identity through interactions with socially excluded communities.

In past novels, the author's appreciation for underrepresented cultural elements are present: *Soledad* (2001) relies on Afro-Caribbean spirituality as an instrument of magical realism whereas *Let it Rain Coffee* (2005) acknowledges Chinese-Dominican laborers

that were brought to the island due to Rafael Trujillo's xenophobia towards Haitians. Scholarly research about Cruz has noticed her contribution to the field of cross-cultural literature. In "Dominican *Décalage*" (2019), Jennifer Wilks describes Cruz's work as "rebutting white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity" (352). Finally, in "The Shared History of the United States and the Dominican Republic in Angie Cruz's *Let It Rain Coffee*" (2015), Rasha Al Shalabi contends that Esperanza chooses "to ignore the plight of the minorities who have been in the neighborhood far longer than she has" (6). While this assessment may be true about Esperanza, a Dominican who migrates to Washington Heights in the 1980s, Cruz's Ana Canción offers a revision of that determination when she identifies with the struggle of those around her. Due to its recent publication in 2019, *Dominicana* lacks a similar treatment despite the novel's intent to build solidarity between migrant and local communities.³

Breaking Down Learned Barriers

In *Masculinity after Trujillo* (2014), Maja Horn notes that "Dominican literature has delved continuously into the memory of the Trujillato up until today, making it perhaps *the* central theme of Dominican literature in the late twentieth century" (57). In *Dominicana*, Cruz engages with the legacies of the Trujillato through race, gender, and generational experience, despite his absence in the novel. Characters like Juan perform their masculinity as an extension of the machista society that Trujillo cultivated. However, in terms of race, Cruz pushes Dominican American literature beyond Trujillo and his masculine successors and situates the conversation around a strong matriarchal character and her relationship with her daughters, so that their relationship reinforces national discourses on race, beauty, justice, and power.⁴ In this vein, the reader learns that the Trujillato permeated all sectors of society, even after his death.

Ana's trajectory toward cross-cultural solidarity happens slowly and awkwardly in the novel. This is largely due to the constant anti-Black conditioning that she absorbs and then has to unlearn. I concur with Lyn Di Iorio, who writes:

Today, Latinx writers are writing their own versions of the bildungsroman, but with a twist. In novels like Angie Cruz's *Dominicana*... protagonists are educated not once, but twice: first, in mostly Spanish-speaking families and neighborhoods; and later, in the English-speaking society outside the home.

What is curious about these two learned experiences is that they do not support each other. To ensure her survival in the United States, Ana has to unlearn much of her mother's lessons in the Dominican Republic as it pertains to race. By setting the novel in 1965 Dominican Republic and New York, Cruz creates two atmospheres rife with fragmented communities based on anti-Blackness. This is particularly interesting because Cruz originally set the novel in the

1970s, when she was a child living in New York (Strauss-Muniz et al.). However, by setting it a decade earlier, Cruz is able to address unrest during the unstable post-*Trujillato* years and subsequent US Occupation of the Dominican Republic. At the same time, the intentionality of the book's setting allows Cruz to pair Ana's liberation from her marriage with civil rights struggles among oppressed communities in the US, thereby underscoring the intercultural solidarity at the core of my argument. In an interview with Ylce Irizarry, the author commented that "...I'm going to set [*Dominicana*] in 1965 because 1965 was at the heart of the civil rights movement...That movement toward liberation mirrored the urgency and possibility for Ana to be free" (Irizarry 69). While Cruz is likely referring to Ana's liberation from her abusive husband, I suggest that there is a decolonizing mental freedom that comes with her observing movements across New York City that directly negate her mother's lessons.

Ana's childhood, and most of her mother's life, was marked by el Trujillato. Ana-Maurine Lara reveals Trujillo's stance on Dominican identity to be a mixture of Spanish and Taíno heritage, not just omitting Blackness, but placing it in diametrical opposition to dominicanidad. Consequently, Dominicans viewed Blackness, particularly in their Haitian neighbors, as negative (469-470). Ana's mother, a product of three decades of conditioning, espouses Trujillo's anti-Black rhetoric even though her family is coded as having African heritage.⁵ To that end, the mother clarifies the society's racial hierarchy when she laments her daughter's dark skin (32) and claims that Ana's most European feature, her green eyes, are her opportunity to leave the countryside for a better life (11). In other words, her green eyes can attract a lighter-skinned man precisely so that she can have lighter-skinned children to whiten the family's line (38). Ana eventually does this, as her mother did before her, thus perpetuating the attribution of superiority given to whiteness. Ana's arrival to New York then is not one of a *tabula rasa*. Quite the opposite, she arrives with perspectives engrained that impede her connections to other groups.

This learned colorism is expounded upon by her husband Juan, who participates in a Gramscian model of hegemony by consenting, subconsciously or otherwise, to the ruling class's interests (Gramsci 211-212). When Juan characterizes African Americans as "self-destructive" (154) and "untrustworthy" (86) and Puerto Ricans as "wanting everything for nothing" (87), he extends divisive rhetoric that maintains the status quo and negates any chance of solidarity between him and Ana and other groups. Moreover, Juan demands that Ana not leave the apartment unless she is with him. This effort to control Ana, successful until he leaves for the Dominican Republic, prevents Ana from forming any sort of community. There are few Dominicans in New York at this time, and her only attempt is with a Dominican woman who ultimately betrays her over money. Thus, Ana's first alternative community is creatively imagined in direct resistance to her husband's patriarchal control. For instance, Ana takes interest in Malcolm X after he is assassinated across the street from her apartment (78). Initially, her intrigue is passing when she believes

that she sees herself in the televised report: "Our red window curtains! There, a silhouette—is that me?" (78). The notion of her as a silhouette is informative of Ana's maturing Self in this moment. The silhouette form provides a blank portrait of her, representative of her inability to contextualize and find meaning of this event because at this point in her adolescent life, she is not yet fully cognizant of her Self. Furthermore, Ana significantly differs from Juan in this scenario. While he makes generalizations, Ana attempts to learn through singular interactions in which she humanizes members of other communities. Cruz further develops this when she writes, "Self-destructive, is what Juan calls [African Americans]. He never mentions the black woman in the red hat who still appears to refresh the flowers for Malcolm X in front of the Audobon." (154-5). By engaging in concrete interactions, and refraining from making overarching comments, Ana's perspective becomes more nuanced, which helps her to unlearn many of the perspectives imposed on her.

Ana's fascination with Malcolm X and Betty Shabazz is explored through her attempt to comprehend Shabazz's grief. After being beaten by Juan the night before, Ana contemplates that the mourning widow brings flowers to the Audubon Ballroom each day while calling herself "Ana X" (97). The scene illuminates Ana's growing resistance to the United States' patriarchal national community because in Betty Shabazz, Ana sees a loving wife who cared for her husband. Since she does not feel the same about Juan, she resolves in that moment to leave him (98). In that sense, Shabazz serves as the exemplar of spousal love, thereby suggesting that Ana search elsewhere. Here she demonstrates a connection to Shabazz, however tenuous, because though she cannot share in the widow's sentiment of spousal love, she can recognize loss and empathize with the widow. Intercultural empathy studies show that attempting to imagine a difficult situation that another is going through "leads to more positive cognitions and intentions towards the members of the outgroup" (Salanga and Bernardo, 166). Her adoption of the surname "X" links a positive perception of African American culture: it unsettles Juan's possession over her as she goes from being Ruiz-Canción to X, thereby stripping the Ruiz name imposed upon her at marriage and empowering her to rename herself outside of the patriarchal system. She employs the Ana X persona in moments of rebellion as well, such as when she refuses to serve Juan (97) or keeps secrets that protect her and her sister from punishment (121). While evoking Malcolm X's name in these moments may seem sophomoric, it is Ana's first attempt at reaching out to an alternative community. Forced to expand her notion of community, she dismisses national models, such as the First Lady Jackie Kennedy, also a recent widow (82-3), and looks to others who share in her alienation. People resist power structures in different ways. During these moments in the novel, Ana is learning to do that and is informed by the surrounding environment that is geared toward social protest, with emphases on civil rights and anti-military sentiment. In an interview with Arriel Vinson, Cruz states that this mounting resistance conforms to Ana's character arch:

To show the marches and acts of resistance out on the streets, but also to correlate this moment of revolution and multiple forms of resistance in the world that were also happening inside Ana's apartment, inside her body too, was intentional ("In 'Dominicana'").

Ana finds a model for love and resiliency in Betty Shabazz, and in Malcolm X she finds a model for resistance. That this model is an African American demanding racial justice demonstrates the intersectional connection she feels as a marginalized Latina.

While Shabazz and X are among Ana's early engagement with African American community, their mentorship, in keeping with common tropes of bildungsroman, is imagined from her apartment. When she is faced with an actual interaction with a member of the African American community, the prejudices that she has learned resurface. Her anxieties come to light in one particular episode after leaving an ESL class offered by the local church. Walking down the street, she drops a scarf, and a benevolent stranger attempts to return it to her:

A young black man is waving [the] scarf...I press my purse against my body, thinking about all the things Juan has told me. I walk as fast as I can, the baby pushing against a rib, and no one is there to save me (187).

In fact, there *is* someone there to save Ana, who has fallen to the ground, curling around her stomach and purse while screaming for Juan: the same man who is returning the scarf. The episode is indicative of the stereotypes that Juan, and society, has taught Ana through media images, descriptions, and hearsay that leads Ana to connect Blackness with criminal behavior. However, this is not to remove all agency from Ana. Granted, she is in an unfamiliar metropolis, but she makes conclusions despite seeing the man approach with her garment. She participates in these stereotypes by protecting her bag and her baby, which is to say, she expects an attempted robbery or worse. Her learned perspectives have led to discriminatory generalizations. Though it is difficult to justify her behavior, I posit that fifteen-year-old Ana learns a valuable lesson: as her "fear evaporates" and she feels "silly," she learns to not believe everything she is told; to make judgment based on her own experiences. Feeling "silly" is a step toward undoing her cultural conditioning, which will then reduce cultural biases and stereotypes, a marker of empathic development and relationality. Although that lesson seems elementary, she develops more autonomy to continue questioning power structures and to identify cross-cultural understanding.

Alternative Communities in *Dominicana*

I outline the pervasive anti-Black mentalities of Ana's closest family members and society in general to emphasize that Ana's coming-of-age is not solely about her understanding of Self, but also

her growing civic engagement through empathy and relationality with other communities. In *Ethics and Human Rights in Anglophone African Women's Literature* (2016), Chielozona Eze postulates that empathy "brings people back to the most basic form of bodily identification with others regardless of race, sex, age, religious beliefs, and other forms of group identifications" (17). Cruz's protagonists' increasing association with an alternative community fosters cross-cultural solidarity and anti-racist tendencies because they are able to overcome divisive rhetoric learned through patriarchal forces. In *Dominicana*, the opportunity for cross-cultural empathic experiences happens more frequently after Juan leaves for the Dominican Republic and Ana is free to leave the house on her own or with her brother-in-law César, thus creating social opportunities for solidarity. César and Juan are different despite being brothers. Physically, César is much darker-skinned than Juan, whose "pasty" skin (85) affords him privileges that César is denied. This is most evident when the two brothers try to enter a "gringo bar" in Washington Heights and the bouncer prohibits César from entering, presumably due to his Blackness (92). The incident reveals the two different experiences of *latinidad* that the brothers have, one in which whiteness and *latinidad* can afford access where Blackness and *latinidad* cannot. After both men are removed for arguing with the bouncer, Juan punches César, thereby giving physical form to the shame and embarrassment that his brother's Blackness causes him. The fact that people stare at César as if he is the perpetrator (92) is a commentary on society's colorism writ large, a commentary that privileges Juan in the moment, so that he goes from aggressor to victim.

In terms of personality, the divergences continue. Whereas Juan seems to reduce nearly every group to denigrating generalizations, César has found a sense of belonging in New York City because he seeks a larger community that accounts for class in addition to race and ethnicity:

Harlem is where César got the crazy idea to let his hair grow and pick it out into a puff. But César says he feels at home in Harlem, where the women don't clutch their purses or cross the street when he walks by them. No one stops him at the door when he walks into a bar. And then there are the white girls, who go to the Harlem bars to dance... (172).

In finding some relationality with the African American community and other open-minded groups in Harlem, César counters the rejection he suffers due to institutionalized racism and racism he likely experiences from lighter-skinned Latinos. By avoiding segregated bars, he circumvents racially-charged interactions that would serve as a reminder of his marginalization. Instead, he joins like-minded groups as a form of resiliency. The fact that he wears his hair in an afro, a symbol in that era of Black power, further articulates his allegiance to a larger community of oppressed groups, one that, it should be noted, makes room for whites as well. Harlem then be-

comes the oppositional safe haven to the hegemonic discourse imposed upon persons of color. He avails Ana to these types of alternatives, so that she too can contest the same discursive practices that Juan, because of his lighter skin and gender, uses to consolidate his power.⁶

César represents to Ana an immigrant who finds alternative communities in New York, but he also immerses her into new experiences that broaden her societal interactions. On a night in which César uses a connection to a Puerto Rican friend to sneak Ana and himself into a movie theater, thereby showing two friends subverting the capitalist model, he pulls her into a group protesting the US occupation of the Dominican Republic. Though she is becoming engaged with American politics, the protest, which she unwillingly participates in, is her first experience alongside a larger community:

But César can't hear me as he pumps his fists and joins the chanting—*Dom. Rep.! Dom. Rep.!* In his excitement he pulls us away from the theater and toward the crowd. I lose my grip on his arm...The crowd of protestors swells into traffic, and the nearby police extend their arms, building a human wall to push them back (180).

However, the language that she uses to describe the event is that of an observer. She refers to "the protestors" and "the crowd" as if she is spatially separate from them, thereby maintaining a distance between her and them. This suggests some hesitation to consider herself part of the group, a wording that will change at a later protest. At the same time, the protest reveals to Ana a community of compatible individuals who also oppose Occupation.

Ana's trajectory toward cross-cultural solidarity is often fitful, reflective of an adolescent's maturation process as well as someone exploring different levels of affiliation. Cruz's novel seeks solidarity between groups through Ana and César, but it does not overlook racial tensions in an effort to simplify the narrative. An episode detailing a brawl in Major League Baseball between Dominican pitcher Juan Marichal and African American catcher John Roseboro is used to highlight animosity between the two communities. Ana feels "satisfaction" when Marichal stands up for himself at the expense of finding commonality (254). Meanwhile, César draws on the similarities between the two communities only to end with a divisive statement: "We can't rent houses, either. Our schools aren't better. We're paid less. The police harass and shoot us at will. We want to work and be left alone. To be able to live our lives without watching our backs. But the blacks look at us like, Who invited you to our party?" (253). These comments, coming from characters whose civic engagement has aligned them with African American communities in moments, acknowledge that the African Diaspora is prismatic; diaspora does not minimize nationality. In *Colonial Phantoms* (2018), Dixia Ramírez argues that "diaspora—in the Dominican and African senses—does not and cannot signify a single, linear trajectory, experience, or aesthetic" (155). That is to say, identity is far more

complex and personal, as Juan Flores and Miriam Jiménez Román explore in "Triple Consciousness?" (2009), their inflection on W.E.B. DuBois's seminal notion of double consciousness, in which they account for *latinidad* (327). This distinction, in which the Afro-Latino feels a sense of unbelonging and belonging as a Latino, of Black descent, and American, can create opportunity for cross-cultural understanding that maintains space for unique cultural identities. Ana negotiates alliance in significant ways as an immigrant who remains connected to the Dominican Republic. Though the novel does not profoundly explore Ana's Blackness in a United Statesian context, a missed opportunity, this scene elucidates the concept of triple consciousness. Ana and César both move through the fluidity of their identity as Afro-Dominicans living in the United States by relating to African Americans as they too are affected by systematic oppression. However, they also value their cultural differences, specifically their *dominicanidad*, which for both, is inclusive of Blackness. Cruz interrogates race and the complexities of Blackness as it can both unite and differentiate African American and Afro-Latino populations. That this episode precedes Ana's empathy toward protesters of police brutality, that it precedes her participation in an anti-war protest, clarifies Cruz's central message: marginalized communities can dismantle oppression, whether small-scale or large-scale, if they can work together.

The culmination of Ana's solidarity with the African American community occurs through a vaguely described day in which Ana's ESL class is canceled due to an impending uprising in the street. The implication here is that as in a year earlier, when policeman Thomas Gilligan killed fifteen-year-old James Powell to incite the 1964 Harlem Riots, another instance of police brutality has occurred. Ana has recently experienced two relatable moments: the death of her brother Yohnny, who was shot in the back by a Dominican guard even though his hands were up (233), and the violent arrest of César after a policeman throws him to the ground and then presses his boot on César's neck in front of her (241). In both instances, Ana finds herself in opposition to authoritative forces that solidify their power on the arbitrary promise to protect the community. These events create further understanding in Ana, so that when African Americans take to the street in revolt, Ana empathizes with their struggle:

Outside I examine the grave faces of the older men and women standing guard in front of their buildings. Their anger makes me nervous, but I understand it. To be angry and not have the power to control your life. To not feel safe. To depend on a person who reminds you how they can hurt you, even kill you, at their whim. I understand (282-3).

In Ana's case, this dependency on others functions on a number of oppressive levels. There is the most immediate one, her husband Juan, who rapes and abuses her, yet is also the couple's breadwin-

ner, her child's father, and key to her family's eventual arrival. A more distant, but oppressive level is the one that similarly affects the African American community that she builds solidarity with: white hegemony that purports equal opportunity for everyone willing to work hard (the American dream), but reinforces institutionalized racism to keep specific groups oppressed. Cruz plays with mutual suffering here as a means to build understanding between two communities over a shared political struggle. This is an important strategy in Cruz's writing, who commented in an interview that "a lot of my work is interested in making sure that the history of how we Dominicans fit in the African diaspora is visible, so Dominicans can be empowered and understand we should celebrate how we are part of the Black diaspora (Irizarry 71). By saying "I understand," Ana has transformed from someone that upheld racist stereotypes to someone who shows consideration and can express care that a group's situation improves. This display of solidarity emerges from cultural relationality, since both communities have been the target of unnecessary violence stemming from the abuse of authority.

By aligning herself with alternative communities, she grounds her own identity in the United States. At the same time, Ana's affinity for African American communities complicates notions of *dominicanidad* by valuing Blackness. García Peña argues that "though in the twentieth century Dominicans continue to imagine themselves as nonwhite (non-European), being black—that is, admitting one's relationship to colonial oppression and slavery—became incompatible with being Dominican" ("Translating" 14). However, Ana rejects the anti-Black rhetoric pervasive from the Trujillo era. Disinterested in upholding the concept of the ideal national community, she chooses oppositional resistance. Ana's dissent is mostly small-scale acts of resistance that seek to upset the power dynamic within the household. Through them, Ana unsettles Juan's dominion from within the confines of her situation as an underaged, undocumented, abused teenage bride who is an elementary English-speaker. However, by the end of the book, drawing on parallels between the US military presence in the Dominican Republic and in Vietnam, she is able to find relationality with large-scale anti-military protests. Her choice to intentionally participate in this protest demonstrates her new-found commitment to civic engagement: "I should go home to avoid trouble, but I throw myself in, allowing the wave to lift and take me along. Surrendering. *Peace for All*" (295). Ana's participation provides her with what Juan has deprived her of since arriving in New York City: a community, and in turn, a reason to stay in spite of all the hardships. "Chants rip through my body. *Together we're strong*. So strong. This is why we sit. This is why we say no. This is why we link arms" (295). The shift from "I" to "we" marks her inclusion within the group and reflects the feminist *bildungsroman* emphasis on a subjectivity that moves from Self to community; a trajectory that was not developed when she was thrust into her first protest. Her activism shows a larger aspiration on her part to contest institutions of power and align herself with those interested in changing the status quo.

Conclusion: Writing Alternative Realities

Facing multiple levels of oppression as an undocumented Afro-Dominicana in the United States (as a woman, as a Latina, and as an Afro-Latina), Ana uses her creativity to imagine alternate possibilities in which this oppression dissipates. The day after Yohnny dies in the crossfire in Santo Domingo, Ana rushes to the lobby to look for news of his death in an American newspaper, only to find that the paper's one article about the Dominican Republic regards the death of Porfirio Rubirosa, Dominican diplomat, playboy, and Trujillista. Dismayed at the lack of representation pertaining to the US military occupation of the island, Ana seeks consolation from César. Citing that the newspaper is "for white people" (235) and therefore, disinterested in the intersection of class and race, particularly underprivileged persons of color, César hands Ana a pen and paper and encourages her to write a eulogy for her brother. This act facilitates Ana imagining new realities, one in which an Afro-Dominican gunned down by trigger-happy soldiers receives the tribute that he deserves. To write Yohnny's death into the newspaper, if only as a creative exercise, is to envision a world in which Afro-Dominican lives are given the same representation as their lighter-skinned counterparts. Beyond a form of closure, the act serves to imagine a reality in which racial hierarchies once enforced and promoted by the Trujillato are dismantled. At César's behest, Ana writes a future eulogy for her brother-in-law, set in 2033. In this reality, César becomes a successful fashion designer who opens the "first bodega on the moon" (237). When César questions such an ambitious description, Ana tells him, "Why do we have to settle for just this life?" (238). In her study on Afro-Atlantic literature, *Decolonizing Diasporas* (2020), Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez refers to this type of creative potential as imagining "worlds/otherwise." Worlds/otherwise "fashions new possibilities for Black life and ways of being in the world for both the present moment and the future" (148). Moreover, it engages "in the future work of thinking, writing, and acting that humanize peoples condemned by coloniality and ongoing forms of racism" (148). In *Dominicana*, Angie Cruz's protagonist

does not settle for what society has denied her; she unsettles the power structures through her creativity. By eulogizing her brother, she visualizes a more just representation in media. Furthermore, she imagines a "worlds/otherwise" in which her brother-in-law becomes a pioneer in fashion, a forward-thinking career in a futuristic landscape.

Imagination plays a role in Ana's self-fashioning throughout the novel as well. From imagining the struggles of Betty Shabazz and Malcolm X to participating in anti-war protests, Ana finds belonging with those who have also been cast aside. She comes to understand her identity through her increased interest in civic engagement. Both inside and outside her apartment, she participates in subverting power structures as her growing sense of belonging in a community informs her sense of Self. An alternative community strengthens Ana's ability to resist her abusive spouse, here a symbol of hegemonic impositions on her sense of Self. Yet this oppositional resistance does not weaken her in a foreign country. Through these shared experiences, Ana is able to visualize an alternate reality in which she exerts control over her life. In the empowering final image of *Dominicana*, the protagonist will study accounting to manage the family's food businesses, enjoying her success without Juan.

For Angie Cruz, whose writing has been impacted by the era in which she writes, an era marked by xenophobia towards Latin American immigrants, the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement, and wide-spread injustice and corruption, cross-cultural solidarity as a model of resistance is a notable offering to the studies of Afro-Latinidad confronted with white, patriarchal hegemony. *Dominicana* serves as an example of Dominican American authors challenging what dominicanidad looks like in the diaspora. In Cruz's project, unity with African American communities subverts the dominant rhetoric of anti-Black dominicanidad on the island as articulated through and after the Trujillato. The intersectionality within the text postulates that communities oppressed due to gender, race, class, and status are able to lean on and learn from each other through acts of resistance, imagined or otherwise.

NOTES

¹ See, for instance, Viswanathan's "Rev. of *Dominicana*" (2019) and Segura's "Dominicana" (2019).

² In the summer of 2019, protesters took to the streets throughout Puerto Rico to demand the resignation of then-Governor Ricky Rosselló after approximately 900 pages of text messages were leaked revealing sexist and homophobic language.

³ At the time of writing, only one scholarly result appeared in the online database *MLA International Bibliography*, Jocelyn Fenton Stitt's *Dreams of Archives* (2021). Unfortunately, Stitt's treatment of *Dominicana* is tangential as her analysis focuses more on the online archive that Cruz created on Instagram (@dominicanasny) to collect photos and narratives of Dominican women in New York City.

⁴ In "Beyond resistance in Dominican American women's fiction" (2021), Regina Marie Mills analyzes how Cruz moves beyond the Trujillato in *Soledad* by focusing on a woman-centered narrative through "art, quiet, secrecy, surrender, and interiority" (72).

⁵ In "*Más que Cenizas*" (2010), Lorgia García Peña astutely points out that Trujillo was not the first Dominican leader with an anti-Haitian rhetoric. What sets Trujillo apart is that these ideologies "were translated into tangible actions that reinforced clear national, territorial, and psychological borders through law, force, and violence..." (45).

⁶ Paradoxically, Juan has a Puerto Rican lover and supports the presidential candidacy of Afro-Dominican José Francisco Peña Gómez. Thus, Juan's colorism comes with allowances. A Puerto Rican mistress is permissible as long as he marries a Dominican woman. Regarding Blackness, Juan distinguishes between African Americans and Afro-Dominicans and that is why he can advocate for Peña Gómez. Of course, his personal life necessitates those distinctions, since his wife and brother César are characterized by their darker skin.

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