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Dominicanness at the Crossroads: Surviving the
translocal-global village

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DOMINICANNESS AT THE CROSSROADS

Surviving the translocal-global village

KARIN WEYLAND

I took these photographs with a 35mm Leica camera in Washington Heights, New York City, the site of the largest Dominican community in the United States, and in the Dominican Republic itself. They span two and a half years between 1993 and 1996.

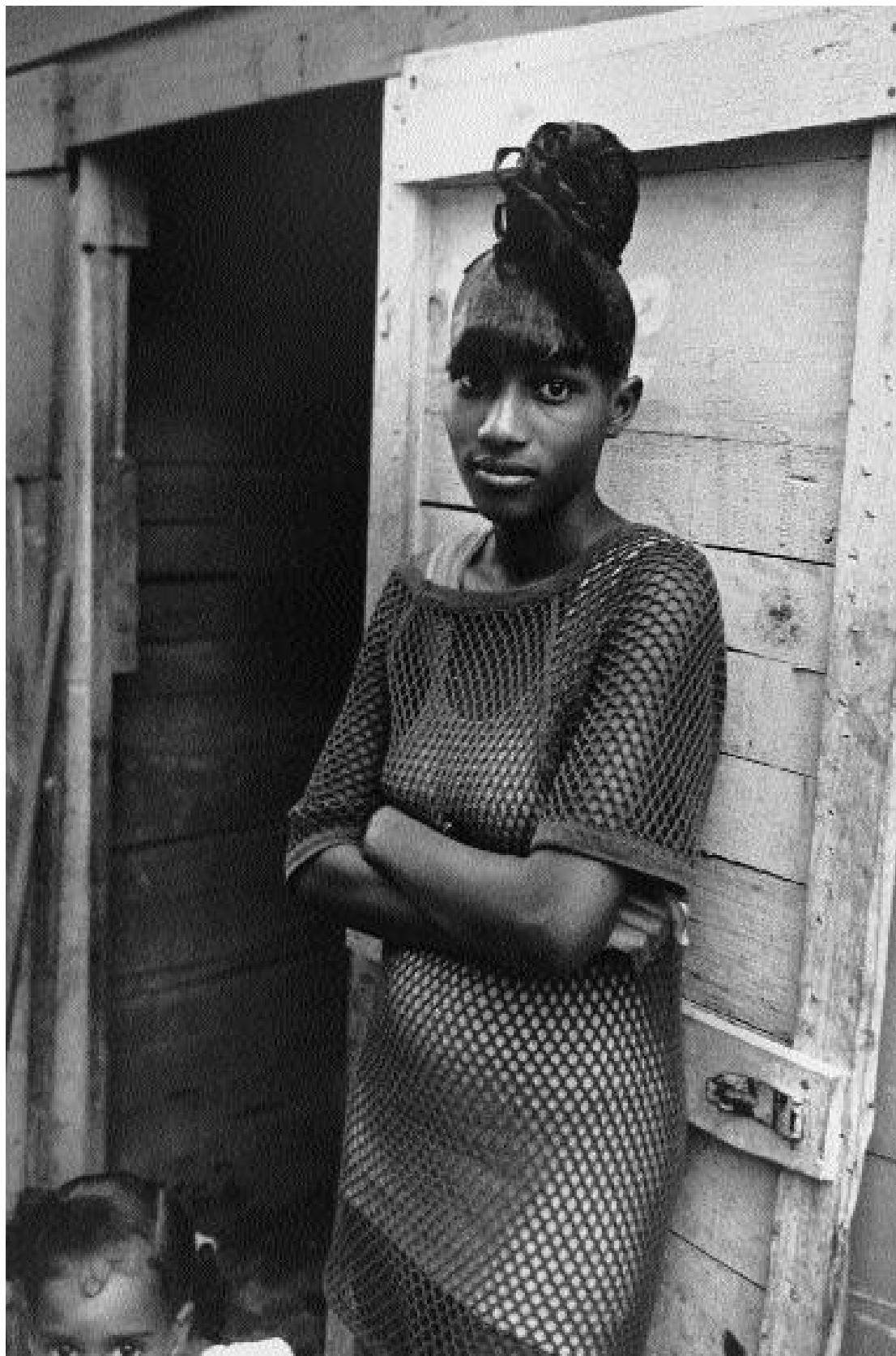
Before traveling to Santo Domingo on a fellowship from the Organization of American States, I lived in Washington Heights and became a daily observer of the local culture and community dynamics. I participated in political campaigns, social gatherings, parades, church festivities, and other social events, which gave me the opportunity to use street photography to record the idiosyncrasies of Dominican culture in the United States and the hybrid forms that originate in a newly constituted ethnic enclave. I came to realize that Dominicans are driven by a strong national identity, depicted in these photographs in the continuity they give to the political ideologies and cultural practices they have brought with them from the island, while they attempt to achieve social mobility and the American dream. Their testimonies of hard work and constant struggle with various American institutions bespeak the breakdown of the family in the United States and the need to build and maintain a transnational support system with the family left behind. Such transnational networks would become the standard by which to evaluate a migratory experience.

My interest focused on immigrant women, so I became a volunteer at the Dominican Women's Center in Washington Heights. I had access to all the programs organized by this and other community centers, such as adult classes, fund-raising parties, and other educationally oriented activities. From the summer of 1994 on I conducted interviews with a small number of women I had met in the field. The interviews took place in their homes. I chose to shoot portraits there to capture something of the daily context of their lives as well as some expression in their faces, hand movements, or posture that reflected the issues we had discussed during the interviews.

In the Dominican Republic I contacted some of the relatives of the families I had met in New York and interviewed and photographed them as well. In some instances I was able to interview families that had returned to the island for good. I also contacted various community-based organizations in Santo Domingo and worked in many impover-

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*Lucha diaria entre
el parecer y el ser
[Daily struggle
between being and
appearing to be]*

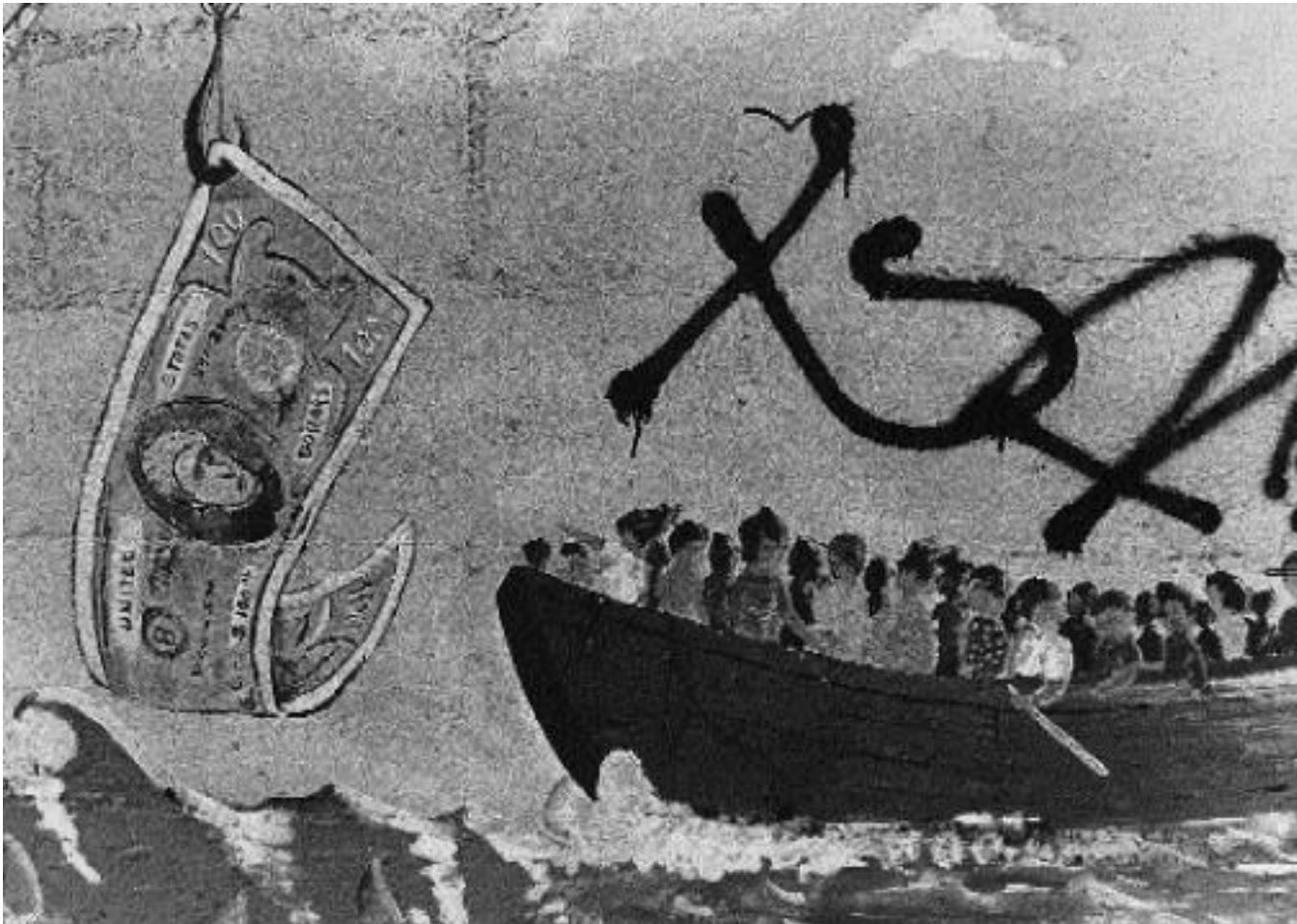
**La Ci naga,
Santo Domingo**

Young mother getting
ready to go to a disco

ished barrios of the city. In the end I witnessed the cultural transformations that the migration phenomenon and migrant families in particular had introduced, directing local tastes toward goods and practices imported from the United States. As carriers of the American dream, migrants and non-migrants alike fashion their daily lives according to living standards guided by the American entertainment and tourism industries.

My photographs, I trust, are a visual testimony of these changes. They suggest the paradoxical interplay between global and local values.

—K. W.



El gancho del dólar
[The deceiving dollar]

**Graffiti in Cristo Rey,
Santo Domingo**

Since the 1960s many Dominicans, attracted by the demand for cheap labor in metropolitan areas, have emigrated to New York City, embarking on a long journey of ensnared

dreams. After refuting the commonly held view that "landing in New York is like landing in paradise," migrants begin to include the homeland in their prospects, investing in two countries at the same time. A strong transnational support system, sustained mainly by women, helps make this vision possible.

Today about three hundred thousand Dominicans travel to the island yearly; while many have residential and business investments there, others are simply tourists. Dominicans also contribute to the national economy from abroad, sending about \$500 million a year in cash remittances.



Con plomo de mujer
[With a woman's strength]
Washington Heights

The demand for cheap labor in New York City garment sweatshops increased the number of women in the Dominican circuit. Many left their children in the care of the

extended family. Even when the reason to emigrate was to provide their children with better educational and job opportunities, the act of migration increased women's authority and autonomy in the traditional family. Many single-parent homes resulted.

The
Transnational Family I
Washington Heights

Carmen standing in front of pictures of her parents in her apartment. She pays the rent by working as a baby-sitter in her own home. After she had emigrated, her mother in Santo Domingo took care of her five children, and in a few years Carmen was able to bring her two oldest children to Washington Heights to live with her.





The Transnational Family 2

**San Cristóbal,
Santo Domingo**

Carmen and her mother at
the *colmado*, a grocery
store her mother built with
the money Carmen had sent
her from abroad

Mujer campesina

**Cristo Rey,
Santo Domingo**

Migrant women bring with them many of the rural customs they grew up with. They continue to live by these practices. During one of my interviews in New York, I saw two guinea pigeons imported from the Dominican Republic. Every morning their owner anxiously searched their nest for eggs, just as if she had been back on her patio in Santo Domingo.





Factory Worker

Washington Heights

Most migrant Dominican women arrive with no knowledge of the English language and with poor educational skills. In part because the garment and personal services industries

are among the few sources of work that they are prepared to do, these sectors have become "feminized." Employees can expect low wages, no benefits, and long hours of manual labor in poor working conditions.



Mujeres ausentes
[Absent women]

**La Ci naga,
 Santo Domingo**

"When my wife told me she had to look for new horizons for all of us, *le di un voto de confianza* [I gave her a vote of confidence]. She went to work abroad. I thought I couldn't live without her,

but you get used to it, with uncertain resignation. Some neighbors tell me *que me dejaron roncando* [I was jilted]. I tell them if she's mine, she'll be back; if she isn't, she won't. If she marries someone else over there, it will be painful, but it will mean she never loved me. So I'll look for another wife. *Más adelante vive gente* [Onward with life]."

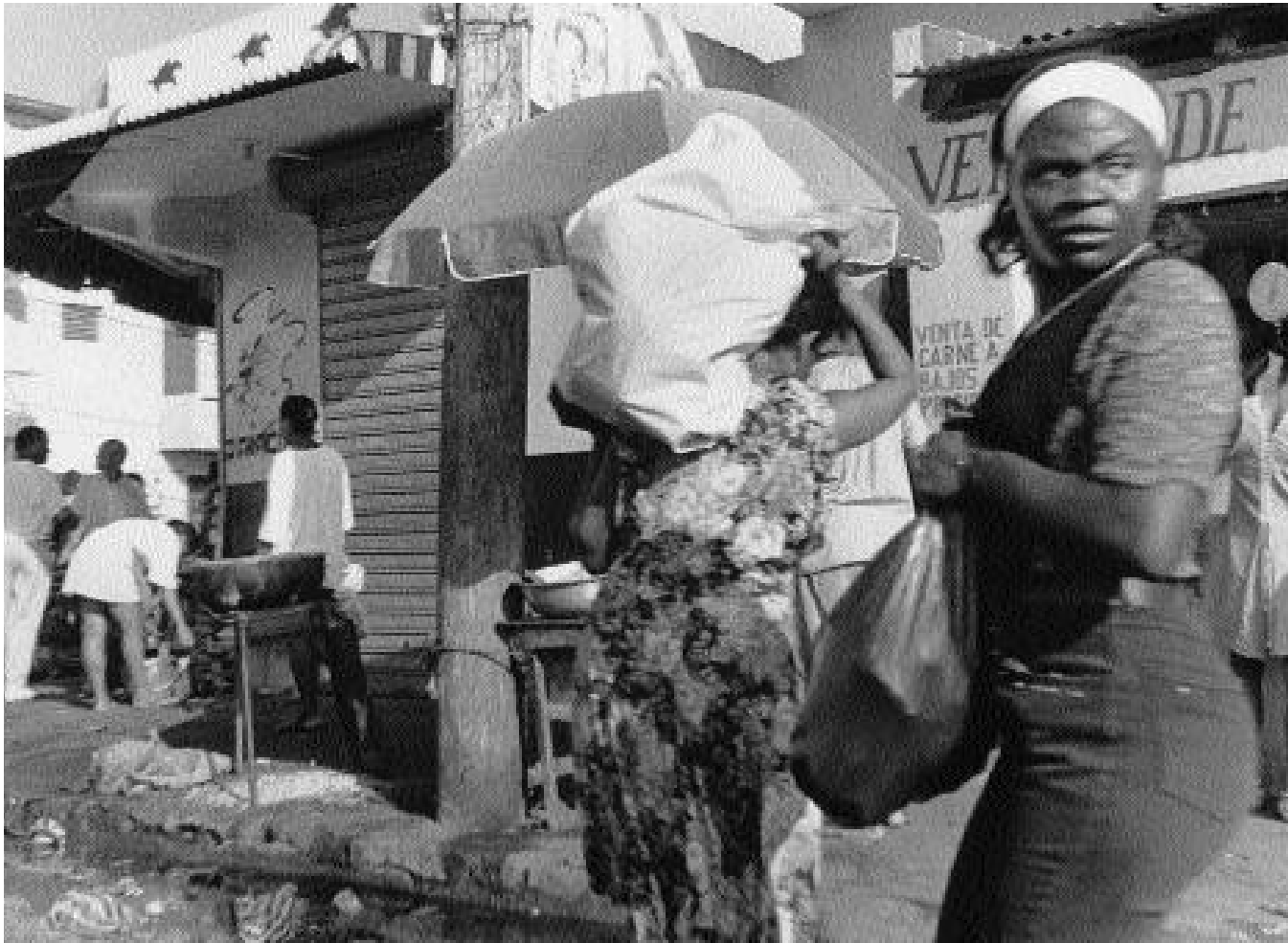


***We Came por la puerta
ancha [through the
wide door]***

Washington Heights

It took Altagracia some ten years to unite her family in New York City. During this time her sister and her mother raised her four daughters, whom she saw

only on occasional visits to Santo Domingo. After working as a domestic at a tourist resort in Curazao for eight years, she entered the United States with a tourist visa. She continued to work as a domestic, and two years later she obtained her green card, after marrying a U.S. citizen.



Marketplace

Santo Domingo

For many women in Santo Domingo, selling products in the informal economy is a traditional way to earn a living. They also shop in the marketplace for household needs. Today imported clothing, sneakers, handbags, perfume, hair products, and music tapes are common articles of exchange in the informal economy.



***Marchantas Here
and There***
Washington Heights

Pressured by need in their families, migrant women cannot afford to stop working in order to study or to acquire new skills. Some of the economic strategies they use to support themselves and their families resemble traditional gender roles.

For example, they often resort to providing child care or cooking *empanadillas*, *chicharrones de pollo*, and *bizcochos* in the informal economy. Ramona has been selling ethnic foods on this busy street corner for a few years. She serves passersby as well as a regular clientele, consisting of a few restaurants and other members of the community.

La curandera
[The healer]

Oviedo,
Dominican Republic

Curandera treating a young woman for stomach pain. Practicing *curandería* and *santería* has long been traditional in the Dominican Republic; most migrants seek moral support in *curanderas'* home remedies and *santeras'* rituals and have brought many of their practices to New York City. Uncertain of their prospects, migrants and nonmigrants alike rely on the advice of these practitioners in their search for comfort and good fortune, even as they hope for legal papers to come their way.





Baby Esperanza

Washington Heights

Holding on to their cultural traditions, a group of women perform a ceremony in memory of a newborn baby girl found dead in a garbage can.



Toque de palos

**La Ci naga,
Santo Domingo**

Party organized by the church community for its three neighboring barrios. Wearing New York fashions—jeans, T-shirts, Nautica shoes and sneakers—Dominicans on

the island enjoy a festive atmosphere offered by merengue and *bachata* music. In the face of urban poverty, *el barrio* provides them with a sense of solidarity and companionship rarely found in leisure activities or at parties in Washington Heights.



First Communion
Washington Heights

Among migrant families in New York City, extravagant celebrations of religious occasions commonly symbolize success and social status. Through such events, many of the cultural elements that underlie the participants' social and class identities in the United States and abroad are transformed.

Baptism

Washington Heights

Adopting a New York City lifestyle is a visual expression of upward social mobility. Immigrants show off their success most often through new clothing and private parties.

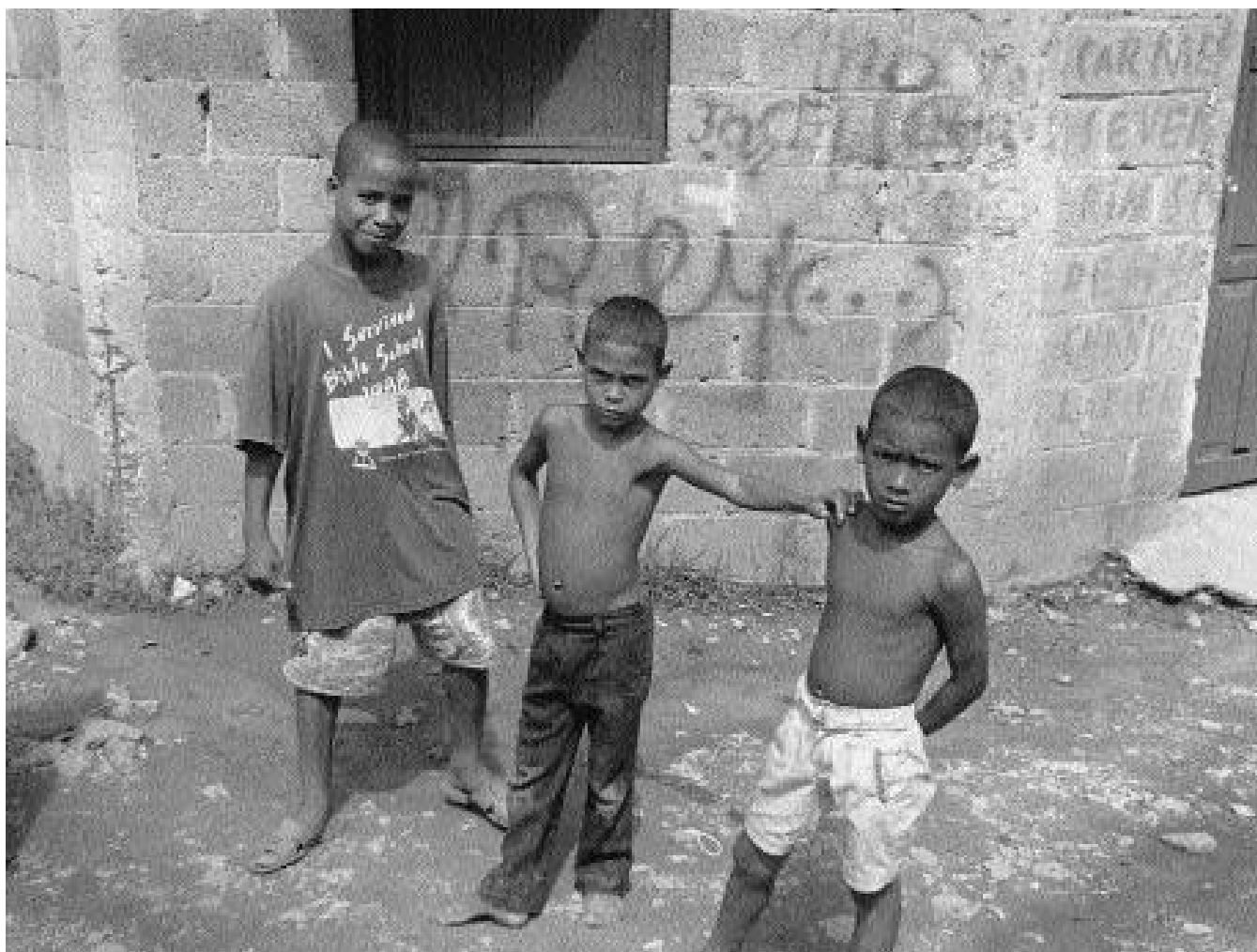




Migrant's Dresser
Washington Heights

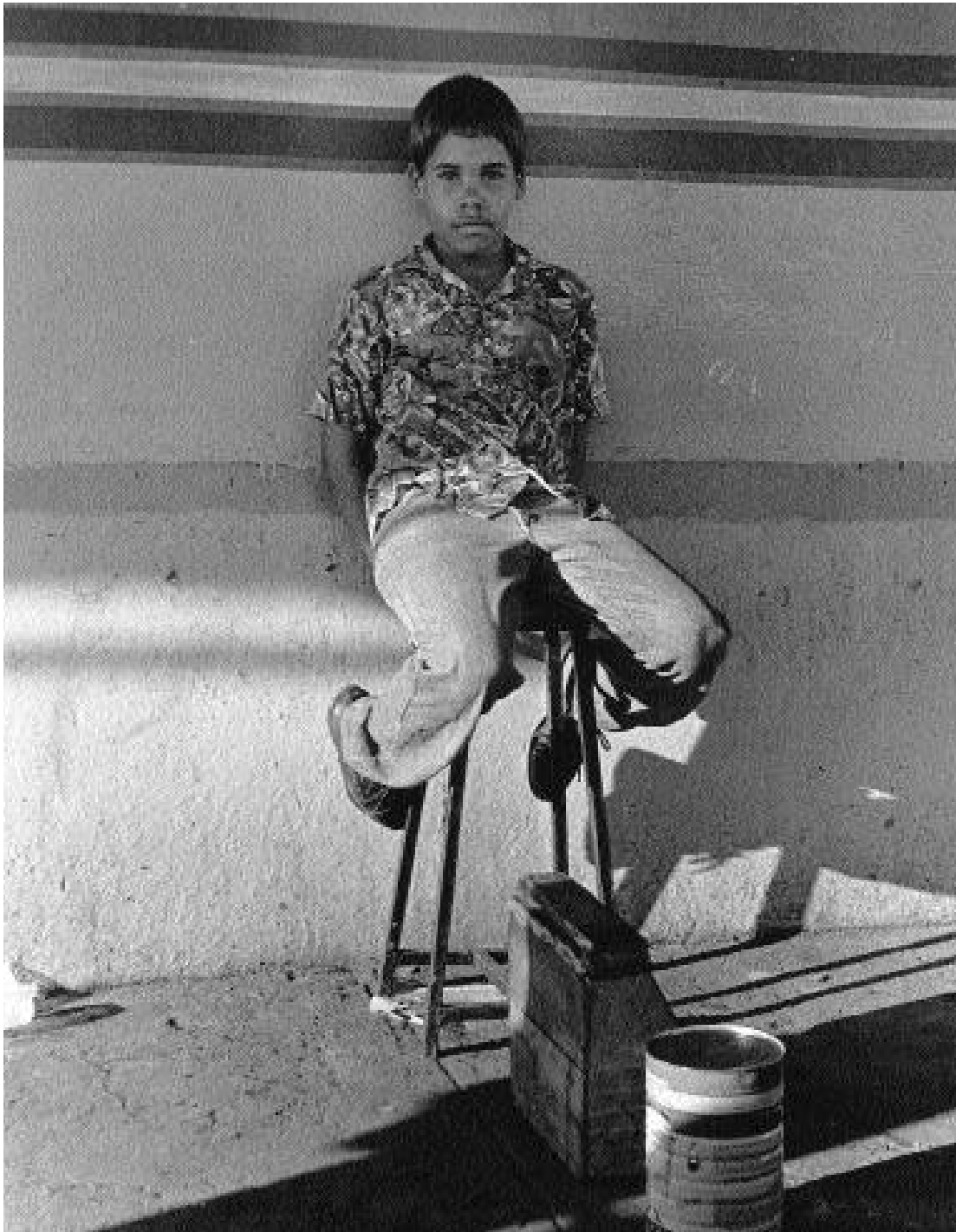
Personal effects are among the most important status symbols for migrants and nonmigrants alike, because they are both quickly acquired and highly visible. When migrants go back home, they pay special attention to their clothing, their hairdos, and the amount of jewelry they

wear. Often they will not think of going back without first changing their appearance. Indeed, it is so important to demonstrate one's success in this way that earlier migrant streams gave rise to informal networks through which people could rent gold jewelry to pretend that they had relatively high economic standing.



El rey [The king]

La Ci naga,
Santo Domingo



Limpiabotas

Cristo Rey, Santo Domingo

Boy making a living in the streets. Most migrants gain access to consumer goods and American lifestyles by democratizing the practices

that represent power and prestige on the island. This process raises the expectations of the native population, of which a great majority continues to experience class and gender inequality.

*Uncontested
Gender Identities*

**Barahona,
Dominican Republic**

The patriarchal ideology sustained by Catholicism and capitalism for centuries determines many of the roles women assume in contemporary Dominican society. As mothers, partners, and workers, women are the pillars of family life and happiness. Despite their awareness of the male-breadwinner myth, they uphold similar patriarchal values generation after generation.





Playing House
S bana Grande
de Boya,
Dominican Republic



***Teenage Mother
and Child 1***
Washington Heights

Over a third of Dominican households in New York City are headed by women, many of them teenage

mothers. Despite their own mothers' efforts to encourage them to remain in school and marry later, teenage mothers are common in the second generation of migrant women.



***Teenage Mother
and Child 2***

Washington Heights

In Washington Heights, the city's most over-crowded high school fails to educate the young. Many girls who attend it resort to motherhood to

raise their self-esteem and to establish a material link with the father, usually an older man. Denied the opportunities of a better education and decent entry-level jobs, girls fall back on traditional gender roles.

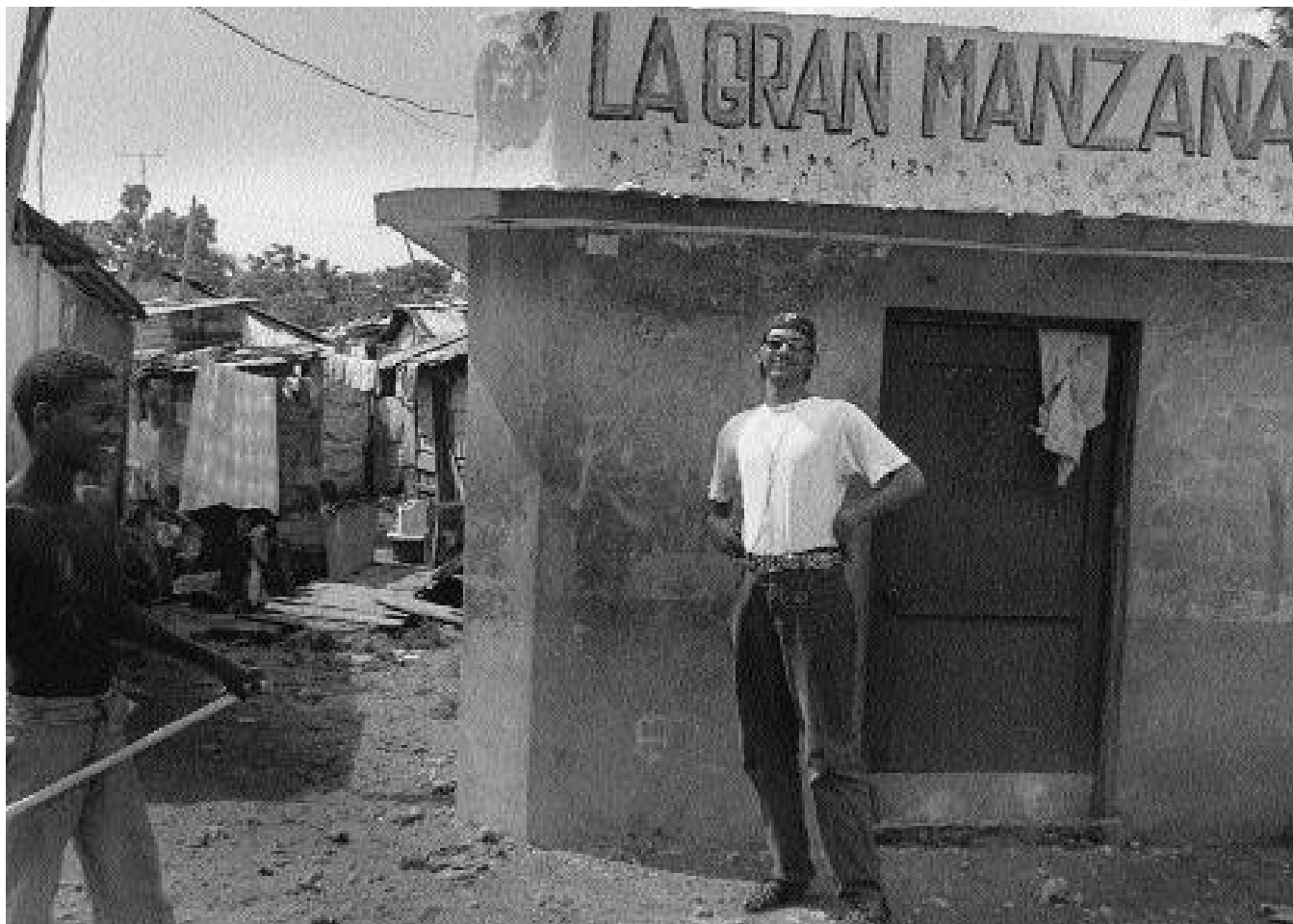


*Translocal-Global
Practices I*

**La Ci naga,
Santo Domingo**

Young men standing in the bodega exhibit imported American goods, such as FILA sneakers, baseball caps, loose pants, and T-shirts, all brought back by circulating migrants. Prototypical icons of American culture, these mass-consumption articles

reach even the most remote towns of the Dominican Republic, transforming local values with global cultural practices. The ideas of independence and material comfort embedded in these products contrast sharply with the gender ideology depicted on the walls of this bodega, where women are portrayed as homemakers and sex objects.



*Translocal-Global
Practices 2*

**La Ci naga,
Santo Domingo**

Names are commonly transposed from one place to another. This old prostitution house, now closed, contains allusions to many of New York City's extravagances. With its tall buildings and skylights,

occasionally referred to as *los países* in Dominican pop culture, New York represents the global power of the United States for most Dominicans living on the island. They view the "capital of the world," as illustrated in the thousands of Hollywood movies imported into their own capital, as a bastion of high technology, capital

flow, job opportunities, and commercial investments. When the Dominican film *Nueva Yol*, depicting the lives of Dominicans in New York, was released in 1995, theater attendance in Santo Domingo reached an all-time high. By the end of the year the film was still playing at nine different cinemas.



Translocal-Global
Practices 3

**Villa Consuelo,
Santo Domingo**

Prospective migrant watching *El show de Cristina*, a talk show popular all over Latin America and among Latinos and Latinas in the United States. It is staged and produced in Miami, the Hollywood of the Hispanic world.



Nike Girl

**La Ci naga,
Santo Domingo**

In the 1960s the diffusion of American goods abroad gained great importance for the American national economy. In 1989 entertainment was the third largest U.S. trade-surplus item, after food and aerospace products: in that year the exportation of movies, television programs, videos, records, cassettes, and CDs brought in \$8 billion.



***Cadenús and
Dominican Yorks***
**Guachupita,
Santo Domingo**

Migrants' access to American consumer goods says more to Dominicans on the island today than American TV series and films do. Despite the sometimes negative image of "Dominican Yorks" among Santo Domingo's

upper class, its lower class looks up to migrant Dominicans for having achieved what it views as a middle-class standard of living in America. This standard was seldom attained by the first generation of immigrants, but new forms of transnationalism have put it within reach of new immigrant groups.



Sunday Morning

Washington Heights

Dominicans' transnational practices have enabled many ethnic stores in Washington Heights to prosper, especially travel agencies, service agencies, and photographic studios. Wedding, baptism, first communion, and graduation albums are in great demand among migrants, because they are confirmations of a newly acquired lifestyle.



The 1994 Presidential Campaign

Washington Heights

By living abroad, Dominicans have gained leverage in the political struggle over national resources in the home country. Even after taking steps to obtain political representation in the United States by electing one of their own to the New York

city council, they maintain their allegiances to political parties on the island. Unified by the diaspora experience, they are becoming a transnational interest group. On the basis of their ethnicity and class mobility, they have gained access to economic resources and political representation in American and Dominican politics.



The Transnational Home
Washington Heights

Dominicans' emulation of American cultural patterns and standards of living has served American corporations well, as this AT&T advertisement indicates. Selling the American dream to underdeveloped nations is an

increasingly widespread means of opening consumer markets and influencing foreign politicians. Its proponents have become harbingers of industrialization and modernization abroad. For migrant women, becoming part of the transnational home helps maximize personal

resources. However, their cultural conversion has not significantly changed the ideological basis of their behavior and expectations. This result has been most paradoxical in the interplay between global and local values, because it speaks to the precarious position of Latina women in the global economy.