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Sharon Utakis

CUNY Bronx Community College

Nelson Reynoso

CUNY Bronx Community College

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“No Tengo Otra Opción – Ya Me Voy”: Stories of Family Separation Told by Dominican Immigrants¹

Sharon Utakis and Nelson Reynoso, Bronx Community College, CUNY

The Dominican community in New York City is a clear example of a transnational community: migrants move between the Dominican Republic and the United States, maintaining strong ties with both places. Dominicans migrate because of economic difficulties and to rejoin family members who have gone before them. Families often move in a stepwise fashion, with one or two members of the household immigrating first, and then bringing others over. Here we discuss the oral histories of three immigrants, Manuel, Yngrid, and Maria, who were separated from their families for at least three years during the course of immigration. Each decided to move to the United States, sometimes against the will of their family members. They were motivated to immigrate to escape difficult financial situations, to seek new opportunities, and to provide for family members who were left behind. In varying degrees, these narrators felt that they had no other option but to go to the United States. Manuel fulfilled the traditional patriarchal role of decision-maker and financial supporter of the family, while Yngrid and Maria both went against traditional gender roles, taking on the role of breadwinner and redefining it in terms of the traditional caregiving role.

Introduction

What lengths would you go to in order to support your family, to make sure that your family members had a place to live, food to eat, and an opportunity for an education? Would you be willing to be separated from them for an extended period of time? Would you break the law? Would you risk your life? Many people never have to ask themselves these sorts of questions, but they are all issues that have been confronted by the Dominican immigrants that we have interviewed. This article will examine the life histories of Dominican immigrants who have come to New York City since 1981 and were separated from their families for at least three years. Most of the studies on Dominican immigrants to the United States have been quantitative studies that have presented aggregated data. In this

¹ This research was funded by a 2006-2007 CUNY Community College Collaborative Research Incentive Grant. We would like to express our appreciation for our student research assistants who have helped with transcription, especially Jose Reyes, Wendy Nuñez and Mary Garcia. We would also like to thank Marianne Pita, two anonymous reviewers, and the editors, Stacey Zembrzycki and Katrina Srigley, for their helpful comments and suggestions. Most importantly, we would like to thank the immigrants who were willing to share their stories. This article is dedicated to Manuel Rosario, 1946-2009.

study we focus on three interviews that highlight a range of different experiences. By examining the life experiences of these three immigrants in depth and by quoting extensively from their interviews, we hope that their voices will emerge and provide a better understanding of their life histories.

These interviews illustrate the motivations for immigration, the effects of separation on families, and the important role that gender plays in migration experiences. We show that all three of our narrators were motivated to come to the United States to escape difficult financial situations, to seek new opportunities which they believed would be readily available, and to provide for their family members who were left behind in the Dominican Republic. The first, Manuel, fulfilled the traditional Dominican masculine role of decision-maker and breadwinner. The second, Yngrid, went against traditional gender roles and decided to emigrate against her husband's wishes. The third, Maria, subverted traditional gender roles out of necessity. In varying degrees, these three narrators all felt that they had no other option but to immigrate to the United States.

As a result of their migration, our three narrators and their families experienced a number of challenges, including loneliness, homesickness, the stress of dealing with a new environment, and, in the case of those who immigrated illegally, fear of being caught. These challenges raise several interesting questions: what motivates families to go through this type of separation? Who decides whether a separation should happen or not? In retrospect, do immigrants believe that such sacrifices were worthwhile?

Background on Dominican Immigrants in New York

With more than half a million members, the Dominican community in New York City is a clear example of a transnational community as defined by Nina Glick Schiller, in which migrants move between the Dominican Republic and the United States, maintaining strong ties with both places.² The Washington Heights neighbourhood of New York City, the largest Dominican settlement in the United States, offers new immigrants, long-term immigrants, and second-generation Dominicans an extended neighbourhood that recreates many aspects of the Dominican homeland. In a monograph about the Dominican community in Washington Heights, anthropologist Jorge Duany states that transnational

² Nina Glick Schiller, "Who are These Guys? A Transnational Reading of the U.S. Immigrant Experience," in *Identities on the Move: Transnational Processes in North America and the Caribbean Basin*, ed. Liliana Goldin (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1999), 15-43. See also Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, "Transnationalism: A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration," in *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism Reconsidered: Vol. 645. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, eds. Linda Basch, Cristina Blanc-Szanton and Nina Glick Schiller (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1992), 1-24.

communities such as the Dominican community in New York can be “characterized by a constant flow of people in both directions, a dual sense of identity, ambivalent attachment to two nations and a far-flung network of kinship and friendship ties across state frontiers.”³ Transnational Dominicans tend to return to the Dominican Republic for vacations or extended visits because of inexpensive air fares and short flights (it is only three and a half hours between New York City and the Dominican Republic), and they stay in regular contact with family, friends, and institutions through phone calls, faxes, and the internet.

Based on United States census data, sociologist Ramona Hernández and economist Francisco Rivera-Batiz estimate that there were 1,041,910 Dominicans in the United States in 2000. This makes the population the fourth largest Latino group, after Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans.⁴ The largest concentration of Dominican immigrants is in the state of New York, with 617,900 in 2000, but there are other sizable communities in New Jersey, Florida, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania and Connecticut.⁵ In New York City alone, the Dominican population reached 554,638 in 2000. This made Dominicans the second largest Latino population in New York City, following Puerto Ricans. However, the Puerto Rican population has been shrinking as the Dominican population has been growing, so it is quite likely that the Dominican population will surpass the Puerto Rican population by 2010.⁶

Hernández and Rivera-Batiz demonstrate that the growth of the Dominican population in the United States is largely due to immigration.⁷ Dominican immigration has been caused by political and economic changes both in the United States and in the Dominican Republic. During the time of the Trujillo dictatorship (1930-1961), only Dominicans with close ties to the Trujillo government were permitted to travel outside the Dominican Republic. Jorge Duany shows that unrestricted emigration only commenced during the post-Trujillo era. Dominicans began to migrate in large numbers after the assassination

³ Jorge Duany, *Quisqueya on the Hudson: The Transnational Identity of Dominicans in Washington Heights* (New York: The CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 1994), 2; see also, Milagros Ricourt, *Dominicans in New York City: Power from the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 2002) for a more recent ethnographic study of Dominicans in New York.

⁴ Ramona Hernández and Francisco Rivera-Batiz, “Dominicans in the United States: A Socioeconomic Profile of the Labor Force,” in *Building Strategic Partnerships for Development: Dominican Republic – New York State*, eds. Ramona Hernández and María Elizabeth Rodríguez (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic: Fundación Global Democracia y Desarrollo, 2004), 31-33. Hernández and Rivera-Batiz suggest that there were 91,000 undocumented Dominican migrants living in the United States in 2000, based on estimates by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, but they argue that “a substantial fraction” of these undocumented migrants were counted by the U.S. Census.

⁵ Hernández and Rivera-Batiz, “Dominicans in the United States,” 35.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, “Dominicans in the United States,” 34.

of Trujillo in 1961, the *coup d'état* against the elected president Juan Bosch in 1963, and the United States military occupation of Santo Domingo in 1965.⁸

Ramona Hernández suggests that during the 1970s, most Dominicans migrating to the United States were blue-collar workers, while during the 1980s this trend shifted, with an increase in professional and technical workers migrating due to “the progressive deterioration of the public services, the drastic fall of the value of the *peso* (the Dominican currency), and the loss of stable and well-paid jobs.”⁹ Even Dominicans who held college degrees had difficulty finding employment; positions often went to those less qualified but better connected. Although Dominican immigrants to New York have been more educated since the 1980s, limited English skills tend to keep these immigrants in less-skilled jobs, such as taxi-driving or working in restaurants.

Party affiliation and political involvement play a central role in Dominican culture, and can also affect employment opportunities. Dominicans who have family members with connections to the political party in power have a better chance of getting a job. However, Eugenia Georges suggests that given “the clientelistic and paternalistic climate of the Dominican political system,” these jobs are often insecure. After elections, these positions may be “redistributed as spoils to loyal supporters of the victorious party.”¹⁰ Duany notes that Dominican migration to Puerto Rico, often a stepping stone to New York, has usually peaked in years of presidential elections in the Dominican Republic.¹¹

During the 1980s, referred to as the “lost decade” by the Dominican economist Bernardo Vega, “most workers who needed to work for a living suffered.”¹² Hernández notes that by 1984, 40.8% of children under five years of age in the Dominican Republic were malnourished. The number of families living below the poverty level in 1984 was 47%, and by 1989 it was 56%.¹³ Dominican families resorted to immigration when they could not find another way to feed their children.

Milagros Ricourt describes how, beginning in the mid-1980s, illegal immigration became increasingly common for those who were unable to legally obtain a visa. Desperate immigrants would travel by boat across the Mona Strait to Puerto Rico. Ricourt argues that:

⁸ Jorge Duany, “Dominican Migration to Puerto Rico: a Transnational Perspective,” *Centro Journal* XVII,1 (2005), 245.

⁹ Ramona Hernández, “On the Age Against the Poor: Dominican Migration to the United States,” *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Services* 2, 1/2 (2004), 89-90.

¹⁰ Eugenia Georges, *The Making of a Transnational Community: Migration, Development, and Cultural Change in the Dominican Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 137.

¹¹ Duany, “Dominican Migration to Puerto Rico,” 247.

¹² Quoted in Hernández, “On the Age Against the Poor,” 92.

¹³ *Ibid*, quoting statistics from Santana and Rathe, 1993.

[Poverty] is the main factor driving the massive waves of migration, which represents a choice rebelling against the lack of opportunities in the home country. Migration is one of the few choices available to people to change their status. In previous times other choices were open: social change, revolutions, the acquisition of a political consciousness, collective political organizations [...]. Today the paradigm of social change and revolution is gone; the poor now migrate to attain a life for themselves.¹⁴

While the poorest of the poor were unable to raise enough money to leave, legally or illegally, those who could get the money together to emigrate often did. Economic conditions were difficult, and in the 1980s they were getting worse. Many Dominicans began to think that opportunities for improving their family's economic situation, or even just maintaining it, would be better elsewhere.

Family members were left behind for a variety of reasons. A resident visa can only be obtained when someone with permanent residency sponsors a family member and shows evidence of being able to support that family member. In some instances, families could not afford to send more than one or two members at a time, or a sponsor could not show evidence of being able to support all of the members of the family. Decisions about who would go depended on whose travel would most benefit the entire family. Anthropologist Eugenia Georges, in an ethnographic study of one rural Dominican immigrant-sending community, discussed the role of the family in immigration decisions: "Migratory moves were discussed by spouses and parents, and strategies to raise the relatively large amount of capital needed to finance a move were jointly planned, often with the assistance of the larger extended family."¹⁵ Family members who were left behind managed to survive by relying on remittances from those who emigrated. Manuel Orozco suggests that 60% of Dominicans in New York have an income of less than \$25,000 (U.S.) annually, but that these same immigrants send about \$200 (U.S.) in remittances ten times a year, which is almost 10% of their income.¹⁶ Sociologist Luis Guarnizo argues that family remittances have helped diffuse social and political discontent in the Dominican Republic: "[Remittances] have served to transform social dissatisfaction among a significant segment of the

¹⁴ Milagros Ricourt, "Reaching the Promised Land: Undocumented Dominican Migration to Puerto Rico," *Centro Journal* XIX, 2 (2007), 230.

¹⁵ Georges, *The Making of a Transnational Community*, 93.

¹⁶ Manuel Orozco, "Opportunities and Strategies for Development and Growth Through Familial Remittances to the Dominican Republic," in *Building Strategic Partnerships for Development: Dominican Republic – New York State*, eds. Ramona Hernández and María Elizabeth Rodríguez (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic: Fundación Global Democracia y Desarrollo, 2004), 277.

population into reliance on relatives' support from overseas and to make emigration a more practical alternative than militant opposition.”¹⁷

The other major reason Dominicans choose to emigrate is to rejoin family. According to Philip Martin, Elizabeth Midgley and Michael Teitelbaum, about 98% of Dominican immigrants who arrive lawfully in the United States have obtained visas through family unification criteria.¹⁸ The first immigrants from a family may have moved primarily for economic reasons, but over time family reunification has become an important cause of immigration.

Family Separation Caused by Migration

Like many other immigrant groups, Dominican families migrating to the United States frequently come in a stepwise fashion, with one or two members of the household immigrating first, and then bringing others over.¹⁹ This type of immigration results in what Guarnizo refers to as “multilocal transnational families,” nuclear families with members in two different countries.²⁰

Immigration may also separate children from their parents. Carola Suárez-Orozco, Irna Todorova, and Josephine Louie discuss how children experience these separations. They found that 89% of the Dominican families that they studied were separated during immigration, sometimes for extensive periods of time. In 61% of the cases, children were separated from both of their parents. Additionally, length of separation was important. Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie found that for over half of the Dominican families separated from the father

¹⁷ Luis Guarnizo, “The Emergence of a Transnational Social Formation and the Mirage of Return Migration Among Dominican Transmigrants,” *Identities* 4, 2 (1997), 283.

¹⁸ Philip Martin, Elizabeth Midgley and Michael Teitelbaum, “Migration and Development: Whither the Dominican Republic and Haiti?” *International Migration Review* 36, 2 (2002), 587.

¹⁹ For a related discussion, see Pierrette Hodagneu-Sotelo, “Overcoming Patriarchal Constraints: The Reconstruction of Gender Relations among Mexican Immigrant Women and Men,” *Gender & Society* 6, 3 (1992), 393-415. On “family stage migration” see Marjorie Faulstich Orellana, Barrie Thorne, Anna Chee, and Wan Shun Eva Lam, “Transnational Childhoods: the Participation of Children in Processes of Family Migration,” *Social Problems* 48, 4 (2001), 572-591. On “stage” or “chain” migration see Carola Suárez-Orozco, Irna Todorova and Josephine Louie, “Making Up For Lost Time: The Experience of Separation and Reunification Among Immigrant Families,” *Family Process* 41, 4 (2002), 625-643. On “stepwise” migration see Milton Vickerman, “Second-generation West Indian Transnationalism,” in *The Changing Face of Home: The Transnational Lives of the Second Generation*, eds. Peggy Levitt and Mary C. Waters (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002), 341-366. On “the migration cycle” and for an early example of the complications of Dominican chain migration, see Vivian Garrison and Carol Weiss, “Dominican Family Networks and United States Immigration Policy: A Case Study,” *International Migration Review* 13, 2 (1979), 264-283.

²⁰ Luis Guarnizo, “Going Home: Class, Gender and Household Transformation Among Dominican Return Migrants,” *Caribbean Circuits: New Directions in the Study of Caribbean Migration*, ed. Patricia Pessar (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1997), 13-60.

by immigration, the separations lasted for more than five years, and in some cases these separations were permanent. Furthermore, if children are separated from their parents for a long period of time, they face two sets of disruptions in attachments, first from the parent and then from the caretaker that the child became attached to during the parent/child separation.²¹

Family separation caused by migration can lead to conflict within the family. Guarnizo noted the frequency of “conflictive relations between migrant parents and their children” and the “extreme stress, especially regarding child rearing”²² that migrant families experienced. Peggy Levitt also discussed some of the difficulties of raising children transnationally. In addition to the emotional consequences of separating parents and children for long periods of time, it is also not always clear who makes decisions about how children should be raised when one or both parents have migrated and left their children behind. Levitt describes one boy who was raised by his grandparents while his mother was in the United States. The boy’s grandfather would tell him one thing, his uncles something else, and then they would call his mother in Boston: “He felt he was always getting caught among several bosses, and he was never sure who he was ultimately accountable to.”²³ Mixed messages from multiple sources can ultimately lead to communication breakdown between children and their caregivers.

In her “analytical memoir”, entitled *Dominican Dream, American Reality*, Jocelyn Santana discusses the effects that being left behind had on her life:

When Mami [Santana’s mother] moved to New York, she left me in Padre Las Cases with Mamá [Santana’s grandmother] and my aunts. I was about three years old. What my childhood mind misinterpreted as abandonment led to emotional traumas that have taken years to heal. I had food, shelter, and education, but I needed something more. I wanted my mother’s love. Mami’s decision improved both our lives, but as a child all I could feel was the pain and sadness of being left behind.²⁴

Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie provides a similar reaction from a fourteen-year-old Dominican girl in an interview after a year of separation from her mother: “The day I left my mother I felt like my heart was staying behind. Because she was the only person I trusted – she was my life. I felt as if a light had

²¹ Suárez-Orozco, Todorova and Louie, “Making Up for Lost Time,” 626.

²² Guarnizo, “Going Home,” 39, 54.

²³ Peggy Levitt, *The Transnational Villagers* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 78.

²⁴ Jocelyn Santana, *Dominican Dream, American Reality* (Middle Village, NY: Attanasio and Associates, 2007), 10.

extinguished. I still have not been able to get used to living without her.”²⁵ Nevertheless, they note that other factors, such as parents’ marital problems, may complicate the family separation. For example, in Santana’s case, her parents’ divorce also affected her. Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie suggest that it can be difficult to determine which problems are a result of the separation caused by immigration, and which problems are a result of marital separation.²⁶

On the other hand, reunification can be an ambivalent experience. Santana says that during the long wait to be reunited with her mother, she developed anger and resentment, which she said, “greatly complicated [their] reunion.”²⁷ However, Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie found that some families had difficulties when the family members were first reunited, but later developed a greater closeness and family solidarity, in part due to the feeling that family members needed to “make up for lost time.”²⁸

Certainly, some of the actions of migrating parents can make the situation easier for children left behind. Karen Fog Olwig analyzed the life stories of four young people who had been left with grandparents when their parents migrated away from Nevis, one of the Leeward Islands of the Caribbean. Olwig found that the parents’ absence in and of itself was not experienced as traumatic as long as there were regular remittances and gifts and periodic visits by the parents. This allowed the children to maintain a social position in the family that cared for them, and helped them understand that their parents were away in order to support them.²⁹

When only one parent immigrates, the gender of that parent is significant. Charlene Tung refers to the situation in which the mother immigrates as “mothering from afar.” Tung studied Filipina home health caregivers for the elderly in Southern California who had left their children and spouses in the Philippines. She found that the women in her study did not view mothering from afar as “incompatible with traditional notions of motherhood,” but instead saw themselves as “merely extending their family obligations by raising their families’ living standard. That is, from their viewpoint, they were better mothers for being better able to provide financially for their families.”³⁰ Since many of these women were unable to return to the Philippines for periods of five to ten years, they maintained ties with their children through packages, telephone calls, and sometimes letters.

²⁵ Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie, “Making Up for Lost Time,” 634.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 639.

²⁷ Santana, *Dominican Dream, American Reality*, 12.

²⁸ Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie, “Making Up for Lost Time,” 640.

²⁹ Karen Fog Olwig, “Narratives of the Children Left Behind: Home and Identity in Globalised Caribbean Families,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 25, 2 (1999), 278-279.

³⁰ Charlene Tung, “The Cost of Caring: The Social Reproductive Labor of Filipina Live-in Home Health Caregivers,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 21, 1/2 (2000), 67.

The separation of a mother from her children has emotional consequences for both the mother and the children. Rhacel Salazar Parreñas focused on the emotional effects of family separation in situations in which migrant Filipina domestic workers left their children in the Philippines. Parreñas argues that the strains of “transnational mothering” include anxiety and feelings of helplessness, loss, guilt, and loneliness. These mothers also experience a loss of intimacy with their children. She argues that the mothers she studied dealt with these strains in three ways: commodification of love (buying material goods for their children); repression of emotional strains; and the rationalization of distance by keeping in touch by telephone and letter writing. Their children feel loneliness, insecurity, vulnerability, and a craving for intimacy with their missing parents. Parreñas also argues that “the traditional ideological system of the patriarchal nuclear family” causes the separation from the mother to be seen as more of a problem than the separation from the father, since the father is seen as the breadwinner while the mother is traditionally viewed as the nurturer.³¹ When the father is separated from the family by immigration, it can be seen as a continuation of his role as breadwinner, but when the mother is separated from the family by immigration, it can be seen as a conflict with the mother’s role as the provider of emotional support.

Our Oral History Methodology and Theoretical Approach

This article employs material that was collected as part of the Dominican Oral History Project at Bronx Community College (BCC), which we started in 2006. BCC, a part of the City University of New York, is a Hispanic-serving institution with an overall student population that was 55% Latino in the Fall term of 2008. By far the largest group of Latinos are Dominican students. In the Fall of 2008, 1562 out of 9117 students were born in the Dominican Republic, which constituted 17% of all BCC students;³² this figure does not include second generation Dominicans, born in the United States, many of whom were raised, for at least part of their lives, in the Dominican Republic.³³

Since 2007, we have collected more than twenty-five life histories in both English and Spanish from Dominican immigrants in the New York City area. We have made use of a non-random snowball sample. Many of the interviewees were

³¹ Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, “Mothering From a Distance: Emotions, Gender, and Intergenerational Relations in Filipino Transnational Families,” *Feminist Studies* 27, 2 (2001), 380.

³²We thank Handan Hizmetli of the BCC Office of Institutional Research for providing us with recent data; also see Semester Profiles, http://www.bcc.cuny.edu/InstitutionalResearch/semester_profiles.htm, last accessed on 17 June 2009.

³³ According to Hernández and Rivera-Batiz, in 2000, one out of every three Dominicans in the United States was born in the United States. See “Dominicans in the United States,” 31.

in some way connected to BCC (as students, former students, or graduates); some (such as Yngrid and Maria) were our own former students. In the interviews we asked for life histories, focusing on the immigrants' educational and vocational experiences in New York and in the Dominican Republic; separation from family members was a frequently recurring theme in these narratives.

In this article we discuss the interviews of three immigrants: Manuel, Yngrid, and Maria; all three of these interviews were conducted entirely or primarily in Spanish. When quoting from the interviews, we provide English translations in the text, and the original Spanish in the footnotes. We chose to focus on three interviews so that we could discuss each narrative in detail; we also believe that these interviews reflect the range of experiences of Dominican immigrants in New York. Each interviewee is different: male and female, younger and older, married and unmarried, uneducated and educated, with different legal and illegal immigration experiences, and with varying degrees of success in achieving their goals. We also found these three narrators to be particularly compelling storytellers.

We are also quite interested in the role that gender plays in these three stories. Patricia Pessar and Sarah Mahler argue for a framework that they call "gendered geographies of power." They show us that "bringing gender in" to the study of transnational migration is not just a question of including women in the research, but also of looking at "how gender controls options available to individuals and groups, determining who stays and who moves – how often, when, where and why," and looking at how individuals' "imagined lives as immigrants" are affected by gender.³⁴ Eugenia Georges has described how women in the Dominican Republic are traditionally identified with the home and the reproduction of the household, while men are identified with the street and are thus considered to be primarily responsible for the family's financial responsibilities.³⁵ The story of Manuel and his wife Clara typifies the traditional Dominican family: Manuel is not only the breadwinner of his family but also the head of the household and therefore his main roles are to provide for his family and lead it; Clara, in contrast, acts as the family nurturer who submits to the will of her husband. Yngrid and Maria, on the other hand, illustrate a departure from the traditional roles of Dominican women. For both Yngrid and Maria,

³⁴ Patricia Pessar and Sarah Mahler, "Transnational Migration: Bringing Gender In," *International Migration Review* 37, 3 (2003), 823, 818.

³⁵ Eugenia Georges, "Gender, Class, and Migration in the Dominican Republic: Women's Experiences in a Transnational Community," in *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism Reconsidered: Vol. 645. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, eds. Linda Basch, Cristina Blanc-Szanton and Nina Glick Schiller (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1992), 88.

immigration led to a clear shift from traditional patterns of behavior among Dominican women.

Manuel Rosario

Manuel Rosario's story is a story of success, in spite of the separation that he endured from family. Although he only had a fourth-grade education, Manuel was able to raise and educate his family in New York City, and purchase a farm and build his dream home in the Dominican Republic. In order to achieve this success, Manuel worked extremely hard and had to make many sacrifices. Sadly, Manuel passed away on 6 June 2009.

Nelson Reynoso interviewed Manuel in July 2007. Manuel knew Nelson well, and the interview took place in a relaxed atmosphere at the house that Manuel built for his retirement in the Dominican Republic. Manuel was born in 1946 in the municipality of Tenares in the Dominican Republic. He had grown up in the *campo* (countryside), was the oldest of thirteen children, and worked in the cacao and coffee fields from an early age. He went to school to the fourth grade. In the *campo* where Manuel grew up, there was only an elementary school, which included kindergarten through eighth grade, and one high school located in the town of Tenares. For some children the schools were far and the transportation was difficult. Some families in the *campo* sent their children to school long enough for them to learn the basics and then the children stopped attending school in order to work in the fields. Manuel's father took him out of school at an early age because he needed Manuel's help in farming and wanted him to learn the family business.

For many years, Manuel worked as a tenant farmer, but he dreamed of owning his own *finca* (farm property) one day. By the age of 29, Manuel had five children with his spouse, Clara, and a daughter from a previous relationship. He had a strong work ethic and maintained a traditionally masculine sense of responsibility to his family: "When Manuel [his oldest son] is born, I have no choice but to realize that I am a father of a family. A man with a child has to work hard to support the child in a time of limited opportunities. However, a man who works can move forward if he knows how to manage the little income that he earns. From then we continued and the other children were born."³⁶ In Dominican culture, the birth of a child is seen as a rite of passage to manhood. With this came

³⁶ "Ya cuando Manuel nace me cuesta entender que yo soy un padre de familia, un hombre ya con hijo que ya tiene que fajarse para mantenerlo en una época donde la desenvuelta no es muy abundante pero que si el hombre que trabaja como quiera se desenvuelve sino desperdicia mucho lo poco que consigue y de ahí después seguimos hasta que siguieron apareciendo los otros muchachos." Manuel Rosario, interview with Nelson Reynoso, Los Cacaos, Tenares, Dominican Republic, 30 July 2007.

responsibilities. Manuel was always setting goals and working hard to achieve them. His desire to be able to have enough money to support his own family, purchase his own farm, and build a new house motivated him to travel to the United States.

Manuel remembered with excitement when people who had grown up poor in his neighbourhood returned from the United States with money, fancy clothes, and jewelry. Eugenia Georges notes that these types of spending displays were a way of broadcasting success and demonstrating that the “process of achieving one’s migration project was well under way.”³⁷ These displays inspired Manuel. Looking back on these feelings of admiration and inspiration during the interview, Manuel realized that he had attained the same status that he had admired in others so many years before.

Since about 1979, Manuel had begun to think about migrating to the United States. He started to go to the consulate. Although he had saved money and could show documents for his land and house, he was initially denied a tourist visa and told to return in six months.³⁸ In 1980, he returned to the consulate, but was again denied a visa, and once again he was told to return in six months: “My friends insisted that I apply again. We’re talking now about the end of ’81. In December of ’81 they gave me a visa. This visa was for three months, and I traveled to the United States. At this time my wish was to travel and investigate to see what there was in the United States.”³⁹ If it seemed like he would be able to make enough money, Manuel planned to overstay his visa to work in New York. He arrived in New York City in 1982.

Manuel stayed with a younger sister, who was the first in his family to migrate to the United States. Two of Manuel’s brothers also lived with them. They all shared a two-bedroom apartment in Washington Heights. Together they divided all the expenses, including rent, the telephone, and food. At first Manuel had a low-paying job in a *bodega* (a small grocery store), and he was not sure that he wanted to stay. Manuel was frustrated because he was not earning enough to pay for his expenses and send money home to Clara and the children. He considered returning home, but he realized that the economic situation there made it very difficult to support his family. Then, after four months, he found a job in the kitchen at Tavern on the Green restaurant:

³⁷ Georges, *The Making of a Transnational Community*, 161.

³⁸ When someone applied for a tourist visa, the U.S. consulate required proof of financial resources; more resources in the Dominican Republic made it more likely that the applicant would return. See Georges, *The Making of a Transnational Community*, 82.

³⁹ “Los amigos me insistieron para que volviera al consulado. Estamos hablando ya de el final del 81 a final del 81. En Diciembre del 81 me dieron una visa. Con esa visa yo viaje, y pues me dieron 3 meses de visa. En esa época mi deseo era viajar y investigar a ver lo que había en Estados Unidos.” Rosario, interview.

When I started working at Tavern on the Green restaurant, I worked cleaning pots and dishes. It was a very hard job; some new employees used to last only two days doing that job and leave. I, on the other hand, had no choice but to stay because I had my family back home to support. I was their only source of income. After several months at Tavern on the Green, my horizon changed and became brighter. Things changed for the better somewhat over the years. Until today I can't complain.⁴⁰

Getting the job at Tavern on the Green was an important turning point in Manuel's migration experience. Since he earned more money than at the *bodega*, he decided to stay in New York. Although the work was difficult, over time Manuel was able to save enough money to send back to his family and rent an apartment on his own. He ended up working as a dishwasher at Tavern on the Green for twenty-five years.

During the time that Manuel was working, he was separated from his family and living a very frugal lifestyle. In order to begin to bring his family to the United States, he needed to adjust his status to legal residency. His solution was to marry an American citizen or a permanent resident: "When I overstayed my visa I was already there illegally. I decided to get married to someone with legal documents; I had no other alternative but to start to get ready to help my family because I did not have anything here or anything back home."⁴¹

Immigration policy in the United States allows permanent residents to bring their spouses and their unmarried children into the country. As a result of his *matrimonio de negocio* or business marriage, Manuel was able to begin bringing his children to New York around 1985.⁴² However, since he was already officially married in the United States, he was not able to bring his spouse, Clara, as his wife. Instead, he made arrangements for Clara to marry someone else for "a green card" (residency), another *matrimonio de negocio*, so that she could also join him in New York at about that time. Although both Manuel and Clara eventually were divorced from their green-card spouses, they never legally

⁴⁰ "Hay entraban la gente y duraban 2 días ahí y por ahí mismo de iban, pero que yo estaba obligado a aguantar el jugo ahí porque yo tengo a mi familia que están en mi país, que deje a mi familia atrás. Yo deje a mi familia atrás y no tienen nada de que agarrarse que no sea de mí. Entonces ahí pues ya la cosa al mes y pico de yo estar en la Taverna [Tavern on the Green], un nuevo horizonte a brillar. Las cosas me cambiaron un poco, me fueron cambiando y hasta la fecha que no nos podemos quejar." Rosario, interview.

⁴¹ "Cuando llego al país ya yo como quiera estoy ilegal pero decido casarme porque ya yo estoy trabajando y no me quedaba otra alternativa que empezar a prepararme y empezar a ayudar a la familia porque ya yo ni tengo nada aquí, y ni tengo nada allá." Rosario, interview.

⁴² See Vivian Garrison and Carol Weiss, "Dominican Family Networks and United States Immigration Policy," *International Migration Review* 13, 2 (1979), 264-283.

married each other, despite having been together for forty-three years. Garrison and Weiss argue that U.S. immigration policy contributes to these “disruptive influences” in Dominican family relations, leading to a variety of extra-legal and illegal strategies to reunite family members.⁴³

In total, Manuel was separated from his family for about three years. In his interview, he did not discuss that period in detail and did not focus on the emotional costs of separation. Instead, he talked about how he spent most of that time working hard and saving money for the future. He wanted his children to be able to get the education that he did not have, and he wanted to own his own *finca* and be self-sufficient. He remained focused on his vision for the future: “My idea and my wish was to bring my children to the U.S in order for them to go to school, since I never had the opportunity to go to school. Not having the opportunity to go to school troubled me very much. I mourned not being able to go to school even though I had wanted to.”⁴⁴

Having an education is a sign of prestige among Dominicans, and college-educated Dominicans generally enjoy a higher socio-economic status. As Manuel recollected the past, he would have liked to have had an opportunity to go to school to learn and become a professional. His family had taken him out of school at an early age, but he was determined to support the education of his children, and he wanted to ensure that his children grew up in a place where they would have that opportunity.

While separated from his family, but supporting them financially, Manuel was comfortable knowing that Clara was taking good care of their five children in the Dominican Republic. Once Manuel was reunited with his family, he worked to instill in them the traditional Dominican values, such as a strong work ethic and an emphasis on family. Although raising children in Washington Heights can be difficult because of social problems such as poverty, violence, and drug use, Manuel’s children grew up to be responsible and hard-working adults: “Everyone in my family works and we are very united. We are a very close family and that was good. Even today if I need anything or if there is a problem that needs to be resolved, my children are always ready to help out immediately.”⁴⁵ Because of the ultimate success and unity of his family, Manuel felt that his separation from them had been worth the struggle.

⁴³ Ibid., 280.

⁴⁴ “La idea mía y mi deseo era tener la familia mía allá, llevarlos a la escuela, como yo nunca pude ir a la escuela y eso me mortificaba mucho. Tenía sentimiento o duelo de que yo nunca pude ir a la escuela aunque yo quería.” Rosario, interview.

⁴⁵ “Después trabajaron y estábamos muy unidos, una familia muy acoplacados. Eso fue muy bueno que todavía yo, cualquier cosa que haya que resolver, los muchachos levantan la mano inmediatamente.” Rosario, interview.

After Manuel was reunited with his family, he gradually saved enough money to buy his own *finca* of almost 500 tareas (approximately 77 acres) in San Francisco de Macoris in the Dominican Republic. He spent two months each year in the Dominican Republic. Tavern on the Green allowed him to take one month of vacation and one additional unpaid month each year to return to his *finca* for the cacao harvest.



Image 1. Cacao plant on Manuel's finca, Dominican Republic.⁴⁶

When Manuel retired in 2006, he moved back to the Dominican Republic, where he spent forty-five to fifty-five hours a week working on the *finca* growing cacao: "For me this is a triumph. The farm produces my food and everything one needs. I decided to retire and return to the Dominican Republic to attend to my farm."⁴⁷ [Please see the video clip: Manuel at the Finca. In this clip, Manuel described how he was experimenting with a new farming method of mixing cacao from different

⁴⁶ Photograph of a cacao plant on Manuel's finca, Dominican Republic, photograph by Nelson Reynoso, 2007.

⁴⁷ "Para mí eso es un triunfo, que me produce a mí la comida y todo lo que uno necesita. Entonces decido salir de Nueva York y de venir a atender mis tierras." Rosario, interview.

cacao trees to yield cacao crops that are bigger and of a wider variety, and would also improve the long- term viability of the cacao trees.]

When most people retire, they spend significantly less time working, but for Manuel it was different. Manuel loved agricultural work so much that he worked longer hours in his retirement than he had before that time. His day started by waking at 5:30 a.m. to get ready to pick up his workers and go to his *finca*. At the *finca* there was always something to be done, and Manuel laboured alongside his workers. He enjoyed the physical work involved in farming and was known in his community as a man who enjoyed working in agriculture.

As a result of his retirement, Manuel was once again separated from his now grown children and his grandchildren; in spite of this separation, he did maintain regular contact with them by telephone. After his retirement, Manuel felt thankful for what he had, and grateful to the United States for the opportunities it had given him:

I am thankful to God, to my family, and to the country that took me in. This country helped me and gave an educational opportunity to my children. My children learned English and became professionals. I was not able to learn English because I had to go to work and had no time to attend school. But I feel happy because my children know English. Most of my children work for the government; they have good jobs, the women have good husbands, the men have good wives, and they treat me well. They don't forget about those times when we barely survived financially. During that time my children could not have a bicycle. However, today my children have cars and they can have those things that I could not give them. We could not have achieved success in this country, if I had not immigrated and I had not submitted to a strict regimen of life.⁴⁸ [Please listen to the audio clip: Manuel sound clip.]

Unfortunately, Manuel died of a heart attack on 6 June 2009, about three years after his retirement. Manuel can be characterized as a traditional male

⁴⁸ “Tengo que darle gracias a Dios, tengo que darle gracias a la familia, tengo que darle gracias al país que me acogió, me dio la mano, me ayudo, me dio escuela para los hijos míos, los muchachos míos que se casaron en ese país, aprendieron inglés, cosa que yo no pude, porque no pude sacar de mi tiempo para ir a la escuela a aprender el inglés, pero me siento feliz de la vida porque los muchachos míos saben inglés. Las mayorías trabajan para el gobierno, tienen buenos trabajos, las mujeres tienen buenos esposos, los barones tienen buenas esposas, me tratan bien. No se les olvido aquellos años que apenas podíamos sobrevivir. Los muchachos míos no podían tener una bicicleta, sin embargo hoy los hijos míos tienen carro, y pueden tener lo que yo nunca le pude dar. Si yo no hubiese podido inmigrar y someterme a el régimen de vida que llevamos tampoco lo hubiéramos podido lograr.” Rosario, interview.

breadwinner who worked very hard to support his family, while his wife raised his children in the Dominican Republic. Much of Manuel's narrative is about his hard work and what he was able to achieve as a result of this work. In the Dominican Republic a man's identity is deeply influenced by his work ethic. A man who is lazy is considered to be weak and not masculine. On the other hand, a strong man is one who works hard. The highest praise a man can receive is to be called a hard working man. At Manuel's funeral, one man explained that, "[there] has not been a man that has worked more than Manuel."⁴⁹

Manuel worked hard (perhaps too hard) and achieved success as the patriarch of his family. When Manuel set a goal, he was determined to achieve it, even if that meant that he had to work twelve hour days. This determination did not come without a cost. Spending time with his family was sometimes sacrificed, even after his retirement. In the last few years of his life, Manuel would have liked to visit his children in the United States more often, but due to the responsibility of running the farm, he did not. In addition, he sometimes neglected his health because he was so focused on his passion for his *finca*; this neglect probably contributed to the conditions that led to his heart attack.⁵⁰

We turn now to Yngrid's story. Despite age and gender differences, we can see some interesting similarities between Yngrid and Manuel. Both left their children with their spouses and traveled to New York City to make more money. Both arrived in Washington Heights and benefited from the community and the help of family members who had already settled there. But while Manuel embodied the idealized Dominican patriarch, Yngrid broke with Dominican tradition in several ways.

Yngrid Lizardo

Yngrid Lizardo was the youngest and least traditional of our narrators. Dominican women are traditionally taught to be passive and are discouraged from being assertive and independent. Men are supposed to take care of them financially. Yngrid made decisions independently of her husband and took charge of her family's financial circumstances. Yngrid was both a child separated from her father by immigration, and later a mother separated from her children and husband. We interviewed Yngrid in June 2007 in her apartment in Washington Heights.

Yngrid was born in Santiago in the Dominican Republic in 1974, and raised by her mother: "When I was only a year old, my father migrated to the United States. It was my mother that raised me, even though my father supported

⁴⁹ "No había un hombre que ha trabajado tanto como Manolo," funeral attendee, personal communication to Nelson Reynoso, Los Cacaos, Tenares, Dominican Republic, 7 June 2009.

⁵⁰ Manuel's family, personal communication to Nelson Reynoso, 24 September 2009.

me financially until I was at least fifteen years old. I remember the checks for one hundred dollars and the money orders, something like that.”⁵¹ Yngrid’s father offered to take care of the paperwork required to bring Yngrid to the United States, but Yngrid’s mother did not want him to do this: “When he told my mother that he was going to do the paperwork for my visa to the United States, my mother said, ‘no.’ She told me that when I became an adult I could apply for a visa if I wanted.”⁵² When Yngrid was seventeen, she asked her father to begin the paperwork for her to get a visa, and the process was completed when she was eighteen. At this point she went to the United States and discovered that, unknown to her, her father had another family.⁵³ “At the age of eighteen, I arrived in Chicago, which is where [my father] lived. I got to know the United States, but I also got to know a family that I had never seen. It was something a bit shocking for me. I found out that I had brothers who were older than me, and some of them had children of their own.”⁵⁴

Over the next few years, Yngrid went back and forth between Chicago and the Dominican Republic to make money to pay for college in the Dominican Republic. She graduated with an Associate Degree in Business in 1994, and then returned to Chicago for eight months, where she worked for a company that made parts for trucks and machines. When she returned to the Dominican Republic, a friend helped her get a job in a bank. As time went on, she continued to advance at the bank.

In 1997, Yngrid married her husband Oscar; they had been together for eight years at that point. Her son was born in 1998 and her daughter was born in 2001. In 1999, Yngrid’s life changed dramatically. Oscar had a heart attack at the age of twenty-eight, but Yngrid did not think that he was prepared to make the lifestyle changes required to stay healthy (perhaps like Manuel). Yngrid worried about what would happen to her and their children if Oscar became disabled or

⁵¹ “Cuando yo tenía un año de nacida mi papa vino para los Estados Unidos ósea que fue mi mama la que me levantó y me crió sola. Aunque mi papa pues claro me mandaba cierto sustento, no sé si era mensual, por lo menos hasta los 15 años de edad. Yo me acuerdo de los checkes de cien dólares, de los money order, something like that.” Yngrid Lizardo, interview with Nelson Reynoso and Sharon Utakis, New York, New York, 16 June 2007.

⁵² “Cuando él le dijo a mi madre que iba hacerme papeles para traerme aquí a los Estados Unidos, eh, mi mama le dijo que no, que cuando yo fuera mayor de edad y que si yo quería decidir venir, pues que yo lo hacía.” Lizardo, interview.

⁵³ Eugenia Georges discusses Dominican men’s establishment of second households; see *The Making of a Transnational Community*, 69. According to Yngrid’s narrative, her father’s primary household was in Chicago.

⁵⁴ “A los 18 años yo vine a Chicago que es donde él reside pues, y conocí a los Estados Unidos pero que pasa que conocí también a una familia que yo nunca había visto, o había tratado. Fue algo un poco chocantes porque habían cosas que yo en mi vida me había enterado dígame los hermanos, que eran mayores y yo creía que era la mayor y habían otros grandísimos allá con hijos ya y, tal vez nietos porque ya eran bastantes mayores.” Lizardo, interview.

died. Yngrid felt that she had to take drastic measures to safeguard her future and the future of her children:

Right after my husband got out of the hospital, I was saying to myself, “Well, it seems to me that this man is not taking care of himself. I need to become a little more independent,” and I made the decision to come back to the United States and then to bring him over. Understand that it was with the purpose of living more calmly [...]. Also, [my husband] was working in the finance industry and the economy was bad [in the Dominican Republic].⁵⁵

In 2003, Yngrid decided to migrate to the United States, bringing her family when she was able to do so. Like most of the Mexican women in Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo’s research, Yngrid’s decision did not coincide with her husband’s wishes.⁵⁶ Unlike most of the women in Hondagneu-Sotelo’s study, Yngrid decided to migrate first, leaving her husband behind:

Then I said, “no, I am going to go to the United States first. I am going to go and when I am settled, then I will bring you and our children.” That was what I said. He did not agree with my decision because he thought there was no need for me to go. He assumed or believed that the business would improve or that money was going to fall from the skies or something like that, but I knew that, in the long run, that was not going to happen and then I decided to come here.⁵⁷ [Please listen to the audio clip: Yngrid sound clip 1.]

Yngrid found it very difficult to leave her children, but she knew that she had no other option: “The most difficult aspect of going to the United States was leaving my children behind. But I said to myself I don’t have any other choice; I

⁵⁵ “Ya después que ya estaba fuera del hospital y yo decía bueno, ya yo veo como que este hombre no se cuida, yo necesito como ser un poco más independiente y eso me llevo a tomar ciertas decisiones ya de venir para acá, para los Estados Unidos y traerlo a él para acá. Ya dígame, [...] como para tratar de hacer una vida como más calmada aunque claro que su tú la lleva claro que vas a encontrarla. Entonces también son los negocios allá de el que él trabaja allá en una financiera, cosa que el sistema económico no está muy bueno.” Lizardo, interview.

⁵⁶ Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, “Overcoming Patriarchal Constraints: The Reconstruction of Gender Relations Among Mexican Immigrant Women and Men,” *Gender & Society* 6, 3 (1992), 393-415.

⁵⁷ “Yo dije no, pues, yo voy a decidir de irme primero para los Estados Unidos. Y yo me voy a ir yo y cuando yo este estable, entonces yo traigo al muchacho ósea yo me los llevo. Era lo que yo le decía. Él no estaba muy de acuerdo con eso, porque él decía pero como si no hay necesidad, ¿Por qué? Él entendía o creía que el negocio se iba arreglar o que iba a caer del cielo dinero o algo por el estilo pero yo sabía que a la larga, eso no iba hacer flexible y entonces decidí venir para acá.” Lizardo, interview.

am going to go.”⁵⁸ [Please listen to the audio clip: Yngrid sound clip 2.] Yngrid left her children in the care of her husband and her mother, so, like Manuel’s children, they were never separated from both parents at the same time. In addition, as in Manuel’s case, Yngrid’s marriage was intact, another factor which aided the adjustment of her family. There may have been strains on Yngrid’s relationship with Oscar because of her decisions while they were separated, but Yngrid did not mention them in our interview with her.

Most of the life stories that we have collected in this oral history project have been fairly straightforward, linear narratives. The types of questions that we ask, and the sequencing of those questions, usually lead to a story told mostly in chronological order. In Yngrid’s case, what was most striking about the narrative was its complexity, as the story circled back several times. In addition, Yngrid took control in the interview situation, sometimes interrupting her life story to give her expert opinion on banking matters and the economic situation in the Dominican Republic. Susan Chase and Colleen Bell discuss how difficult it can be to avoid treating our interviewees “not as objects of research but as subjects of their own experiences,” especially when it comes to asking women about how they have experienced different forms of inequality.⁵⁹ Women’s narratives about these experiences may be complicated or contradictory. Furthermore, they suggest that, “[once] we understand that women often work to achieve control over their lives in social contexts that make their desire for control problematic, such contradictions within a woman’s narrative come as no surprise.”⁶⁰ Yngrid took control in the interview, and described herself as taking control in her marriage, deciding, against her husband’s wishes, to come to the United States alone in order to make money. While explaining the difficulty of her situation, Yngrid chose to emphasize how she was able to manage her situation. She focused on her decisions and why she made them, seldom mentioning her husband’s reactions.

Another way that Yngrid emphasized her control was by comparing herself to Trujillo, the Dominican dictator:

I know the story. Since high school, I was fascinated with the history [of Trujillo] and the revolution of 1930. I learned a lot. I identify with that period in history. My husband has always told me that I am a stubborn and inflexible person. If I say this is the way, then it has to be my way, and no one can go against me. I know that this is one of

⁵⁸ This quotation is the source of our title: “Y mas era dejar lo niños como que era difícil para mí, pero yo dije bueno, ya no tengo otra opción – ya me voy a ir.” Lizardo, interview.

⁵⁹ Susan Chase and Colleen Bell, “Interpreting the Complexity of Women’s Subjectivity,” in *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*, eds. Eva McMahan and Kim Lacy Rogers (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 63.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

my weaknesses. Maybe I was influenced by the many books I read about Trujillo. My friends realize that I am a strict taskmaster the moment they visit my home. I see how my children don't behave like typical children. If my children are misbehaving, I control them just by giving them a hardhearted look, and I don't even have to punish them. This is my signal to them to get in their place and to behave properly. I have controlled them by instilling in them a sense of fear since they were small, similar to the period of Trujillo that my mother lived through.⁶¹

By comparing herself to Trujillo, Yngrid emphasizes her power, rather than the powerlessness that she may have experienced as a woman and as an immigrant. She specifically mentions controlling her children, although, or perhaps because, she was separated from them.

Yngrid borrowed money to pay for the flight to New York. Like Manuel, when she first arrived in New York with only about eighty dollars in her pocket, she moved in with a relative. She stayed at the apartment of her cousin in Washington Heights, where she continues to live today, and began desperately looking for a job. She worked as a waitress in a small restaurant, earning little more than tips. Later she worked as a cashier at a parking garage. As she earned more, she sent money back to Oscar to repay the loan for the flight, until eventually she was able to send money to help support her family.

Given her previous banking experience, Yngrid was able, after some time, to get a job in a bank. Yngrid's job was flexible enough to permit her to visit her children in the Dominican Republic regularly, two or three times a year; this allowed her to maintain the "social presence" that Karen Fog Olwig describes as so important.⁶² Despite this, it was always difficult when Yngrid had to leave them. When asked what it was like, Yngrid responded:

⁶¹ "Si, yo qué sé yo, desde el 3 de bachillerato yo me gustaba cuando era la historia y desde cuando yo comencé que del año 60 del año 30 de la revolución. Bueno, comencé muchas cosas ahí hasta el 61. Como yo digo y yo aprendí que te digo, tal vez no muchas cosas pero si yo me identifico. Mi esposo siempre me lo ha dicho que yo soy terca. Es lo que él me dice dura de torcer, pero no el hecho de que mi terquedad es, como que dura de torcer pero si yo sé que tengo un error o algo claro que yo cedo, pero si yo digo que por ahí es que va, es por ahí que va y no me lleven la contraria. Entonces yo no sé tal vez Trujillo fue lo tanto que leí que tal vez por ahí es que va la cosa pero no, no, no. Eh, si mis amigas me dicen que yo soy batuta y constitución al momento de que ellos se dan cuenta cuando llegan a la casa que como que los muchachos no parecen muchachos y que yo digo, bueno eso es lo que hay. Eh, yo no tengo ni que castigarle, desde que ellos están como de presentao' y lucidos yo na' ma' estaco los ojos esa es su señal para que ellos bajen la guardia y se estén tranquilos. Ya si ellos no me están entendiendo ya entonces espérate tu no me está viendo, y mi mamá vivió mucho en el tiempo de Trujillo, mi mamá nació en el 34. O sea que ella sabe y vivió todo." Lizardo, interview.

⁶² Olwig, "Narratives of the Children Left Behind," 279.

There was happiness when I arrived, but sadness and teary eyes when I had to go back [she laughs]. It was difficult but I was prepared mentally because I would tell myself that I could no longer stay in the Dominican Republic. My family depended on me for financial support. I had to return even if I did not want to. In the U.S I did a lot of work, even overtime, so I did not have much time to think about the separation. I started to study so I would not have time to think about the separation. But thank God I overcame that difficult part of my life.⁶³

As Yngrid described her visits with her children and family, she remembered feelings of great happiness, which made her laugh. When she started talking about having to return to New York alone, the laughter stopped. These visits were very important to Yngrid because they helped her to deal with the guilt she felt for leaving her children, and they inspired her and motivated her to continue to work toward her long term goal of being reunited with her children and husband in New York. Yngrid sent money from New York, and visited as often as she could. She was unhappy about being apart from her children, but she felt that it was necessary for a time.

In January 2005, Yngrid began to take classes at BCC. She stopped taking classes when she was finally able to bring her children to the United States in early 2007, after a separation of almost four years: “I have not been able to continue college because my children arrived and I want to make sure that they get adjusted to school and I want to dedicate myself to them 100%. The school here is different for them because they don’t speak English. I have not continued to go to college, although I am studying in an institute that the bank where I work pays for. I take a few courses to get certified.”⁶⁴ Yngrid stopped going to college because she was working full-time and wanted to devote the little free time that she had to her children. She realized that her children needed her, especially as recent immigrants who were still learning English. Yngrid had experienced the

⁶³ “Ah, felices, cuando tenía que regresar, los lloros [risas]. Era difícil pero ya yo estaba preparada mentalmente porque yo decía ya yo no puedo decir que yo me quiero quedar aquí y lo que yo comencé que, a veces yo decía a ya yo no quiero ir para allá, pero no, no era que ya yo no quiero sino que ellos dependían de mí. Osea que yo tenía que venir aunque yo no quisiera, y venía y como había mucho trabajo y mucho over time, no me daba tiempo de pensar mucho. Tú sabes, vivía ocupada. Era la palabra por eso. Pues, ah, me puse a estudiar, para tener menos tiempo que pensar y pues ah, gracias a Dios, ya yo superé esa parte.” Lizardo, interview.

⁶⁴ “Claro que no he podido seguir porque en este año pasado traje los niños y quiero como dedicarme con ellos 100% a que ellos se habitúen aquí a la escuela que es diferentes para ellos aquí porque ellos no saben inglés. Eh, y no he seguido la universidad aunque si estoy estudiando en el instituto que me paga el banco. Osea cojo unas materias como una certificaciones y eso es lo que estoy haciendo ahora mismo.” Lizardo, interview.

stress involved in migrating to a land where she neither understood the culture, nor spoke the dominant language. She wanted to help her children cope and adjust to their new life in New York. She may have wanted to continue to take college classes to learn more English, but her family and work became her main priorities. Yngrid hoped to return to school once her husband was able to join the family in New York: “I will resume my studies at university when my husband gets to the United States. He will stay with the kids and dedicate time to them. Then, I will study. This is what we are planning.”⁶⁵ Although Yngrid described this as a joint plan, it is interesting to note that there is very little discussion of her husband’s reactions to her plans, and almost no discussion of how he coped with her absence while she was gone, although there was discussion of how Yngrid and the children coped with their separation.



Image 2. Yngrid’s family, New York, 2008.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ “Y la universidad, yo creo que esperar a que mi esposo venga para que ya mas o menos pues se quede con los niños, le dedique tiempo y entonces yo de lleno me pongo a estudiar. Es lo que por lo menos estamos planeando.” Lizardo, interview.

⁶⁶ Photograph of Yngrid and her family, New York, 2008, photograph by anonymous, 2008, in Yngrid’s possession.

At the time of our interview in June 2007, Yngrid was preparing to send her children back to the Dominican Republic for their first visit since their arrival in the United States. Since that time, we have learned that Oscar joined Yngrid and their children in New York in April 2008. Yngrid said that her children were improving in school, and her husband Oscar was taking English classes. She described this as “a remarkable time for all of [them]” and later remarked that they were “a wonderful family.”

Our third story, Maria’s story, shares some features of both Manuel’s and Yngrid’s stories. Maria was separated from her two children for an extended period of time, although she eventually reunited with them. Like Manuel, Maria immigrated illegally, and was therefore unable to return to the Dominican Republic for a number of years until she had finally legalized her situation. Unlike the two previous stories, however, Maria’s situation was much more desperate, and she took greater risks for the sake of her family.

Maria Báez

Maria Báez (a pseudonym) was interviewed by both authors on the BCC campus in November 2008 and again in January 2009. She was born in Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic, in 1959, and is the second of seven children. She had a very strong, loving relationship with her mother, but described her father as “disastrous.”⁶⁷ Her father traveled a lot and was barely present during her childhood. She said: “My father was a driver for some wealthy people and he worked for them for thirty years. He was always traveling from town to town and I remember that I only saw him at home some Christmases with a small bag of apples, and then he left.”⁶⁸ Maria graduated from high school at the age of sixteen. At the time, she was three-months pregnant with her first child, a boy. A second child, a girl, was born three years later. When her daughter was two years old, Maria and her children lived with Maria’s mother and her other siblings who were still at home: “Then already the father of my children at this time had gone to Puerto Rico. He was not helping me. He didn’t send me money or anything for the children and I was seeing my mother suffering. We had to move and we couldn’t because we didn’t have money.”⁶⁹ The situation for Maria, Maria’s

⁶⁷ “Yo tuve una muy, muy, muy buena madre, buenísima. Pero un padre [ella se ríe] desastroso.” Maria Báez [pseudonym], interview with Nelson Reynoso and Sharon Utakis, Bronx, New York, 25 November 2008.

⁶⁸ “Mi papa fue chofer de, de de unas personas pudientes y estuvo treinta años trabajando con ellos. Siempre viajaba de pueblo en pueblo y yo recuerdo que solo yo lo veía en casa algunas navidades con una bolsita de manzanas, después se iba.” Báez, interview.

⁶⁹ “Entonces ya el papa de mis hijos para ese tiempo había venido para Puerto Rico. Se había ido para Puerto Rico. No me ayudaba. No me mandaba dinero ni nada para los nenes y yo viendo mi

mother, and Maria's two children became desperate. They were at the point of being evicted from their home and becoming homeless. That was when Maria decided to go to Puerto Rico. With the help of the sister of her children's father,⁷⁰ Maria arranged to pay to take a *yola*, a small fishing boat, through the Mona Strait, a distance of about sixty miles⁷¹ from the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico: "She told me that it is very dangerous because it was in a *yola*. That was in the year 1981. And I told her that it didn't matter to me [...] that I wanted to go in order to help my mother and I had to put my children ahead."⁷²

She left her young son and daughter in the care of her mother and headed off in search of better options. Maria spoke about her experiences getting to Puerto Rico in a harrowing and dramatic way. In her first attempt, fifty-seven people filled a small boat that became lost for seventeen days. Eventually, they were rescued, then arrested and returned to the Dominican Republic. Maria, sick from dehydration, made it home, but since she had already paid for the trip, she felt compelled to make a second attempt, even though she had become much more aware of the risks involved. Her mother pleaded with her not to go again, but she told her: "Ay, mami, I have to go because I have already paid that money and besides, I have to go in order to be able to help you, because here I am not going to be able to help you."⁷³ [Please listen to the audio clip: Maria sound clip 1.]

On the second trip, the *yola* took a more direct route, but the trip was very difficult. A pregnant woman in the boat began bleeding, which brought on the fear that the blood would attract sharks. The boats faced huge waves. Maria described how someone in the *yola* began to pray: "Lord Jesus, you are powerful. Oh my Lord, these waves are yours, because you alone have the power! Let us get there, Lord! Let us get there, if you are willing!"⁷⁴ Maria said: "I never forgot

mama sufriendo, que teníamos que mudarnos y no podíamos porque no teníamos dinero." Báez, interview.

⁷⁰ Maria appears to have been married to the father of her children before he left for Puerto Rico, but she consistently refers to him as "el papa de mis hijos" ("the father of my children"), not as her husband.

⁷¹ Philip Martin, Elizabeth Midgley, and Michael Teitelbaum, "Migration and Development: Whither the Dominican Republic and Haiti?" 587.

⁷² "Entonces le dije a ella que por favor que me ayudara, que yo quería ir pa' Puerto Rico y ella me dijo pero eso es muy peligroso porque era en *yola*. Eso fue en el año mil novecientos ochenta y uno. Yo le dije que no me importaba. [...] Yo le dije que no me importaba, que yo me quería ir, que yo me quería, que yo quería ayudar a mi mamá, que yo tenía que echar mis hijos hacia adelante." Báez, interview.

⁷³ "Ay, mami, es que yo tengo que irme porque ya yo pagué ese dinero, y además de eso yo tengo que irme para yo poderte ayudar porque aquí yo no te voy a poder ayudar." Báez, interview.

⁷⁴ "Señor Jesús, tú eres poderoso. ¡Ay señor mío, estas olas son tuyas porque tú solamente puedes! ¡Déjanos llegar, señor! ¡Déjanos llegar si es que tú quieres!" Báez, interview.

that, I have never, never forgotten those words.”⁷⁵ [Please listen to the audio clip: Maria sound clip 2.] Despite these difficulties, within a few days the *yola* made it to Cabo Rojo in Puerto Rico. Helicopters chased the people from the *yola*, but Maria managed to escape because some Puerto Rican men helped her hide. Eventually, she made it to San Juan, the capital city.

Luisa Hernández Angueira argues that women who risk their lives in a *yola* “challenge the dominant discourse regarding women’s submission, intuition, and dependence vis-à-vis men.”⁷⁶ The women are desperate to support their families, and see Puerto Rico as a place of opportunity, where Dominican women often find jobs more readily than men. By deciding to immigrate by *yola*, Maria acted more independently than Dominican women traditionally do. However, once in Puerto Rico, Maria initially had to struggle to become independent of the father of her children. Maria stayed with his sister in San Juan, but there were problems because Maria did not want to be with him anymore. She believed that he had failed her, but he wanted them to be together. She stayed at his sister’s home for two months, but then she had to leave because he was hitting her. She was able to separate from him permanently by moving with a friend to a smaller town. Like Yngrid, when what Maria wanted did not coincide with her husband’s wishes, in the end she followed her own will, not his.

Commonalities of lifestyle between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico made the adjustment to living in Puerto Rico easier. In addition, there are Dominican communities in San Juan and other places that have grown tremendously since the 1960s.⁷⁷ Despite these advantages, as an illegal alien, Maria encountered great adversities. She always had to work at two low-paying jobs in order to send money to support her children and her mother and to help her siblings. She worked at a poultry factory, as a cleaning woman in a bar, and in a cafeteria, among other jobs. Immigration officials raided her workplaces at least twice. On one of these occasions, a customer in the cafeteria invited her to walk out with him and she managed to escape detection. Another time, she hid in a freezer until the immigration officials were gone.

⁷⁵ “A mí nunca se me olvidó eso, nunca, nunca. Esas palabras de él, nunca, nunca se me olvidaban nunca.” Báez, interview.

⁷⁶ Luisa Hernández Angueira, “Across the Mona Strait: Dominican Boat Women in Puerto Rico,” in *Daughters of Caliban: Caribbean Women in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Consuelo López Springfield (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 97.

⁷⁷ In “Reaching the Promised Land,” Milagros Ricourt notes that the Dominican population in Puerto Rico was 1,812 in 1960, 10,843 in 1970, and 20,559 in 1980. Ricourt, “Reaching the Promised Land,” 231.

Eventually, Maria married a Puerto Rican man, to whom she is still married.⁷⁸ With him she had a third child, another son, in 1988. As a result of this marriage, she had the opportunity to legalize her situation by becoming a legal permanent resident. Since she had entered Puerto Rico illegally by *yola*, she had to return to Santo Domingo and enter legally in order to get her papers. This was her first opportunity to return home. Maria stated tearfully, “This was when I saw my daughter, who was already nine years old.”⁷⁹ Eventually Maria was able to complete the paperwork to bring her two older children to live with her, after living apart from them for eight years. Maria was happy to be reunited with them, but they experienced separation anxiety from their grandmother, who had raised them for eight years. For a few years, Maria lived in Puerto Rico with her Puerto Rican husband and all three of her children. Later, Maria’s oldest son got into trouble with the law, and the legal fees contributed to financial problems, which eventually pushed Maria to migrate again. In 2005, the family moved from Puerto Rico to New York.

Maria believes that her children, especially her daughter, were adversely affected by their long separation from her. In addition, the two oldest children may have been affected by Maria’s separation from their father. In a trembling voice, Maria stated: “My daughter still has many problems, a lot of trauma, because of [the separation from me]. She doesn’t leave her daughters anyplace because she doesn’t want her daughters to go through what she went through without me [Maria begins to cry].”⁸⁰ Maria realized that leaving her daughter behind at an early age had caused her to experience significant emotional pain. Maria’s daughter has suffered from serious depression, and her relationship with Maria is often strained. Maria’s crying illustrates the pain and guilt that she felt from having hurt her daughter in this way. When we were writing this article, Maria’s daughter moved to Miami with her two daughters, although Maria advised against it. Several months later, Maria’s daughter was back in New York City. Their relationship continues to have its ups and downs.

In addition to being separated from her children, Maria was separated from other members of her family. While she was in Puerto Rico, and later New York, Maria especially missed her mother. Both Maria and her daughter were deeply saddened when Maria’s mother died a few years ago: “When my mother died, it was very difficult. I cried and was very sad. My grandmother told me that

⁷⁸ In “Dominican Migration to Puerto Rico,” Jorge Duany notes that there is a high rate of intermarriage between Dominicans and Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico. Duany, “Dominican Migration to Puerto Rico,” 260.

⁷⁹ “eso fue cuando yo vi mi hija, ya tenía nueve años.” Báez, interview.

⁸⁰ “Todavía la hija mía tiene muchos problemas, muchos traumas por esa causa [momento emotivo: a ella le tiembla la voz]. Ella las hijas no las deja ningún sitio porque ella no quiere que sus hijas pasen lo que ella paso sin mí [ella llora].” Báez, interview.

I had to be strong [...]. This has strengthened me and has motivated me to continue forward. My family depends on me.”⁸¹ When Maria was growing up, she had depended on her mother’s strength to support her. Once her mother died, Maria felt that it was her responsibility to support the family. It is this sense of responsibility that continues to drive her.

Now Maria works at a low-paying retail job and attends community college in New York City. She does not find this job satisfying, but, as she explains, it pays the bills and allows her to send money back to her family members in the Dominican Republic. Similarly, Cecelia Menjívar discusses Central American women who “evaluate their current situations in comparison with what they left behind,” and “do not see their work in a liberating light, but only as a way to meet the survival requirements of their families.”⁸² Maria finds life in New York difficult, but much easier than the life she would have faced if she had stayed in the Dominican Republic.

When asked if, in retrospect, she would leave her children behind to immigrate again, Maria said that she would, although she would not go by *yola* again. She declared: “From each suffering, I searched for alternatives. First, I searched for God. In each situation, I searched for something that motivated me. My children and my family was what motivated me to go to Puerto Rico in a *yola*. I must continue forward.”⁸³

Conclusion

Alessandro Portelli argues that “a life history is a living thing. It is always a work in progress, in which narrators revise the image of their own past as they go along.”⁸⁴ A number of changes have taken place in the lives of our narrators since these interviews occurred: Manuel died and was missed by the many people whose lives he had affected; Ynggrid’s husband joined her and their children in New York City; and Maria’s daughter moved away from New York and then, several months later, returned. The views that our interviewees expressed must

⁸¹ “Cuando murió mi mama fue muy difícil. Lloré mucho y estaba muy triste. Mi abuela me dijo que yo tenía que ser fuerte [...]. Esto me da fuerza y motivación para continuar. Mi familia depende de mí.” Maria Báez [pseudonym], interview with Nelson Reynoso and Sharon Utakis, Bronx, New York, 16 January 2009.

⁸² Cecilia Menjívar, “The Intersection of Work and Gender: Central American Immigrant Women and Employment in California,” *Gender and U.S. Immigration: Contemporary Trends*, ed. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 111.

⁸³ “De cada sufrimiento yo busqué alternativas. Primero busqué de Dios. En cada situación yo buscaba algo que me motivaba. Mis hijos y me familia fue lo que me motivéirme a Puerto Rico en una yola. Tengo que seguir adelante.” Báez, interview, 16 January 2009.

⁸⁴ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991), 61.

therefore be understood as being the product of a particular moment in their lives, based on an accumulation of their life experiences up until that point.

The three people whose interviews we discuss here each made a decision to leave the Dominican Republic, sometimes against the will of their family members. Manuel had known people who had immigrated before him, and he made the decision to stay in New York after he was able to find a job that would allow him to send money back to his family. He fulfilled the traditional patriarchal role of decision-maker and financial supporter of the family. Yngrid had lived in the United States before, and so she was familiar with what life could be like there. Of a later generation than Manuel, Yngrid went against traditional gender roles and decided to immigrate against her husband's wishes. Out of necessity, Maria also went against traditional gender roles, immigrating without knowing much about what would happen to her.

Manuel, Yngrid, and Maria all indicated that their primary reason for immigrating was to improve their financial situation. Their financial concerns were not just for themselves, but for the many people who depended on them. In the cases of Manuel and Yngrid, it is clear that striving for a better future for themselves and their families was their motivating force for immigrating. Manuel and Yngrid were both determined individuals who value education, especially for their children, and were willing to make personal sacrifices in order to achieve their goals. In Maria's case, the motivation went beyond striving for a better future. Maria believed that migrating was necessary for the survival of her family. Maria risked her life and was separated from her children for eight years because she felt that there were no other options available to her.

For both Manuel and Yngrid, saving money and making wise investments have been extremely important to their success. Manuel talked about how some Dominicans have lived in the United States for over twenty years but do not have anything to show for it because they have mismanaged their money. Manuel made his money through hard work, lived within his means, and was able to save enough money to buy his *finca* and build his retirement home in the Dominican Republic. Yngrid also worked long hours, not just to accumulate money, but to take her mind off the separation she endured from her family. Maria is still struggling in New York, attending community college and working at a low-paid retail job, but she believes that poverty in New York is quite different from poverty in the Dominican Republic. Life in New York may be difficult, but it is still possible to survive. Like Manuel, she plans to retire to the Dominican Republic soon.

Gender played a role in how family separation affected these immigrants and their families. It also impacted how our narrators framed their stories. In many of our interviews, we have seen that Dominican men typically express their emotions differently than women. Manuel did not focus on his own emotions or

on the emotions of his family members when discussing his separation from them. His emphasis was on the work he did for his family and on his pride in his success. For Dominican women, caretaking traditionally plays a greater role. In the cases of Yngrid and Maria, there is a greater expectation that they would discuss emotions, and they did, although Yngrid spoke more about overcoming the difficulties that led to her emotions. In addition, because of the social expectations of mothers, Yngrid and Maria, in contrast to Manuel, may have felt that it was necessary to justify their choices and to emphasize the emotional difficulty of separation. They took on the role of breadwinner, while redefining it in terms of the traditional caretaking role.

The stories of Manuel, Yngrid, and Maria give us a picture of strong, determined individuals who, with the support of their transnational family networks, have endured separation from close family members in order to achieve long-term goals. All three spoke about how much others depended on them, and it was this sense of responsibility to family members, and the idea of abundant opportunities available in the United States, that led them to endure the hardships of separation.