From Island to Island
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Approximately 1,500 miles from New York City, on an island called La Hispaniola, are two small nations: Haiti and the Dominican Republic. While I have not yet had the opportunity to visit either, I have spent the summer learning about Dominicans who have come to live in my hometown, New York City.

There are records of Dominicans arriving at Ellis Island in the late 1880s alongside immigrants from countries like Russia and Italy among others; however, in the early 1960s, Dominicans began to migrate to New York City en masse. Following the assassination of Rafael Trujillo and subsequent collapse of his dictatorship, new legislation regarding internal and international migration reduced the cost of a visa and passport, paving the way for such migration. Data collected by the New York City Department of City Planning illustrates the growth of the Dominican community recording that in 1970 around 51,000 Dominicans were living in New York City, while in the 1990, this number had grown to 225,000, and in 2000 to 369,000 (Department of City Planning, 2013).

Initially, most people settled in Washington Heights and Inwood, neighborhoods located in the northernmost tip of Manhattan. Though smaller communities have since formed in other boroughs like Queens and the South Bronx, the largest concentration of Dominicans remains in upper Manhattan and has slowly replaced ethnic groups like the Italians, Jews and Puerto Ricans who had populated the area in earlier decades. As the numbers of Dominican residents increased, networks of ethnic commerce developed. Bodegas and grocery stores began to display typical Dominican ingredients like plantains, and street vendors appeared selling snacks like “chicharrones” and “pastelitos.” Migrants brought the culture of their home country to the streets of New York, and simultaneously encountered American customs, in particular those, which pertained to life in the city. This flow of goods and people established a Dominican presence in the neighborhood.

I have been exploring the food choices of Dominicans living in New York City, and how such practices convey the identity of individuals within their broader community. I am interested in the influence of an ethnic enclave on individual identity as well as the strong connection to the Dominican Republic, which many Dominicans living in New York City maintain. My research relies on qualitative methods, specifically that of interviewing. I conducted 10 interviews this summer with individuals who live or work in upper Manhattan. I talked with three male and seven female respondents, ages 21-80 who are both first- or second-generation immigrants. I recruited half of the subjects at a subsidized housing facility in Inwood, which is associated with a local community center. The rest of my respondents work at the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, where I have spent the summer doing background research. The Lifson Family Summer Research Fellowship has allowed me to conduct this research, which forms the basis of my senior honors thesis. This summer, I have focused on collecting data, creating a bibliography and beginning a thorough literature review. I plan to analyze my findings and start the writing process during the academic year.

Faculty Mentor: Professor Nancy Riley
Funded by the Lifson Family Summer Research Fellowship

References: