

Far From Home: Winston Vargas in Washington Heights

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In 1962, a young woman boarded a Pan American flight in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, and arrived at John F. Kennedy Airport, in New York.¹ This was the first time she had left her home country. This woman, my mother, was one of thousands of Dominicans who would eventually settle in New York City, which would become the center of the Caribbean nation's diaspora. Her story of immigration, as well as that of her compatriots and our family, is marked by the life-altering effects of displacement. This story also unwittingly laid the groundwork for my interest in the imagery and history of people leaving one home for another. When I learned about the work of the Dominican-American photographer Winston Vargas (born 1943), I was immediately drawn to its subject matter—the people and streets who had populated the neighborhood I too had come to know throughout my life.² His photographs of the northern Manhattan neighborhoods of Washington Heights and Inwood, taken from the 1960s to the 1990s, are evocative portraits of people far from home, caught 'between two islands'—the Dominican Republic and Manhattan.³

Vargas, himself an immigrant, moved to New York City from Santiago, Dominican Republic, in 1952, as a child. He came of age in Washington Heights, which has served as home to hundreds of thousands of Dominicans who began arriving in greater numbers starting in the 1960s, and has therefore played a key role in Dominican cultural consciousness.⁴ His photographs depict multiple generations of newcomers becoming part of an already heterogeneous area, which throughout its history has been populated by New

Yorkers hailing from Cuba, Germany, Greece, Puerto Rico, and elsewhere. Their lives unfold, as they get married, have children, shop for food, or merely walk down the street (figs. 1–6). At first glance the photographs may appear to be the simple recounting of quotidian activities in an urban space, marked by multi-story brick buildings, fire escapes, and storefronts. Within these photographs, however, we find hints of the complicated nature of establishing a new home in a foreign land. In undergoing dramatic shifts of assimilating to a new environment, the newcomers in Vargas's photographs also alter their new homes. Vargas therefore photographed the neighborhood as it changed and also how it has left its imprint on those who settled there. As such, this examination of Vargas's work expands the discussion of how the photographic medium depicts newcomers as both affected by and themselves affecting their new environments. Vargas's photographs also speak to how photography mediates the experience of migration, especially in the United States, and as this volume explores, how 'migrant communities meliorate cultural dislocation.'

When considered against the story of the mutual impact of people and place, Vargas's oeuvre also provides an opportunity to further explore the concept of 'home' for a diasporic community, marked by pervasive transnationalism.⁵ Even when there was a return 'home' to the Dominican Republic, Washington Heights and Inwood still served as the other 'home' to which Dominicans often returned once in the United States. This back and forth between the two was made possible by a number of factors, including the proximity between New York and the Dominican Republic, as well as that unlike with many other diasporic communities, the majority of Dominicans *could* return to their home country usually without fear of political reprisals.⁶ There is, as James Clifford explores, no 'constitutive taboo on return.'⁷

Within this easy mobility between two 'homes,' New York City, specifically, came to hold a special place for the Dominican diaspora. As the historian Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof has noted, 'The distant Empire City, the universal standard against which Dominican identity could be measured, grew over four decades into the second-largest Dominican city.'⁸ Therefore, when Dominicans think of the United States, it is New York, not Chicago, Boston, or Miami, which comes to mind. And in the city, Washington Heights and Inwood loom large within the Dominican imagination and day-to-day reality. The neighborhoods, as explored here, become what Arjun Appadurai has defined as an 'ethnoscape,' a 'landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live.'⁹ With each visit between the two islands, parts of Washington Heights and its people have been carried to the Dominican Republic, and vice versa, inevitably affecting both places.

Likewise, for Vargas, upper Manhattan has had a magnetic draw, akin to an almost diasporic sentiment towards the neighborhood.¹⁰ As he explains, you 'can't get away from where you grew up.'¹¹ Vargas's sustained engagement with the area and its residents, even when he no longer lived there, brings to the fore his own particular experience of the Dominican diaspora. For Vargas, I argue, Washington Heights and Inwood, with their increasingly Dominican population, businesses, and customs, were interchangeable with the Dominican Republic.

Photography, displacement, and geography intersect in Vargas's work, which becomes an example of a 'diasporic geographical imagination.'¹² He is simultaneously a variably defined diasporic subject, Dominican immigrant, and former and return resident of Washington Heights and Inwood, who with his migrant gaze develops versions of the

neighborhood through his photographs. As Joan M. Schwartz and James R. Ryan have discussed, photography has had a significant role in disseminating images of place, and more pressingly, for this discussion, in its envisioning. Photographs, they argue, are how 'we see, we remember, we imagine: we 'picture place'.'¹³ Schwartz and Ryan expand on David Harvey's notion of the 'geographical imagination,' whereby photography becomes a 'mechanism by which people come to know the world and situate themselves in space and time.'¹⁴ For Vargas, I argue, the photographs that he took of Washington Heights and Inwood served a similar purpose. As he walked the streets he came to know as a child, he positioned himself in relation to his 'ethnoscape,' the ever-shifting city and its always changing population.

To elucidate these points, in what follows, I first discuss the histories of Washington Heights and Inwood. Then, I will explore the history of Dominican-U.S. relations, and, in particular, its effects on Dominican migration to the United States. I position Vargas within a narrative of the photography of immigration that focuses on the newcomer once she or he has arrived and started settling into their new home. The challenges that the Dominican community confronted when arriving in Washington Heights, as New York City's and the country's demographics and society changed, also play a significant role. The city could adjust to newcomers, and vice versa, to a certain extent. The intention is not to present an idealized view of New York as an easy place for newcomers. Yet, New York's importance within the patterns of Dominican migration cannot be underestimated. In the end, Vargas's photographs emerge as an understudied visual document of the formation of diasporic

identities and the persistent yearning for home of New York's Dominican-American community.

At the core of Vargas's work also rests the concept of contact between photographer, place, and subject. In his case, he turns the camera toward a population that is familiar to him, residents of the neighborhood in which he came of age. Vargas's position as a diasporic subject is crucial to his approach to the neighborhood and its residents. The earlier photographs depict an area not too different from what he had experienced on a day-to-day basis during his youth. Yet, just as he had moved away from the Dominican Republic, he also left Washington Heights and Inwood, which had come to supplant his original 'home.' As he continually returned to the same places, he eventually started documenting the multiple sites of change. Vargas's documentation of place, therefore, becomes another sort of contact. One in which shifting populations of Dominicans in Washington Heights and Inwood brush up against one another, at different phases of their diasporic lives. Their 'diasporic identities,' such as those discussed by Stuart Hall, 'are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.'¹⁵ In Vargas's photographs, Dominican migratory experiences are multi-generational and multi-layered. While some embrace their new or old surroundings, others reject it, and the neighborhood and its people are in a continual process of adjustment.

Well before Washington Heights became the inspiration for *In the Heights* (2007), the Tony Award-winning musical by Inwood-raised Lin-Manuel Miranda, the area roughly bound by Dyckman Street/200th Street on the north, 155th Street on the south, and the Harlem and Hudson Rivers at east and west, was a rural outpost that served as the site of military

campaigns during the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783). Inwood, initially home to the Lenape people, is bordered by Dyckman Street on the south and the northern tip of Manhattan island on the north. By the mid to late nineteenth century, real estate development had changed the landscape, with wealthy New Yorkers building estates overlooking the Hudson.¹⁶ By the early twentieth century, with the arrival of the subway and elevated train, new buildings catered to people of a more moderate income who wished to avoid the increasingly crowded areas of lower Manhattan.¹⁷

As housing and transportation changed, so did the population. German and Irish newcomers started moving further uptown in the mid to late nineteenth century. Italians followed at the turn of the century. German Jews arrived in the 1930s and 1940s, and Greeks and Puerto Ricans in the 1950s and 1960s. With each new group, the neighborhood changed. New businesses, religious observations, and favorite pastimes began altering the urban fabric. This multi-cultural enclave has not been devoid of frictions among groups. As early as the 1920s segregationist real estate policies were often used to keep groups out, particularly African Americans. These tactics later expanded to exclude others as building owners tried maintaining middle-class standards, which within this context meant white.¹⁸ By the time Dominicans started settling there in greater numbers in the 1960s and 1970s, the neighborhood's racial divides had coalesced along black, brown, and white lines.¹⁹

Dominican presence in the New York City area can be traced as far back as 1613, when the merchant Juan Rodríguez arrived in what would become New York. Rodríguez arrived from Hispaniola (the island shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic) aboard a Dutch ship, and is believed to be the first non-Native person to settle in Manhattan for an

extended period of time.²⁰ Yet the more intermingled histories between the United States and the Dominican Republic gained steam in the nineteenth century. By the early 1870s the debt-ridden Dominican government had almost sold the country to the U.S. Though U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant could not find the needed support for the measure, this would not be the last time that the government of the United States would be invested, economically, politically, and militarily, in the Dominican Republic.²¹ After seizing control of Dominican customs revenue in 1905, with all the economic clout and control that that entailed, the United States military occupied the country between 1916 and 1924.²² Democratic elections in 1924 led to Dominican self-government, by a U.S.-approved president, and eventually to the lessening of American involvement during the early years of the dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo.²³

Trujillo's dictatorship (1930–1961), which began with his military takeover of the island's government, was a defining moment for Dominican migration to the United States. Before then, as the historian Francisco Rodríguez de León has noted, the Dominican Republic itself was a draw for others and few Dominicans emigrated at all.²⁴ Trujillo, or *El Jefe* (the Boss), continued tightening his grip on the island's society and economy. Some who feared persecution began leaving in the 1950s before Trujillo's government started imposing immigration restrictions. Many of those who were able to leave were from the Dominican middle class, including professionals, intellectuals, artists, and business people with the means to make the journey given the relative expense of obtaining a passport.²⁵ Those who settled in New York chose to do so mostly in Manhattan, in the areas of Spanish Harlem (between 96th and 140th Streets, on the east side), Hamilton Place (between 133rd and 155th

Streets), and close to what is now Lincoln Center (around West 65th Street).²⁶ As time went on, many moved to the Lower East Side and the outer boroughs, including Queens.

After 1961, however, with Trujillo's assassination, the floodgates opened. By 1962 it is estimated that there were ten to fifteen thousand Dominicans in the United States.²⁷ As political upheaval ensued in the Dominican Republic, with elections and coups, the American military intervened again in 1965. That same year, the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act, that had seemed expansive in its welcoming of newcomers to the United States, imposed limits on Latin American immigrants, including Dominicans.²⁸ Nevertheless, their numbers continued increasing²⁹ and by 2000 there were over 1 million people who identified as Dominican living in the United States.³⁰ The majority lived in New York, which as I noted earlier, has served as the undisputed center of the diaspora, and for many, become a stand-in for the Dominican Republic.

Dominicans' persistent transnationalism, one in which first- and second-generation immigrants often travel between the United States and the Dominican Republic multiple times throughout their lifetimes, has meant that many in New York live 'con un pie aquí, y el otro allá'³¹ (one foot here, and the other there), a refrain that was popularized in one of the most popular merengues of the 1980s, by Sandy Reyes. The United States may serve as a temporary home, while returning to the Dominican Republic often occupies the minds of many, even if only for extended temporary stays.³² Living in one place with the intention of returning 'home' has led to a dual existence for Dominicans, and an embrace of transnational practices beyond that of any other immigrant group.³³ Airplanes fly multiple times a day to and from several Dominican cities, remittances are high, children are sent back 'home' to

study, or entire families, some with U.S.-born children, move 'home.' As such, 'home' is a transnational concept.³⁴ While this transnationalism may be a form of instability, I argue that it in fact provides a flexible model of what 'home' is. After all, there is still a foot in each place, with a network, even if tenuous, in both.³⁵

Winston Vargas's life story, however, does not fit neatly within the model of transnationalism that scholars of Dominican migration have identified. Although he lived in Washington Heights from the time he arrived in 1952 until he joined the U.S. Army in 1962, his trips to the Dominican Republic as a child were somewhat limited. In 1966, one year after the aforementioned U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic, he returned and took several photographs during a two-week trip. His parents moved back to the Dominican Republic in 1975, and so did he in 1979 to take a job at an advertising company. All the while, Vargas continued photographing in the United States and wherever his travels took him. He did not engage in the *vaivén*, coming and going, that many of his compatriots did. Yet, as I posited earlier, Washington Heights was the place from which he traveled to and from. As Vargas recently explained about the neighborhood, 'In one way, it's always there, and I found it interesting to capture that.'³⁶ And the 'that' that he photographed was a neighborhood and a people in continual transition.

When Vargas arrived in Washington Heights, as he recalls, very few residents spoke Spanish, except for several neighbors down the block and a Cuban family in his building. At school, he depended on a Puerto Rican classmate for basic translations, including for words such as tie and shirt. He learned English at his primary school and while there befriended the kids of the neighborhood, whose families were mostly Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Puerto Rican.

Despite the neighborhood's documented tensions, Vargas does not recall such moments affecting him directly. In his memory, they 'were just kids.'³⁷

His interest in photography emerged after a school trip to the Bronx Zoo, where his teacher brought along a camera. Vargas's father, who worked as a longshoreman, then gave him a camera of his own. He became an avid snap shooter and read about photography at his local branch library. In essence, Vargas was 'hooked.' Photography was a hobby that became a career and followed him everywhere he went, including around the neighborhood, at his secondary school, George Washington High School, and throughout the city. Outside of school, he focused on the blocks between 164th and 166th streets on Amsterdam Avenue, within two streets from where he lived. Local businesses asked him to photograph their shops, as with the case of a Isaac Montes and his 'Spanish & American' barbershop at 2100 Amsterdam Avenue, which appears in the 1961 photograph *Barbershop, Washington Heights, New York* (fig. 1).

[Fig. 1 HERE]

Montes, who lived a few buildings over from Vargas, appears on the barbershop's stoop. He looks to his left, away from the camera, in his crisp light-colored short-sleeved shirt. Through the barbershop's window, between the words 'Barber' and 'Shop,' we see another member of the business's staff, staring intently at Vargas's camera. The last three letters of the words *bodega* (convenience store) and *mercado* (market) are just visible at the left of the photograph, in the store window of an adjacent business. As a neighborhood kid photographing his environs, in this case at the barbershop owner's request possibly for a permit, Vargas unwittingly provided a glimpse of how Spanish was becoming part of the

area's landscape. Businesses mixed both languages, English and Spanish, thus catering to more than one potential set of customers. Although doing work for hire, Vargas, a relative newcomer to the city with an increasing command of the English language, casts his camera eye on what may have been welcome—words in Spanish. His dual role as documentarian and diasporic subject, therefore, meant that he had a different approach to how he would have photographed the neighborhood. In this instance, he is not an outsider looking in,³⁸ but rather, a resident of the area, photographing from within. This positionality, however, would change soon enough.

Vargas joined the Army in January of 1962, and when he returned to New York in the mid-1960s, he moved into an apartment on MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village, in lower Manhattan. Like many at the time, he was drawn to the neighborhood's status as the epicenter of New York's artistic and creative community. While not at his advertising job, he would photograph at Washington Square Park and throughout the city. On many weekends, he would return to Washington Heights to visit his family, and bring along his camera. During these trips he captured favorite pastimes and brides on their way to their weddings (figs. 2–4), in sum, life being lived. [Fig. 2 HERE] Although he did not set out to chronicle northern Manhattan in a systematic manner, the combination of his interests in the neighborhood and its people, as well as the photographic medium, led him to repeatedly photograph his home. Now, however, he brought with him another layer of lived experience, having not only left the United States and been stationed in Europe, but also having chosen to live outside of Washington Heights upon his return. Vargas's view of the neighborhood that he had known

so well was not quite that of an outsider, but was nevertheless imbued with, to borrow a phrase from Salman Rushdie, ‘fractured perceptions.’³⁹

[Fig. 3 HERE]

In 1971, Vargas took a photograph of two young women whom he remembers as being of Dominican origin, just up the street from the barbershop he had photographed a decade earlier (fig. 1). The background of *Sisters, Washington Heights, New York* (fig. 3), functions almost as a theatrical backdrop, and there, we see the rest of the world in which they now lived. At left there is a restaurant and bar named *El Sol* (The Sun). At the center of the photograph is a delivery entrance, closed off with large padlocks. An intergenerational group of men hovers over a makeshift game of dominos. At right is a doorway with peeling paint and graffiti that reads, ‘Free the Panther’ and ‘21 Panther.’ The photograph’s four sections provide hints of the changes in the neighborhood: from the group of men in the background, to the younger well-coiffed women in the foreground, and back to the signage and graffiti. These last two, in particular, offer an arc to the story of the neighborhood, from what was likely an establishment catering to Latinos to the hints of societal conflicts affecting the city and country at the time.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s African American and Puerto Rican residents continued moving into the area, many of them seeking affordable rents in what was considered a good residential neighborhood. Some unwelcoming white residents considered them ‘invaders.’⁴⁰ By the early 1970s Washington Heights had been racked by decades of ethnic and racial tension. Turf battles ensued on the streets and at schools as African

American, Irish, and Puerto Rican gangs fought for control. The violence sometimes escalated to bombings, as with that of an apartment building mostly inhabited by Puerto Ricans.⁴¹

[Fig. 4 HERE]

The graffiti in the doorway of *Sisters* comes into better view in *Child Playing, Washington Heights, New York* (1971, fig. 4). From top to bottom it reads: 'David is a [...] / 'Free the Panther' / '21 Panther' / 'Steve [McCaw] was here' / 'Beverly was Here' / 'Black Power' / and 'The Streets Belong to the People.' '21 Panther,' in particular, references the eight-month Panther 21 Trial, during which twenty-one and then thirteen members of the Harlem Chapter of the Black Panthers were put on trial for allegedly having planned bombings across the city. The graffiti writer's intervention compellingly draws our attention to New York's and the country's broader histories of racial inequity. Dominicans, and other newcomers to the neighborhood, were settling there as the country underwent significant changes in the struggle for civil rights. Additionally, when this photograph was taken, the city was also close to financial insolvency.

Seen as dangerous and decaying during the 1970s, New York was on the brink of bankruptcy. When in 1975 the Federal government initially denied the city a loan, the sentiment was that New York should 'Drop Dead,' as the *Daily News's* sensationalistic headline read on October 30, 1975.⁴² The Federal government did in the end offer assistance. Nevertheless, neighborhoods including Washington Heights and Inwood suffered from the city's vilification and overall financial shortcomings, as well as the greater implications they had for the economy and overall population.⁴³

[Fig. 5 HERE]

The slender doorway in *Child Playing* underscores the area's underlying tensions. Whereas its chipping paint and graffiti draw attention to the city's decay, its last line, 'The Streets Belong to the People,' and the young girl's partly toothless grin, shift our focus back to the neighborhood's residents. Vargas was likewise engaged in chronicling the neighborhood's people, however unsystematically, since to him 'the whole world was there.'⁴⁴ Everything from a *frío frío* (shaved ice) vendor (fig. 5), people carrying groceries, or children playing all made Washington Heights a place that Vargas wished to continue photographing even after he had moved out of the neighborhood. It was 'interesting to see the difference in the neighborhood ... after being away,' he recently explained.⁴⁵ Even within the same city, and on the same island, the lives he led in the bohemian Greenwich Village and the increasingly Latino Washington Heights were vastly different. He was simultaneously an insider and an outsider, who photographed the rest of the city, including other neighborhoods, such as Brownsville (in Brooklyn) and Harlem. However, he would always return to Washington Heights.

Dominicans started settling in the area in greater numbers during these years and especially so in the 1980s. Much as when African Americans and Puerto Ricans arrived in the neighborhood, Dominicans were not always welcome. Some considered them 'unfamiliar.'⁴⁶ As the historian and journalist Robert W. Synder notes, existing residents of Washington Heights sometimes received them with hostility, even citing the perceived unsettled nature of their transnational existence.⁴⁷

During the 1970s, Vargas worked as staff photographer for Reverend Ike, a charismatic African American evangelist whose base was in Washington Heights, at what had

been a Loew's theater at 175th Street and Broadway. As his work with Reverend Ike came to an end, Vargas moved to the Dominican Republic in 1979 to take a job at an advertising firm. He remained there until 1984 and spent some of his free time photographing around the island, including Pope John Paul II's 1979 visit. When he returned to New York in the mid-1980s he eventually settled in Washington Heights and continued photographing what had become a significantly changed area. In moving to the Dominican Republic, Vargas participated in one of the rituals of the Dominican diasporic experience, returning to the 'home' country. Resettling in New York also speaks to another aspect of that experience, whereby Dominican families often went back to the city after having been 'home.'

Vargas returned to a significantly altered Washington Heights and Inwood, where the Dominican presence was almost inescapable. As Dominicans' clout grew economically, Dominican-owned business lined each block. The names of bodegas, hair salons, remittance and travel agencies, taxi services, and more, often referred to Dominican towns or included silhouetted maps of the country. The sounds of merengue emanated from storefronts and moving vehicles. The 1980s and 1990s were also a period during which crime was on the rise in the neighborhood on account of a rampant drug trade, especially crack dealing.⁴⁸

Yet, despite the increasing crime rates, the area continued to serve as home to many Dominicans. As the neighborhoods changed, some things did not. For instance, the *vaivén*, coming and going, between New York and the Dominican Republic, continued, as did signs of its existence. In Vargas's 1992 photograph *Graffiti, Washington Heights, New York* (fig. 6) multiple political posters are affixed to a building at the corner of 175th and Broadway. One is for a local election and the other is of the then-president of the Dominican Republic, Joaquín

Balaguer.⁴⁹ Much as with the area's inhabitants, politics demonstrated a similar porousness between New York and the Dominican Republic.

[Fig. 6 HERE]

The top poster promotes the Dominican-born civil rights activist and 'defender of immigrant rights' Apolinar Trinidad, who ran for the New York City Council in November 1991.⁵⁰ Trinidad may have lost, yet his example and mentorship inspired other Dominicans to run for office, including the first Dominican-American to serve in the U.S. Congress, Adriano Espaillat, who was elected in November 2016. As Snyder and others note, Dominican involvement in New York City's politics, in large part, grew out of locally based concerns. The areas' schools, in particular, were seen as needing attention, as was the increasing crime of the mid 1980s and early 1990s. This period saw the development of local community groups that catered to the interests of Dominicans, as well as an increasing involvement in local politics by Trinidad and other politicians.⁵¹

Despite these inroads, Dominicans were also keenly aware of what was happening back in the Dominican Republic. Dominican political parties established local offices throughout Washington Heights and Inwood, their candidates campaigned in New York, and the details of Dominican local and national elections were discussed often at family gatherings.⁵² Just below the Trinidad poster, another one denounces the then-president of the Dominican Republic, Joaquín Balaguer. Dubbed 'the blind caudillo' (or strongman) by the *New York Times*,⁵³ Balaguer, had served as 'vice-president' and then 'president' during Trujillo's dictatorship. He was then president for twelve years, between 1966 and 1978. In 1986, Balaguer returned to power, yet again, for another ten years. The poster specifically

references what many perceived to be Balaguer's 'selling' of the country to the International Monetary Fund, as the Dominican Republic's economy spiraled out of control. The Dominican peso lost value, among other national crises, thus affecting many New York-based Dominicans who had returned 'home.' Years of saving to buy or build homes in neighborhoods geared at the returning diaspora were threatened by the nation's unstable economy, and many found themselves with no choice but to return to the United States to try to rebuild their lives yet again, often back in New York. But beyond the specifics of this anti-Balaguer poster, what this photograph encapsulates neatly is that on this one wall at least two types of Dominican politics, one New York- and the other Dominican Republic-based, could co-exist and gain the interest and attention of the same population.

Vargas photographed the continuously shifting natures of the neighborhood and its diaspora, providing views that by no means purport to be complete.⁵⁴ His role as a doubly diasporic subject, from both the Dominican Republic and Washington Heights, meant that he too was in persistent transformation, and as such, at the juncture of multiple contact zones, including the changing neighborhoods of Washington Heights and Inwood, the Dominican diaspora, New York City more broadly, and the Dominican Republic. Some of Vargas's photographs confront viewers with the urban decay that befell many parts of New York during the 1970s. Later, his works show how the Dominican Republic had become imbricated in almost every part of the neighborhood.

At their core, therefore, the works taken as a whole depict migratory experiences as processes in which people and place mutually impact one another. They present a community in transition, from new arrivals to active participants in shifting the tenor of an

entire neighborhood. In so doing, they also demonstrate the yearning that results in being 'far from home,' particularly as the Dominican diaspora grew in the 1980s. And with this growth came an intensification of the Dominican presence, which for many also meant that Washington Heights and Inwood would become interchangeable with the island nation. The yearning that results from being 'far from home,' therefore, could potentially be allayed through the elision of the Dominican Republic with Upper Manhattan. From a Caribbean nation to a sliver of what is New York island, the lives Vargas captured illustrate the enduring challenge of creating a home far from home. In Vargas's case it was Washington Heights and Inwood from which he could not 'get away,' nor could I. The transnational existence that he photographed has guided much of my research, and specifically, the photographic medium's ability to bear witness to the noisy process of migration.

¹ The airport was then known as Idlewild Airport, and its name changed in 1963, in honor of the assassinated president.

² I wish to thank my colleague E. Carmen Ramos at the Smithsonian American Art Museum for bringing Vargas's work to my attention as she prepared for her exhibition *Down these Mean Streets: Community and Place in Urban America*. Ramos's exhibition, which was on view in Washington in 2017 and then at El Museo del Barrio in New York City in 2018–2019, made abundantly clear the need for a more inclusive reassessment of the photography of urban spaces. Many thanks as well to Justin Carville and Sigrid Lien for organizing the conference, 'Photography, Migration, and Cultural Encounters in America,' in June 2018. The discussions throughout those days and afterwards have all informed my further research and

thoughts on the work of Winston Vargas. And of course, thanks to Winston Vargas for candidly discussing his work and biography.

³ See Sherri Grasmuck and Patricia R. Pessar, *Between Two Islands: Dominican International Migration* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1991). The Dominican Republic and Haiti share the island of Hispaniola.

⁴ In 1990, there were 332,713 Dominicans in New York City. By 1997, there were 495,000. See 'Table 1: The Dominican Population in the U.S. and New York City,' in Julissa Reynoso, 'Dominican Immigrants and Social Capital in New York City: A Case Study,' *Encrucijada/Crossroads: An Online Academic Journal* 1, no. 1 (2003): 59.

⁵ The study of transnationalism in Dominican migration has been discussed by several scholars, including Grasmuck and Pessar; Jorge Duany, 'Transnational Migration from the Dominican Republic: The Cultural Redefinition of Racial Identity,' *Caribbean Studies* 29, no. 2 (July–December 1996): 253–82; Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York after 1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Robert W. Snyder, *Crossing Broadway: Washington Heights and the Promise of New York City* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015), among others.

⁶ Many thanks to my sister, Anyi Hobson, for this reminder. Also see Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 97–98.

⁷ James Clifford, 'Diasporas.' *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (August 1994): 302–38, 304.

⁸ Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 5.

⁹ Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy.' *Theory, Culture & Society* 7, no. 2-3 (June 1990): 295–310, 297.

¹⁰ As James Clifford explains, one of William Safran's definitions of diaspora includes 'myths/memories of the homeland' as well as a 'desire for eventual return.' See Clifford, 'Diasporas,' 304–5.

¹¹ Winston Vargas (artist), in discussion with the author, April and June 2018.

¹² Many thanks to Justin Carville for pinpointing this useful framework for this project.

¹³ Joan M. Schwartz and James R. Ryan, 'Introduction: Photography and the Geographical Imagination,' in *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 6.

¹⁴ Schwartz and Ryan, *Picturing Place*, 6.

¹⁵ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora,' in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Padmini Mongia (London: Arnold, 1996), 120.

¹⁶ Snyder, *Crossing Broadway*, 13.

¹⁷ Snyder, *Crossing Broadway*, 16.

¹⁸ For an expanded discussion of exclusionary policies in real estate in upper Manhattan, see Snyder, *Crossing Broadway*, 18–23.

¹⁹ For additional information on the ethnic and racial divides in the neighborhood, and their development in light of world and local politics, see Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 99–107.

²⁰ See Anthony Stevens-Acevedo, Tom Weterings, Leonor Álvarez Francés, 'Juan Rodríguez and the Beginnings of New York City,' *CUNY Academic Works* (2013), (http://academicworks.cuny.edu/dsi_pubs/17). Also see Sam Roberts, 'Honoring a Very Early

New Yorker,' *New York Times*, October 2, 2012, <https://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/02/honoring-a-very-early-new-yorker/>.

²¹ Abraham F. Lowenthal, 'The United States and the Dominican Republic to 1965: Background to Intervention.' *Caribbean Studies* 10, no. 2 (1970): 30–55 (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25612211>), for additional details.

²² Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 3, and Lowenthal, 'The United States and the Dominican Republic,' 32. See also 'Dominican Republic, 1916–1924,' U.S. Department of State, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/wwi/108649.htm>.

²³ Lowenthal, 'The United States and the Dominican Republic,' 34.

²⁴ Francisco Rodríguez de León, *El furioso merengue del Norte: una historia de la comunidad dominicana en los Estados Unidos* (New York: [Editorial Sitel], 1998), 43.

²⁵ As Hoffnung-Garskof notes, one hundred plantains cost 1.27 Dominican pesos. A passport and all associated fees cost 125 pesos. See Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 70.

²⁶ Rodríguez de León, *El furioso merengue del Norte*, 43, 51.

²⁷ Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 4, 70–80.

²⁸ Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 69.

²⁹ Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 86–96.

³⁰ Ramona Hernández and Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz, *Dominicans in the United States: A Socioeconomic Profile, 2000* ([New York]: CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 2003), 2.

³¹ Snyder, *Crossing Broadway*, 143.

³² See Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 164–96 for an expanded account of 'home', including how the concept was wielded by the Dominican Tourism Board in efforts to

increase tourism by Dominican-born people to the island country. Furthermore, as Hoffnung-Garskof discusses, the traits of transnationalism had initially been a concern for some, but that in the end, 'Dominican dreams of home were not deviant [...].' (196).

³³ Tracy Rodríguez, 'Dominicanas Entre La Gran Manzana y Quisqueya: Family, Schooling, and Language Learning in a Transnational Context,' *The High School Journal* 92, no. 4, *Special Issue: At the Intersection of Transnationalism, Latina/o Immigrants, and Education* (April–May 2009): 17.

³⁴ Tina Camp't's question about what is 'home' for an immigrant, at the June 2018 conference, has guided my continuing research on this topic as seen through the work of Winston Vargas.

³⁵ See Reynoso's 'Dominican Immigrants' for a discussion of Dominican networks. Also see Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 198–99, for a discussion on the difficulties of living in New York and returning to the Dominican Republic.

³⁶ Winston Vargas (artist), in discussion with the author, April and June 2018.

³⁷ Winston Vargas (artist), in discussion with the author, April and June 2018.

³⁸ See Joan M. Schwartz, 'The Geography Lesson: photographs and the construction of imaginative geographies.' *Journal of Historical Geography* 22, no. 1 (1996): 16–45, 33.

³⁹ For a description of returning to one's home, and the fractured vision that results from writing from a distance, see Salman Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands,' in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Granta Books, 1992), 9–21.

⁴⁰ Snyder, *Crossing Broadway*, 69.

⁴¹ Snyder, *Crossing Broadway*, 43.

⁴² 'Ford to City: Drop Dead,' *New York Daily News*, October 30, 1975, front page. See Sam Roberts, 'Infamous 'Drop Dead' Was Never Said by Ford,' *New York Times*, December 28, 2006, <https://nyti.ms/2k5wmlg>. Also see Snyder, *Crossing Broadway*, 117.

⁴³ Snyder, *Crossing Broadway*, 121–26.

⁴⁴ Winston Vargas in conversation with Leslie Ureña, interview, April 25, 2018.

⁴⁵ Winston Vargas in conversation with Leslie Ureña, interview, April 25, 2018.

⁴⁶ Snyder, *Crossing Broadway*, 138–46.

⁴⁷ Snyder, *Crossing Broadway*, 138–46.

⁴⁸ See Snyder, *Crossing Broadway*, 158–95, for an in-depth summary.

⁴⁹ Credit here goes to my father, who became an ad-hoc researcher and asked friends in the neighborhood about the poster when I could not trace its origins.

⁵⁰ Howard Jordan, 'Apolinar Trinidad 1950–2011, Latino Civil Rights Leader dies at sixty,' National Institute of Latino Policy (January 23, 2011, <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/NiLP-FYI--Apolinar-Trinidad--NYC-Latino-Civil-Rights-Leaders--Dies.html?soid=1101040629095&aid=ZkYuFgQB6Ho>).

⁵¹ Snyder, *Crossing Broadway*, 142–47, 152–56.

⁵² In the case of the discussions at gatherings, I am depending on my own memories of when relatives would often debate Dominican politics.

⁵³ Mark Kurlansky, 'The Dominican Republic: In the Land of the Blind Caudillo,' *New York Times*, August 6, 1989, <https://nyti.ms/2PMA8L0>.

⁵⁴ See Joan M. Schwartz, 'The Geography Lesson: photographs and the construction of imaginative geographies.' *Journal of Historical Geography* 22, no. 1 (1996): 16–45, 33, for a

discussion of how in the case of European photographers in Egypt, for instance, 'photographs, of course, could not communicate the experience of a continuous, multi-dimensional, multi-faceted journey.'