

ESSAY | PEER REVIEWED

Navigating U.S. Citizenship and Colorism in the Dominican Republic: A Black Latinx Art Therapist's Experience

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Abstract

Discussions about cultural responsiveness for mental health practitioners often perpetuate colonizing frameworks. By centering White therapists' awareness of power and privilege when working with people of color, dominant paradigms in the field can overlook the experiences of practitioners of color and the relational dynamics of engaging shared racial/cultural backgrounds. Interrogations of Whiteness are necessary to prevent harm in the predominantly White fields of the creative arts therapies, yet this discussion should not overshadow discussions about the experiences of practitioners of color who encounter issues of colorism and citizenship in working with communities of color. This self-reflexive essay describes how a Black Dominican-Haitian woman art therapist, who was raised in the United States (U.S.), recognized a need to explore her own political awareness while working with female participants at a youth organization in the Dominican Republic (D.R.). The author discusses the use of art to critically interrogate issues of colorism, citizenship, and privilege that arise during her time in the D.R. Recommendations are presented to support arts therapists of color to engage their perceptions of citizenship and colorism while providing mental health services to communities of color.

Keywords: *Black Latinx Art Therapist, Colorism, Privilege, Dominican Republic, Therapeutic Relationship*

Introduction

How does a Black Latinx art therapist navigate experiences of colorism with clients of color? How does a Black Latinx art therapist process privilege while working in communities of color? These two questions are the basis of my reflections on the therapist of color's experience of similar race/ethnicity in therapeutic relationships. The importance of therapists practicing from an intersectional framework and developing cultural awareness by challenging personal attitudes and beliefs that are shaped by ar-

eas of privilege has been widely acknowledged in mental health fields (e.g., Ancis & Szymanski, 2001; Arminio, 2001; Constantine, 2002; Constantine et al., 2001; Hays et al., 2004; Pope-Davis & Ottavi, 1994; Sue & Sue, 2013). Many scholars have addressed the experiences of therapists of color working with clients of color (e.g., Ayonrinde, 1999; Banks, 1975; Bell-Tolliver et al., 2009; Comas-Díaz & Jacobsen, 1991; Goode-Cross, 2011; Goode-Cross & Grim, 2014). The focus of this literature aims to address a range of issues that may present in the therapeutic alliance between therapists and clients who share cultural backgrounds. For example, Black therapists may strongly identify with Black clients, forming close connections; however, they experience difficulty with boundaries and the limits of their therapeutic training (Goode-Cross & Grim, 2014). Black therapists and counselors of color often have the responsibility of navigating their own experiences of oppression while supporting Black clients to process their encounters of discrimination (Calnek, 1970; Sawyer-Kurian et al., 2017). The literature addresses the experiences of therapists of color when working with clients of the same racial/cultural identities, but often does not address intracommunal racialized attitudes such as colorism, class and citizenship. This lack of dialogue may be due to a colonizing approach to understanding cultural diversity in mental health fields that prioritizes Whiteness in analyses of power and privilege. The dearth of existing literature on skin-tone perceptions and their impact on the therapeutic alliance may be one consequence of Whiteness as a dominant frame for engaging with diversity (Marira & Mitra, 2013; Tummala-Narra, 2007). There is a need to examine the interconnectedness of privilege, class, colorism and citizenship for Black, Indigenous, and other therapists of color who experience similar racial/ethnic identities as clients. This article explores how colorism can impact practitioners of color who are working in communities of color. I provide a brief personal history followed by a history of colorism in the Dominican Republic (D.R.) to contextualize my work on the island as a U.S.-based art therapist. I use my experience of working with Dominican-Haitian girls in 2014 as an example of how practitioners of color can engage with concepts of privilege and one's own political awareness when working in community with clients of color.

Unpacking U.S. Citizenship and Colorism as a Black Latinx Woman

I have lived in the United States since moving from the D.R. with my family at the age of three. As a dark-skinned Dominican-Haitian woman whose father is Haitian and mother is Dominican, my parents gave me an understanding of my African ancestry and established my love for my Blackness. I have described myself as Black Latina since childhood. My Blackness encompasses my Haitian ancestry, and African culture and history. My Latinidad represents my ability to speak Spanish and acknowledges the native people of the D.R. My parents taught me to be proud of my heritage; therefore, describing myself as Black and Latina gives me pride and inner-power. Throughout this paper, I use Black Latina or Black Latinx woman to describe my personal identity, and Black Latinx to describe a widely diverse identity of African descendent people across Latin America, the Caribbean and the U.S. There are other terms that Black Latinxs' use, such as Afro-Latinx and Latinegra (Cruz-Janzen, 2001), which are commonly used to acknowledge Blackness or African ancestry of Latinxs. Living in the U.S., my decision to verbalize the word Black clearly tells others where I stand historically and politically, especially due to the Black/White paradigm of racialization in the U.S. When engaging in Latinx communities, I may prefer to use Latinegra as the term encompasses the Spanish language and my identity as Black, Latinx, and a woman. Despite my family's and my personal embrace of my Black Latina identity, in the U.S., I have often been questioned by African Americans, light-skinned Latinxs, other people of color and White folks because of the darkness of my skin or the texture of my hair.

Colorism includes prejudice and discrimination against individuals of a darker skin tone within the same ethnic/racial group (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014; Adames et al., 2016). Experiences of internalized racial oppression and colorism from African Americans and Latinxs have caused a different kind of pain than I have felt when dealing

with non-Black or non-Latinx people. Because I embrace who I am as a Black Latina, experiencing colorism from groups I identify with has not caused me to question my identity. Still, these negative interactions once made me feel isolated, and as if I were the only one with the experience of being a Black Latina. I was saddened to think that I could not be in a community with Latinxs, and I could not fully identify with African Americans. As an adult, I became intentional about finding spaces that completely embraced my identity. I eventually found African American/non-Latinx Black communities that welcomed me, gave me corrective and healing experiences from past encounters of colorism, and made me more at peace with my social environment. African Americans' history of slavery, their cultural norms rooted in Africa, and encounters of racism and discrimination all aligned with my cultural roots and experiences as a Black Latina living in the U.S. (Coombs, 1972). So, when I say, I am Black, it is not just a word; it holds a crucial deep-rooted story of struggle, resistance, thriving, and belonging. Unfortunately, to this day, the U.S. Latinx community continues to wrestle with my Blackness. These interpersonal dynamics resemble experiences of other Black Latinxs who have expressed social exclusion from the Latinx community, striving to convince Latinxs of their Latinidad to feel accepted and finally finding a place of belonging in the African American community (Haywood, 2017). Although I did find a community, some cultural differences amongst my Black peers made me crave and dream of communing with Latinxs.

In 2014, I decided to return to the D.R. I realized that I still longed for a deeper connection with my Latinidad. I wanted to reconnect with my family living there and immerse myself in the Dominican culture that I grew up adoring and embracing. I imagined listening to Merengue everywhere I went and speaking Spanish freely without people being shocked by my tongue's fluidity of the language. In my mind, returning to the D.R. was the land of milk and honey for my soul. I wanted to receive what the land was going to offer me, and I wanted to give back to my people. Therefore, I went back and worked for an organization that I could serve while being nurtured by my birth country. I brought with me a mixture of experiences of belonging and isolation as a first (U.S.) generation Black Dominican-Haitian woman and art therapist, that led me to ask, how do Black clinicians experience both oppression and privilege in their work with Black clients?

Black and Stone (2005) expanded the definition of privilege in academic literature, including other domains in addition to race and gender, to "highlight the conflicting and/or competing nature of privilege" (p. 244). They defined privilege as "any entitlement, sanction, power, immunity, and advantage or right granted or conferred by the dominant group to a person or group solely by birthright membership in prescribed identities" (p. 245). It should be noted that some therapists of color may find problems with using the notion of privilege when working with clients with racially and ethnically similar backgrounds. Margolin (2015) argued that non-confrontational language geared to help Whites see how racism benefits them has reinforced White privilege pedagogy. The term privilege has also been misused to deny the reality of racism as a structural problem (Flaherty, 2020). Cultural diversity discourse in the field of mental health must continuously examine how its framings of privilege and oppression uniquely impact practitioners of color. Black therapists working in similar racial/ethnic or intra-communal therapeutic contexts should have access to discussions about the privilege that center Black experiences so that when disagreements and tensions emerge, they can become opportunities for authenticity in the therapeutic relationship. Racism informs the limited ways in which dominant culture imagines the range of unique experiences and beliefs within Black or African diasporic communities. Examining intersectional markers such as immigration status, birth country, socioeconomic status, and gender can further introduce complex analyses and varying perspectives on the discourse of colorism (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). Through my experience as a Black Latina, U.S.-based art therapist working in D.R., I realized the value of engaging my political and social awareness.

A History of Colorism in the D.R.

Colorism—in the Americas—dates back to European colonization and chattel slavery. In the D.R. and Haiti, the story of colorism begins in 1492 when European colonist, Christopher Columbus, arrived at the island he renamed Hispaniola (Ricourt, 2016). Today the island is known as the land shared by Haiti and the D.R. (Ricourt, 2016; Torres-Sailant, 1998). Before the arrival of Spain, the Taíno indigenous people had named the island Quisqueya meaning, “Mother of All Lands” (Cambeira, 1997, p. 8). The Spaniards forced the indigenous people into enslaved labor in mines and agriculture (Ricourt, 2016). Indigenous people suffered from forced assimilation, acquired diseases brought by the conquistadors, and experienced inhumane work conditions (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). As the Taíno people began to die, the Spaniards sought more laborers and in 1501, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain permitted the Spaniards to bring enslaved Africans onto the island (Ricourt, 2016; Torres-Sailant, 1998). The first Black people in Hispaniola were Black Landinos, Africans who acculturated to European culture (Ricourt, 2016). Along with the indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans were exploited in sugar plantations, gold mines, and construction work (Ricourt, 2016). By the mid-16th century, there were about 20-30 thousand enslaved people who were predominantly Black and a large portion of mixed-race (Ricourt, 2016).

During this enslavement period, the Spaniards structured a caste society or “*system of social stratification*” that established colorism (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014, p. 6; Ricourt, 2016). The caste divided the population based on skin color and position; however, it was a flexible system as the power of different groups shifted throughout history (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014; Ricourt, 2016). The bureaucrats, clergy, and plantation and slave owners were at the top of the hierarchy. Next in power were the “small merchants, waged workers, small planters, and farmers of Spanish descent” (Ricourt, 2016, p. 66). Then proceeded the free Blacks, mulattos, and others of mixed race, leaving enslaved workers at the bottom of the hierarchy.

In the 16th-17th centuries, the island was invaded by France, who settled in the western part of the island (Howard, 2001; Ricourt, 2016). In the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697, France won the west part of Hispaniola from Spain and named it Saint Domingue (now Haiti), and Spain the east, Santo Domingo (now the D.R.; Howard, 2001; Ricourt, 2016). A border between the countries was established by 1777 (Ricourt, 2016). France brought more enslaved Africans for sugar and coffee production, and towards the end of the 17th-century Africans became 90% of the population (Howard, 2001; Ricourt, 2016). Under the Treaty of Basel, in 1795, Spain gave Santo Domingo to France, ending the war between them (Ricourt, 2016).

In Saint Domingue, by 1791, The Haitian Revolution had begun with a slave revolt against the French, led by formerly enslaved General Toussaint L'Ouverture (Paulino, 2006; Ricourt, 2016). The uprisings led to the governor's decision to abolish slavery in 1793 (Howard, 2001). It was not until 1804 that Haitians overtook the French with formerly enslaved Jean-Jacques Dessalines' leadership and obtained their independence (Geggus, 2011; Howard, 2001). The Haitian Revolution was described as “exceptionally brutal” (Geggus, 2011, p. 544) and declared “the first independent republic in the western hemisphere with a majority population of African descent” (Howard, 2001, p. 27). Haiti's victory in defeating White European enslavers inspired revolts across the Americas and spread a sense of Black pride around the globe (Geggus, 2011). The land was renamed from Saint Domingue to Ayiti (Haiti; Geggus, 2011). The mission of liberated Haitians was to prevent the re-establishment of slavery and further European invasions of the island (Paulino, 2006). Haiti's Constitution of 1805 depicted a different society. All citizens were declared Black despite their skin tone as a measure to end mistreatment based on the lightness or darkness of one's skin (Gaffield, 2015). The Constitution prohibited most Whites from citizenship and the right to own land and gave inhabitants the freedom of religion (Howard 2001; Gaffield, 2015). It is noteworthy to mention that while Haitians identified as Black, those who lived in

Santo Domingo identified as Spanish and did not want to be associated with Haitians (Howard, 2001). However, Haitians believed that Santo Domingo had to be liberated from the French and the island to become unified to prevent future European invasions (Paulino, 2006). With the French still residing in Santo Domingo slavery was re-instituted in 1802. Spanish colonists also returned and were able to re-establish rule over Santo Domingo in 1809 (Ricourt, 2016).

Before Spain's return to power, in 1805, the Haitian Army crossed the border to defeat the French but was unsuccessful. However, Haitians destroyed and burned cities in rural Santo Domingo and killed residents in the area (Paulino, 2006; Ricourt, 2016). This historical event is highlighted across Dominican history literature and used to justify Dominican anti-Haitianism (Paulino, 2006; Ricourt, 2016). Santo Domingo did eventually obtain independence from Spain in 1821 and then finally unified with Haiti from 1822–1844 (Paulino, 2006). Race significantly influenced the unification of Dominicans and Haitians, which ultimately led to Dominican anti-Haitianism. In Santo Domingo, most of the population, who were mulattos and Blacks, embraced Haiti's presence and protection (Ricourt, 2016). Jean-Pierre Boyer, Haiti's president, occupied Santo Domingo and immediately ended slavery permanently, creating a comradeship between Haitians and Dominicans (Howard, 2001). Despite these efforts, a small group of *blanco* (White) elitists perceived their presence as an invasion and rejected Haitian policy such as the abolishment of slavery. These elites held on to the notion that Haitians had exploited the land, and their response led to the creation of "a Dominican Creole-led movement," establishing the Dominican Republic, an independent nation from Haiti, on February 27, 1844 (Paulino, 2006, p. 269). Remarkably, today the D.R. celebrates their separation from Haiti as their Independence Day (Paulino, 2006). After declaring their independence, Haitians and Dominicans continued to have a hostile relationship and border issues were impossible to resolve, influencing the D.R. to return and self-annexing to the Spanish colonists (Ricourt, 2016). It was not until 1865 that the D.R. obtained its permanent independence and freedom from Spain (Paulino, 2006). However, to this day, a tension exists between Dominicans and Haitians, and anti-Haitianism/anti-Blackness is prevalent in the culture and politics of the Dominican Republic (Howard, 2001).

Contemporary Haitian and Dominican Dynamics and Impacts of Colorism

Dominican society has culturally ingrained anti-Blackness into the characterizations of "Haitians as invaders" and savages (Paulino, 2006, p. 269). "Dominican nationalism has been colored by a pervasive racism, centered on a rejection of African ancestry and blackness" (Howard, 2001, p. 1–2). Some modern examples of anti-Blackness rooted in Spanish colonists' teachings are the massacre of an estimated 35,000 Haitians in 1937 led by the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo (Paulino, 2006). After the massacre, the Dominican and Haitian conflict was formally addressed and settled in 1938. However, the Dominican government and the people continue to refuse to apologize for Haitians' killings and even commemorate the Haitians who were unjustly murdered. Furthermore, anti-Haitianism has been sustained in the legacy of the D.R. via its continuous deportation of Haitians and Dominican-Haitians, denying them citizenship and birth certificates, exploiting their labor, and sanctioning other discriminatory acts that demonstrate a national and racial prejudice.

Anti-Blackness transcends all areas of Dominican culture and life, consisting of a "strong white bias of positive characteristics juxtaposed with the negative portrayal of blackness" (Howard, 2001, p. 131). This perspective is portrayed in Dominican households and everyday life and in the differential treatment of men and women. Dominican homes play a significant role in reinforcing skin-color bias by family members. Like most Latinx residences, Dominican families often value light-skinned complexion and emphasize the importance of marrying someone who is light-skinned to upgrade their social status and economic class (Haywood, 2017). Chavez-Dueñas et al. (2014)

identified common phrases that are used in Latinx homes regarding skin color: "Hay que mejorar la raza o cástate con un blanco [We need to better the race by marrying a White individual]." "Vete por la sombrita [Go into the shade (to avoid getting darker)]." "Pobrecita, tiene el cabello tan malo [Poor little thing, her hair is so bad (coarse)]" (p. 17). These messages also intersect with gender in Latin America. Experiences of colorism impact all genders; however, women are affected in a unique manner (Hunter, 2007).

For women, being light-skinned and having Eurocentric facial features are perceived as a marker of beauty that can be used as social capital to gain advantages like in education and job position (Hunter, 2007). On the contrary, dark-skinned individuals are perceived as unattractive and disadvantaged accessing education, job opportunities, and the marriage market (Hunter, 2007). In terms of marriage, light-skinned women are more likely to marry someone who has a high social status and higher income (Hunter, 2007). The Eurocentric standards can lead Black Dominican women and girls to skin-bleaching and straightening their kinky curls (Hunter, 2007). As a deeply embedded practice in the D.R. culture, women go to the salon every week to straighten their hair either permanently or using hair straighteners (Candelario, 2000). Stylists often do not work with natural Afro-textured hair. These standards of beauty reinforce colonial ideas and White supremacy that perpetuate colorism within the D.R. Due to the D.R.'s long history of anti-Blackness, if Dominican/ Dominican-Haitian women do not abide by these standards, it is likely they will be subject to discrimination and verbal attacks. Dominican/Dominican-Haitian girls may develop negative attitudes toward their racial and social identity group. Girls may experience low self-esteem, discrimination in interpersonal relationships, and a lack of safety in their environment.

Dominican identity is also significantly influenced by other related colonial ideals. The majority of Dominicans identify as *indio* to refer to their Taíno-Arawak indigenous ancestry (Lamb & Dundes, 2017). However, Dominicans are 9% of indigenous ancestry due to the large population of the D.R. natives murdered in slavery (Lamb & Dundes, 2017). The D.R. is composed of 90% Black and mixed raced people, with only 4% identifying as Black (Lamb & Dundes, 2017). Identifying as *indio* "is a more neutral source of heritage, helping Dominicans maintain a Spanish identity" (Lamb & Dundes, 2017, p. 3). Some scholars view this identification of *indio* as an unconscious attempt to reject Blackness, distance themselves from Haiti, and erase parts of Dominican identity that reveal African roots and history of enslavement (Lamb & Dundes, 2017).

Understanding the history and identity of the D.R., its relationship with Haiti, and the lingering influences of colonization, I bring my personal experiences of self and socially perceived identities to the forefront. My political awakening, while working with Dominican-Haitian girls in the D.R., have allowed me to view the complexities of race, gender, and class that have shaped my personal life into insights for my professional work as an art therapist. As a Black Dominican-Haitian Latina, and a bilingual art therapist raised in the U.S., I navigated the pervasiveness of colorism in the D.R. I was also challenged by ideas of citizenship, which were often in conversations about where Dominican-Haitians belonged.

Black and Beautiful: "Our hair and dark-skin are beautiful, just like yours."

In describing my political awakening, I focus on the experience of creating a community art project while working with Dominican-Haitian girls. This work featured creative dialogues that addressed colorism and citizenship. In 2014, I traveled to D.R. and worked at The Center (pseudonym). This organization's primary mission is to end poverty. As a part of their mission, education and mental health services are provided to about 200 girls, ages 8–18, from deeply underserved communities. Most of the girls are D.R. natives, while some were Haitian-born Dominicans and others were Haitian immigrants. I spent about a year at The Center facilitating daily socio-emotional art-based workshops. The work extended from individual work to the larger community

of girls creating journals, collages, paintings, self-care jars, memory boxes, art using found objects, and more. The workshops addressed various topics, such as coping with anxiety and sadness, self-care, healthy relationships, identity exploration, and conflict resolution. I conducted individual therapy sessions with the girls who had experienced traumatic events such as sexual abuse, witnessing domestic violence in the home, and grieving the loss of family members due to homicide. I also organized and facilitated two mural projects with all 200 girls at The Center.

As a Black Dominican-Haitian, I was ambivalent about how the girls would receive me, understanding the Dominican and Haitian dynamics. To my relief, the girls welcomed me with open arms. One of the staff members told me that I was the first Black Dominican-Haitian staff member at the organization, and the girls were told about me before my arrival. During my first week at The Center, the girls would frequently ask if I was Dominican-Haitian and spoke Spanish and English as if to make sure it was real and for them to finally make a conclusion on how they were going to engage with me. All the girls, including the staff, which were all women, responded with excitement, smiles, and hugs when I responded with, “sí” (yes). Many responded with, “¡Por fin!” (finally!). They all saw themselves in me. My ability to speak Spanish and dance to Merengue and Bachata, the national music, appealed to the Dominican girls. My connection to Haiti, my curly afro, dark skin hue, and enthusiasm to learn the Haitian Creole language created excitement and stunned the Dominican-Haitian girls and those who were Haitian immigrants. These connections were the beginning of creating a bond with them.

During my time at The Center, I continued to connect and build rapport with the girls while feeling a sense of belonging. They shared their goals of attending higher education, becoming a professional dancer, traveling to the U.S. and other parts of the world. As they shared, they would inquire about mine, and, at the time, I expressed that my goal was to pursue a doctoral degree. As we shared, I motivated and affirmed them, and they organically responded by encouraging me as well. In a nation where sexism and gender-based violence are prevalent, affirmation and empowerment became central to our dynamics. My U.S. citizenship eventually challenged my relationship with the girls. My Blackness also brought experiences of colorism and anti-Blackness while navigating the island.

While on a field trip with the girls, at a town market in the city of Dajabón, a light-skinned Dominican man aggressively yelled at me from a distance, “¡Negra, que pelo malo!” (Black one, what bad hair!). I stood in total shock, and one of the girls took my hand and, with soft eyes, looked at me and said, “no le haga caso” (don’t pay attention to him) as if she was used to witnessing such hatred. In silence, a range of emotions welled up inside as we walked back to the school bus. I thought about how vulnerable and powerless I felt and wanting to flee the situation to ensure the safety of the girls who were Haitian. I wondered about how it felt for this girl, who was light-skinned, to witness this event. I felt unsettled that she felt the obligation to protect me yet it simultaneously demonstrated our bond and power-dynamics. This experience helped me understand what the girls, especially those of darker hue, experienced daily. A mixture of experiences of belonging and not belonging was a common theme in the D.R. for those of us who were dark-skinned; some people accepted our Blackness, and others did not. This understanding deepened my understanding and ability to support the girls emotionally. Notions of anti-Blackness were also present in the ideology of the girls at The Center.

While working at the organization, I often witnessed the way in which dark-skinned Dominican girls—also of Haitian descent—complimented and admired the light-skinned and Eurocentric features of their peers, while degrading their own African features. One afternoon, I became quite emotional, and shocked, after hearing a conversation where one of the girls expressed the following: “Ay tú eres tan blanquita y bonita. Yo quiero pelo bueno como tú” (Ah, you are so White and beautiful. I want good hair like you). With managed emotions and socially just convictions, I intervened in their conversation offering positive affirmation acknowledging all shades and hair

textures of beauty. I said: “Todas son bonitas. Sí, todas tenemos diferentes tipos de pelos y diferentes tonos de piel, pero todas somos hermosas” (All of you are pretty. Yes, we all have different types of hair and different skin tones, but we are all beautiful). After validating them, they stared at me in silence, as if it was the first time their constructs of beauty had been disrupted or challenged. The witnessing of how anti-Blackness ideas were already impacting their childhood brought back feelings of anger towards the history of colonialism and wondering if these ideas will ever cease from perpetuating. On that day, I committed myself to continue to dismantle ideologies of anti-Blackness that I encountered in the D.R. I certainly picked my battles and always remembered to address the issue with grace as I saw my Dominican people as victims of colonialism who have not yet realized that they are survivors.

Although these events were painful to experience and witness, I was familiar with the emotional toll of oppression, and had reliable tools to process my feelings. I discovered spending adequate time with myself enabled me to be fully present with my clients. Journaling and *quiet-time* were the primary reflection tools that I used to process these challenging experiences. It helped me understand my personal responsibilities in these situations, as well as my role as an art therapist. Daily, I journaled in the morning to “check-in” with myself and process the ever-present imposition of street harassment from men, rooted in both sexism and colorism. Through my understanding of White power and White privilege, I was versed in unpacking my encounters with racism; however, I was unsure of how to do this with myself and my clients of color when racism had been internalized and spewed back at us by individuals who looked like us. Our people, causing us harm. How does a Black Latinx therapist unpack the complexities and pain of colorism to their light-complexioned Black clients? How do I address colorism with clients while preserving relationships in my community?

As I continued to dismantle colorism, another challenge surfaced around citizenship. The girls perceived me as ‘the Savior,’ and rich. Despite my concerted effort to change their perspectives, I was unsuccessful, because these beliefs were ingrained in the psyche and culture of the D.R. Although I am Black Dominican-Haitian like them, it was as if my Western connection made me half White making me inherently good. My U.S. citizenship, a symbol of Western society, White power, and European colonialism, prevailed as being ideal, better, and incomparable to their lived experiences. Although I have never identified with such status, I blindly experienced the benefits of them. My connection to the U.S. gave me power as I demonstrated advantages in economic, educational, and language (bilingual-Spanish and English) abilities. I fed myself every day and went on fun trips to different cities on weekends while many of the girls struggled to have their needs met, and at times, asked me for money. I freely travelled to and from the D.R. while mothers, stricken by poverty, implored me to take their daughters with me to the U.S. for better opportunities. As an educated, bilingual speaker from the U.S., many doors would have easily opened up to me if I had chosen to live there permanently. Due to the country’s economic instability, corruption and poor policies, disproportionately the mothers of the youth I supported did not complete high school and did not have opportunities to learn a different language. Most of the families struggled to find jobs as employment was scarce and required educational levels that many did not have. For the first time in my life I became fully conscious of advantages that came with U.S. citizenship in the context of this Dominican-Haitian community in which I was centered. They saw me as a powerful Black woman with a significant amount of resources, and I struggled with this because I did not experience this social response when in the U.S.

In the U.S., I grew up in poverty. My family and I survived with public aid such as food stamps, WIC, and Section 8 housing. At times, I was unsure if I would have food the next day, and even receiving presents for holidays and birthdays was rare. Poverty and economic struggle was a significant part of my life. Therefore, to be seen as a powerful Black woman was inconceivable to me. However, from a historical perspective, I eventually came to understand how my citizenship status, education, bilingualism, and having access to U.S. currency gave me power in their eyes. With this new conscience



Figure 1

Bottle Caps, photography by J. Napoleón, 2014.

material, I was more self-aware and intentional about using that power to continue to motivate and encourage them which led to building a stronger rapport and understanding their experiences.

These various experiences sparked even more curiosity and questions. Are therapists of color aware of their beliefs on anti-Blackness and the impact of citizenship on their clients? Are Black therapists aware of how they internalize anti-Blackness ideologies? Have they been given the space to identify and process how they perpetuate anti-Blackness and White supremacy? How does a therapist of color navigate areas of anti-Blackness while serving communities of color? As I continued to be deliberate about spending time with myself to think about my internalization of anti-Blackness, I gained strength and developed ideas on addressing this complex—and historically rooted—phenomenon from a person-centered lens.

Art as a Tool to Mend Cultural Identity

Though my experiences resulted in more questions than answers, I set out to foster a space to address colorism, and simultaneously process their perceptions of Blackness. As an art therapist, I turned to the visual arts. Border of Lights (B.O.L.), an organization that focuses on social justice work around Dominican and Haitian relations ([Border of Lights, 2013](#)), reached out to The Center, proposing to support an art project that would be presented in their annual walk to the border of both countries. B.O.L. had selected a Haitian visual artist to represent the voices of the Haitian people. The vision was then to leave both artworks at the border displayed for all visitors and community members to encounter and encourage meaningful conversations. The Center set me to facilitate an art project of my choice with the girls. I thought this was the perfect opportunity to address colorism and anti-Blackness ideas with them which, as previously discussed, is rooted in the historically complicated relationship between Dominicans and Haitians. The art project¹ allowed the girls to begin healing divisions due to cultural identity.

After explaining the vision of the project with the girls, I proposed creating a mural. They became excited, and with creativity and dedication, we created *Mural de Amistad* (Mural of Friendship; an eight-foot mural). The initial process of the mural was to learn about the history of the D.R. and Haiti. I taught them the history of slavery and colonialism in our Quisqueya island to understand colorism, ideas of anti-Blackness, and the roots of the D.R.'s discriminatory acts and hatred towards Haitians. The girls were not aware of the history of slavery in the D.R., colorism, nor internalized anti-Blackness in the country. They were both surprised and intrigued by this history. Time to ask questions and process their thoughts were built into the art-making process. This included small group work to explore how they wanted to be treated by others and to identify elements of a healthy friendship. While engaging one another, they organically created sketches to symbolize a healthy friendship between Dominicans and

Haitians. Their drawings were combined to create the final design for the mural. The girls came to a consensus to have both flags, of the D.R. and Haiti, represented on the mural. Additionally, they chose to place a tree in the middle of the two countries with the words—equality, compassion, sincerity, love, and understanding—dispersed throughout the tree trunk. The tree and words symbolized the need for growth in the friendship between the countries on both personal and political fronts. I invited them to use found art materials that they discovered in their own communities. Found objects and other accessible materials were utilized to model ways to create art with free to low-cost materials and engage the girls and their community in contributing to the mural with little artistic skills. They were tasked with repurposing materials that had been previously deemed as ugly and disposable to make a piece of art that they considered beautiful. The girls worked collaboratively to gather: more than 300 bottle caps found on the streets of their neighborhoods, fallen branches from the trees at The Center, beads, beans, and scraps of fabric leftover in the art storage closet, and some house paint from past projects. We spent four days crafting, gluing, building, creating—all 200 girls contributed to the mural. The mural was taking longer than anticipated to complete; therefore, I presented the idea of completing the artwork at the border. We came together, both the girls and staff, and discussed the logistics of bringing materials. We also conversed on the significance of both countries working collaboratively. The girls and staff became excited as one of the girls said, “¡eto ta jevi!” (Dominican slang for “this is awesome!”) and another girl mentioned that working together would manifest our solidarity and hope for reconciliation of both nations. We were looking forward to this unique experience.

We travelled for about four hours and arrived to Dajabón, D.R., a city that borders both countries. We set up at a public park and invited children and their families that walked by to help us complete the mural. We explained the purpose of the mural and everyone we approached joined us. The girls from The Center who spoke Creole engaged in conversation with Haitian participants about the mural. Both Dominican and Haitian immigrant children and families gathered to paste bottle caps, beads, and beans onto the mural. Once completed, in solidarity, together we walked the mural to the D.R. and Haiti border in the presence of government officials who opened the border. At the opening of the border, we were met with the Haitian artist selected to represent Haitian voices. He held a painting amongst the presence of other Haitian citizens that came for the event. Haitians and Dominicans were allowed to step over the borderline. We placed the mural and the painting on the bridge side-by-side, where the countries are divided by a river. We hugged and greeted one another, and we viewed and engaged with the art piece as a symbol of healing, renewed solidarity, and transformation. People began to take pictures in front of both works of art. Tears fell from my eyes as I watched the girls smiling and greeting Haitian citizens. I imagined the unity of my people and the shouts of victory from my ancestors. The power of this moment was not only historical but spiritual and transformative.

The girls said their good-byes to the mural and it was left in Dajabón with Dominican and Haitian activists and religious leaders who now use the mural at social justice and solidarity events to mend the relationship between Dominicans and Haitians. After returning to The Center, we discussed the experience, and it was evident that creating the mural not only educated the girls, but shifted how they thought about themselves and their country. They shared how they wished they could have brought the mural back with them to have as a constant reminder of their community's strengths and power. Many of the girls were surprised at how everyone, Dominicans and Haitian immigrants, worked together, “hicimos un mural bien bonito” (we made a very beautiful mural). They expressed how powerful it was that the mural brought Haitian and Dominicans together in unity. At a later time, we did create another mural that represented the strength of their community and as a way to connect with the initial mural. Today the new mural is permanently displayed at The Center.

Creating *Mural de Amistad* was not just a representation of Dominican and Haitian history; it was a symbol of my relationship with the girls and their connection with

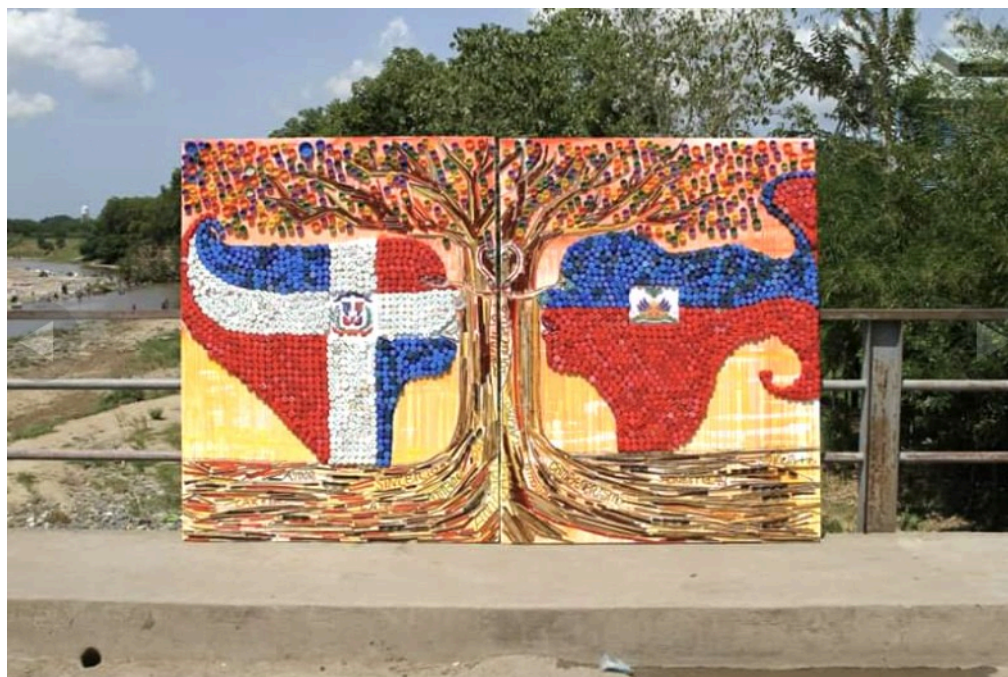


Figure 2

Detail of Mural de Amistad, photography by E. Suero, 2014.

each other. My presence as a Black Dominican-Haitian woman influenced new ideas of self-identity. Both Haitian- and Dominican-identified girls saw themselves in me, allowing them to receive and connect with me. I saw them as experts of their lives as we created a strong bond with one another that consisted of non-judgment, unconditional positive regard, and respect. Although I did not completely eradicate their perceptions of colorism, citizenship, and anti-Blackness during my time with the girls, I supported cultural and perceptual shifts in them. I leveraged the advantages of my citizenship in a useful and meaningful way. I used my education and knowledge-base to share our history with them. Their reverence for me empowered me to increase their awareness of structural oppression while motivating them to listen and redirect any self-defeating thoughts about their identity. I witnessed how these factors in the dynamics of our relationship translated to their relationship with each other.

Throughout the creation of the mural, every time we came together to work on it we contributed something on both the D.R. and Haitian side sending messages of visibility and acceptance. The girls were committed to placing each art material just as they envisioned and were always excited to work on the mural. Their spirit of contribution and dedication seemed to produce feelings of empowerment. One day after working on the piece, one of the girls said with pride, “Mira que lindo. Yo lo hice.” (Look how beautiful. I did it.). As they continued to work together, I noticed them encouraging one another and giving each other design ideas. Their care and love for the mural transcended into the creative space, making it a place of non-judgment and self-expression, and encouraging a sense of belonging. All girls, Dominican- and Haitian-identified, worked together breaking unconscious beliefs about themselves and each other. Within a few weeks after the project, I experienced the girls engaging with each other differently. I was profoundly moved when two of the dark-skinned Dominican-Haitian girls came running to me one morning and said: “nuestro pelo y piel oscura es bella, como la tuya” (Our hair and dark skin are beautiful, like yours). A few days later, one of the light-skinned Dominican girls who typically straightens her hair came to me and shared: “¡Mira, mis rizos!” (Look, my curls!). These sentiments of self-love and pride concerning their identity continued to be embraced throughout the rest of my time at The Center.



Figure 3
Mural de Amistad, photography by E. Suero, 2014.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Upon arriving back in the U.S., I worked in Black and Latinx community mental health agencies as an art therapist. I also continued to have experiences rooted in colorism and encountered conversations about citizenship and anti-Blackness with clients of color. These experiences led me back to my initial question and propelled me to create innovative and more poignant ways to address them with clients of color. My experiences have led me here, sharing a part of my journey so that other therapists of color can navigate colorism and notions of anti-Blackness and citizenship while providing mental health services to communities of color. The following are recommendations for arts therapists of color; they may also support therapists of color outside the expressive therapies.

Arts therapists of color would benefit from having a space to engage in conversation to acknowledge, identify, and discuss areas of colorism and the perpetuation/internalization of anti-Blackness beliefs. Historically, colorism has been impacting communities of color since the time of slavery (Uzogara et al., 2014). Therefore, clinicians of color need healing spaces to address any personal issues of colorism and stereotypes concerning another culture/ethnic group. Specifically, it is essential for arts therapists of color to not only examine oppressive systems of power, but to also assess their own power so as not to reproduce inequities, but to use their power to advance socially just and culturally competent practices. Current organizations and collectives such as the Black Art Therapist Network, the Black Art Therapist Collective, and Black Creative Arts Therapy are safe and brave spaces where these conversations may be held.

As previously mentioned, there is a lack of discourse on colorism and privilege amongst practitioners of color; therefore, the need is even greater. Arts therapists can potentially gather at professional conferences, present on this subject, and host meetings. Likewise, the American Art Therapy Association and other governing bodies of expressive therapies should provide trainings led by Black expressive therapists to address this challenge. In addition, organizations should include a session in their diversity or professional development training for arts therapists to address: How can we, therapists of color, be fully present with clients of color without understanding our relationship with colorism, privilege, and anti-Blackness?

Additionally, arts therapists of color should establish and maintain a personal practice of self-reflection and checking-in with themselves. For example, my *quiet-time* supported me in reclaiming and sustaining my mental and emotional well-being; a time for restoration. As previously mentioned, practitioners of color, like all clinicians, are responsible for managing their thoughts and feelings associated with past experiences of oppression so as not to project upon clients. The projection of these experiences may easily occur as such events happen daily, leading to build-up of thoughts and feelings. A moment of restoration may include recognizing that numbness, breathing for five minutes, or even journaling. Practicing being present with one's inner turmoil can lead to mental and emotional strength and having the ability to be present with clients of color.

Arts therapists of color should utilize a strength-based approach to address the presence of colorism, anti-Blackness, and issues around citizenship. These topics can be challenging to address. Clients may take it personally and feel hurt if accused of perpetuating colorism. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the client's overall strengths, such as psychological and emotional, to help bring about a positive outcome to the conversation. The girls with whom I worked strongly embraced art as their form of self-expression; therefore, art was a great way to address this complex topic. As an art therapist with strong community work skills, I also knew I had the ability to use the creative process to facilitate a conversation on colorism and anti-Blackness. What are the strengths of your community/client of color? How can you creatively use your clinical strengths as a practitioner of color to address colorism, anti-Blackness, and citizenship with clients of color?

Lastly, arts therapists would benefit from developing a framework to address colorism, anti-Blackness, and citizenship in the therapeutic space with clients. Much of the literature regarding theory and practice derive from a White/westernized lens and often does not directly speak to the needs of communities and practitioners of color (Sue & Sue, 2013). A framework would give all therapists of color access to the best practices to address these factors. Also, it would be an opportunity to do more research on the client-therapist relationship of practitioners of color, thus supporting the growth of literature on intraracial therapeutic alliances.

Exploring the therapeutic alliance between art therapists of color and clients of color is an area of study that is often overlooked due to a tendency to center the needs of White mental health practitioners (Sue & Sue, 2013). I have offered my experiences in the D.R. as a Dominican-Haitian art therapist to expand conversations in the mental health field about the experiences of practitioners of color. Additional research and literature about the experiences of practitioners of color working with clients with similar backgrounds is needed to provide support, guidance, and a sense of solidarity with communities of color. As the creative arts therapies continue to navigate how to meet the needs of clinicians of color, therapists of color must continue to speak truthfully and practice authenticity by embracing self, identity, and historical roots. Exploring the issues of complexities of intersectional identity can create possibilities for raising one's political consciousness as a practice of individual and collective healing.

About the author

Johannil Napoleón, LPC, ATR-BC, is an art therapist, artist, educator, and scholar. She is Dominican-Haitian, born in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. Napoleón received her Bachelor's in Art at Berea College and a Master's in Art Therapy at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). Napoleón is a bilingual (Spanish and English) Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) and Board-Certified Art Therapist (ATR-BC). She has years of experience practicing in the United States and abroad at community organizations, hospital settings, residential programs, primary and secondary schools, and universities. In these settings, she created innovative and individualized therapeutic interventions that met the individuals' needs while considering their unique individual and cultural factors. Her passion is serving BIPOC youth and young adults in

under-resourced communities who have been impacted by traumatic experiences, facilitating workshops related to mental health and racial trauma, and creating art that supports Black girls and women empowerment. Napoleón is the founder of the Black Art Therapist Network, an organization that provides support, resources, and mentorship to Black art therapy students and professionals globally. Currently, she resides in the United States teaching at SAIC's Master of Arts in Art Therapy and Counseling Department and pursuing a doctorate in the clinical psychology (Psy.D.) program at Adler University with a concentration in Traumatic Stress Psychology, and Primary Care Psychology and Behavioral Medicine while continuing to use art as a tool for healing and social change.

Notes

1. Due to the public nature of the community mural project, no consents were required for participation. Care was taken not to include identifying information.

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