Two Holy Cross Students Reflect on their Trip to the Dominican Republic

Students in Rosa Carrasquillo's history course explored topics of race and identity first-hand over spring break

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Image by Mariel Aleman '18

During spring break, 25 students traveled to the Dominican Republican with Rosa Carrasquillo, associate professor of history at the College of the Holy Cross, as a part of their course, "Race and Identity." The history course is taught entirely in Spanish and examines the origins and development of racial and national identities in the Caribbean, particularly in the Dominican Republic, from a transnational and historical framework.

While in the Dominican Republic, the students traveled to the border of the Dominican Republic and Haiti and visited Solidaridad Fronteriza (Border Solidarity), a Jesuit organization that works with migrants; they visited a batey, the Haitian migrant communities that developed around sugar plantations; and stayed with local Dominican families in the city of Santiago.

Each student kept a journal while traveling, documenting the powerful experiences they had in the Dominican Republic. Below are two excerpts:

Emily Breakell '16, political science

March 7, the second day

“The batey that we visited was an important, difficult, and new experience. A batey is a community of Haitians or people of Haitian descent that typically do not receive formal recognition from the Dominican state. The majority of people in a batey work in very demanding agricultural jobs and live in poverty without access to healthcare or secondary education. It is challenging to imagine a life without documentation, without opportunities, because a government decided that, for political and racist reasons, you are not a part of legitimate society.

“It was interesting to see the difference between the children’s and adult’s reactions to our visit. The children, that wanted to play and walk with us, were happy and friendly. On the other hand, it seemed that others in the community did not understand why we came. In my opinion, this is a natural reaction, and if a group came to my community to observe, I don’t know what I would think. However, I think that the visit was a gift for us, to see a reality of life in relation to the political, economic, and racial contexts that exist in our world today.”

Mariel Aleman '18, sociology

March 10, the sixth day

“One of my favorite parts about today was our visit to Villa Mella, a municipality in Santo Domingo North, Dominican Republic. I enjoyed listen to the palos, which is Afro-Dominican sacred music played on long drums that can be found through the island. But my favorite part was seeing how the children know the lyrics to the songs and the dance. They were not shy. The way they acted demonstrated how proud they are of their African roots. The people of Villa Mella gave me hope. Hope that our African identity still lives in our culture. They showed me the beauty of our black culture. Although many in the Dominican culture see black as ugly, Villa Mella demonstrated to us that being black is happiness, beauty, love, light, and so much more. Being black is something that we, Dominicans, should be proud of being.

“Another of my favorite parts about this visit was when we all start to dance with the children. It was a fun experience in which I felt like the children had allow us to enter their culture. It was the first time on this trip that it did not matter that we were from the States and that they were from the Dominican Republic. The only thing that mattered was the music, the culture, and the fact that they wanted us to learn and embrace their culture.

“I witnessed how music united people of different countries and culture. I loved seeing how present African roots are in this community and how this African identity would continue given that the new generations accept and embrace this identity.

“To say ‘I am Dominican’ is to say ‘I am African too.’ Thank you Villa Mella for teaching how beautiful your music and culture is. Thank you for teaching me the beauty of being Afro-Dominican.”