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Photo: Jeffrey Wright as Peoples Hernandez in Paramount's *Shaft*. Courtesy of Paramount Pictures.

Black and Brown in Harlem, USA

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African American actor Jeffrey Wright's critically acclaimed portrayal of Peoples Hernandez, a swaggering Dominican street prince with a lush accent and delusions of grandeur, delighted viewers of all races who saw the movie *Shaft*. But the character also provoked outrage in the Latino community, from critics tired of the media's consistent depiction of Hispanics as drug-dealers, sexual predators, or foot-stomping *mamazitas*. The clamor *Shaft* caused has drawn attention to the growing Dominican presence in Harlem, and Dominicans' angry reactions to the movie have underlined the immigrant community's interesting and sometimes strained relationship with local African Americans.

"Anyone with a modicum of intelligence has to know that Hollywood thrives on representations and stereotypes. The Dominican drug-dealer is now an American stereotype," says Carlos Suarez, a New York-born Dominican American who works for a United Nations-affiliated non-governmental organization. "The most angering thing is that the role did not go to a Latino -- they gave it to someone not connected to the culture. A Puerto Rican or Cuban could have played the role and brought reality to it. [Wright] does not speak Spanish, and that was evident. [Wright] can't convey a Dominican character. You can't just put on a costume and be Dominican. If you get someone who doesn't know what he's doing, it's

going to be distorted. And the *Shaft* character was just another piece in the puzzle of distortion."

Asked about the Latino community's complaints, Wright defended his performance in an interview with the *Atlanta Constitution*. "The reason I thought I could play the part is because there are cultural similarities between the Dominican people and me," he said. "The thing about black Americans and Dominicans that is similar is that they are both of the African Diaspora. Dominicans are descendants of a slave history just as I am. So I think that the criticism is a little short-sighted."

According to the New York City Department of Planning, for the past 25 years, Dominicans have been the largest group of immigrants coming into the Big Apple. They currently number around 750,000 (documented and undocumented), settled mostly in Upper Manhattan (in the Washington Heights area) and the Bronx. Dominicans have also settled in West Harlem, a traditionally African American neighborhood, and while interactions between the newcomers and long-term residents are usually cordial, there have been some tensions.

A study published last year in the *Urban Affairs Review* argued that Dominicans, unlike Cubans or Mexicans, display a striking degree of "residential integration" with African Americans and seem to share significant cultural commonalities. Scholars estimate that 90 percent of Dominicans are of African descent; and according to the *Urban Affairs Review* study, because of their "substantial African ancestry, Dominicans living there [in New York] are less segregated from African Americans than whites and have more African Americans than whites residing in their neighborhoods."

While Dominicans may have much in common with African Americans, they have not always been welcomed in the black communities they have entered. Long-time African American residents of Harlem have expressed resentment at the growing "Dominicanization" of their neighborhoods, pointing to the widespread use of Spanish, the boom boxes blaring *merengue* and salsa music on the street, the conversion of *soul* food restaurants like Wilson's – a Harlem institution that specialized in sweet potato pie and other baked goods -- into Dominican eateries serving yellow rice and beans, and the renaming of a stretch of St. Nicholas Avenue, from 173rd to 193rd Street, as Juan Pablo Duarte Boulevard. African American Harlemites also blame Dominican immigrants for West Harlem's reputation as a hub of New York's drug trade.

An article in the *New York Times's* recent "How Race is Lived in America" series spotlighted the troubled relations between law enforcement, African Americans and young Dominican men in West Harlem, particularly the area between 136th and 139th Street known as Hamilton Heights. "On these streets, the African Americans are frequently the older, better-established families who moved here in the 1950s," wrote journalist Michael Winerip in the piece. "Many are middle-class government workers, small-business owners and professionals, and often they are resentful that Spanish is now the primary language spoken in the Broadway shops; that able-bodied Dominican men line the sidewalks all hours of the day; and that the police consider the neighborhood drug trade, controlled by Dominicans, the worst in the city. According to the *Times* report, the citizens' council for the Hamilton Heights area, which meets every month at the 30th precinct police station, is mostly made up of African Americans who often complain about Dominican newcomers, sounding, ironically, a lot like whites who complained of blacks moving into the same neighborhoods in the 1950s. At one recent meeting, an African American lady asked the police to carry

out more loitering sweeps, and to call in the National Guard for reinforcements. "When I go into one of their stores, I try to line up to buy something the American way, but it's all chaos," another woman lamented. "The Dominican customers are milling, they don't know how to go in order." Another local resident, Mrs. Roper, used to own a beauty salon in the neighborhood but said she moved out "when the neighborhood started going down because of the Dominicans."

"We had a nice building until we got a Dominican superintendent and every time an apartment became available, he'd put in some of them, and each one looked like a drug dealer," she said. "They'd play their music so loud, and this one time, a Dominican boy ran into our place, and stole the money for the electric [company] and a gold chain. I tell you, the Dominicans destroy everything."

The bitterness felt by many African Americans is similar to that of the Jews and Italians who lived in Harlem and Upper Manhattan in the early 20th century, until, threatened by black migration from Southern states, they moved to Westchester and New Jersey. "Harlem represents the heart of black America now, but it wasn't always like that -- it was Jewish, German. Washington Heights was populated by Europeans," says Suarez. "That's how immigration happens -- in waves. One reason Dominicans are moving into Harlem is because African Americans are moving up and out of Harlem."

While African Americans and Dominicans sometimes find themselves in competition and conflict in the neighborhoods they share, for a new generation of young people from both communities, the proximity has resulted in friendships, cultural exchange and a shared political outlook. Many American-born or American-raised Dominicans identify strongly with the African American experience, and find friction between the two communities absurd, since both peoples are battling the same forces of poverty and racial oppression.

Dominican writer Junot Diaz is a case in point. Author of the critically acclaimed *Drown*, a collection of stories about childhood in the Dominican Republic and a poor New Jersey barrio, Diaz, who is hailed by the *Village Voice* as "the reigning bard of the little-known Dominican migratory experience," underlines the similarities between Dominican and African American life in the US.

"I read Toni Morrison, who explained the whole US to me in ways that jibed with my personal experiences," notes Diaz. The young author repeatedly emphasizes the rich "creolization" of his upbringing among African Americans and Puerto Ricans, and denounces Latino communities who try to "erase every group we grew up with." In his writing Diaz has interrogated social ills that afflict both the African American and the Dominican communities -- such as sexual irresponsibility and the mistreatment of women. "With men of African descent, it's a real issue," he told an audience in London. "In the States, we're considered much more sexual and the women think there's nobody worse than Caribbean and black men. The fact that I can name the men who haven't cheated is terrifying."

The cultural exchange between Dominican and African American youth is also evident in rap music by Harlem artists such as Cam'ron, who sprinkles Spanish verses in his rhymes, and in the way in which hip hop influences have crept into salsa music.

Most Dominicans in "Quisqueya" -- as natives fondly refer to the Dominican

Republic -- dream of migrating to "Nueva York;" one Dominican folk saying states, "he who dies without seeing New York dies blind." A 1997 Gallup-Hay poll found that more than half of adult Dominicans would emigrate if they had the chance. And compared to their impoverished homeland, opportunities do exist for Dominicans in New York -- a medical doctor in the Dominican Republic can quadruple his salary working as a livery cab driver in Harlem -- and Dominicans in the US send home an estimated \$1.5 billion every year. Yet for most Dominicans in New York, lack of job skills, inadequate education, and the language barrier make life a daily struggle and the American dream a remote illusion. Dominicans will no doubt continue to pour into New York, and to occupy apartments in Harlem recently vacated by departing African Americans. And with both communities facing the same day to day struggles for survival, neither can afford to waste much time complaining about each other.

"There is economic tension," Suarez says. "There are snobbish Dominicans. Dominicans own a lot of businesses, and often don't want to hire non-Dominicans. But most Dominicans are too busy making a living to be distracted by this so-called conflict."

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