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December 14, 2016

Dear Senator Jefferson Beauregard Sessions,

As a fellow elected official, you are positioned to understand the gratitude and respect I hold for the voting public that entrusted me with the honor of serving as their Councilman. Similarly, you likely hold a high esteem for the gracious people of Alabama and the generosity and faith they have in you, their decades-long U.S. Senator. This letter is forged from the deeply felt sentiment that we share a mutual admiration for the American public that has chosen us, time and time again, as their voice in the noisy business of American politics. Speaking from this common veneration for the American body politic, in what follows below I will share with you some of the historical contributions to U.S. society made by one of the peoples I have the honor to represent.

The fabric of social life in the U.S. draws on the traditions and customs of people from across the globe, each offering a unique contribution to the vibrant cultural pluralism of American society. Yet, the contributions of some groups have remained excluded from mainstream cultural narratives. In many cases, when these histories are told, they are perceived as isolated, and irrespective of how long the group has been living in the U.S. Their histories are often considered separate from larger developments in American society, as though the American mosaic is devoid of distinct flavors or exists without a multiplicity of peoples and historical traits. And of course, we know that no modern great society was built on one day nor by a single pair of hands.

People of Dominican descent have a long tradition of contributing to this great society of ours. Unfortunately, as with many others, their contributions have often been overlooked, left out of the historical narratives. A Dominican man, Jose Gabriel Luperon, was among those who fought for the Union. He had earned the rank of captain in the U.S. army during one of the most decisive struggles of our nation, the Civil War. Additionally, many Dominicans were decorated service members who defended the United States during World War II. Among them was Miguel A. Escalera—the highest decorated soldier in his Company earning the silver star for gallantry in action, two combat bronze stars for heroism, the combat expert infantry badge two Presidential Unit citations for his courageous actions in WWII— who recently passed in July at the age of 95 with his children by his bedside, some of whom have followed in what has become a family

tradition, pursuing careers in the U.S. Military. This long tradition of Dominicans serving the United States continues today in the 21st century. By 2008, for instance, we have documented the presence of over 1,300 people of Dominican descent who were serving in the U.S. Army, thus making the ultimate sacrifice by putting their lives on the line to protect our people, our values, and our way of life.

In the political sphere, in the tradition of old European migrants who may have preceded Dominicans in their journey here, Dominicans have been increasingly participating in the political life of our country and in the local communities where they live. So far, Dominicans have held positions at almost every level in American politics, from city council members, mayors, state legislators, federal cabinet-level officials, judges, to ambassadors in foreign countries. Similarly, they have served their communities for decades either as grass root leaders or as elected officials. They began at first by organizing to improve schooling in their communities in the 1980s, especially in New York City's Northern Manhattan district, where they became the largest immigrant group. Dominicans also displayed their civic spirit and their sense of responsibility by founding and leading many community-based organizations to provide vital, needed services to benefit fellow residents. It was, after all, schools and neighborhoods that educated and housed children of Dominican descent, whom today make up close to 40% of the Dominican people.

Since then, Dominicans have increasingly served as elected officials, especially in New York City and New York State. In 1991, Guillermo Linares became the first Dominican elected to public office in New York City, when he was elected City Council member of District 10 in Northern Manhattan. He and Kay Palacios, who was elected to the Englewood Cliffs, NJ City Council, became the first Dominicans elected to office in the United States and paved the path for others to follow.

In the years since, many people of Dominican descent have joined them in setting milestones by increasing the political presence of Dominicans in the United States. Adriano Espaillat became the first Dominican state legislator in the U.S. in 1996 when he was elected to the New York State Assembly. In this past election, Espaillat rose to the highest legislative office when he was elected as the first Dominican Congressperson. Now, he will soon be joining you as colleague to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Grace Diaz broke barriers when she was appointed as Rhode Island State Representative thus, becoming the first Dominican woman to ascend to the post of state legislator. The trailblazers were followed by Juan Pichardo who became the first Dominican state senator in the U.S. in Rhode Island, William Lantigua, the first mayor of Dominican descent in America in Lawrence, MA, and Angel Taveras who in 2011 became the mayor of Providence, Rhode Island, one of the major cities of the Northeast.

Dominicans' ascent to federal office is also exemplified by Thomas Perez, appointed by President Obama as the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights and then, as the 26th U.S. Secretary of Labor. Lastly, one must not forget Julissa Reynoso, who grew up in the South Bronx, graduated from Harvard University and Columbia University Law School, and went on to become Deputy Assistant Secretary for Central America and the Caribbean in the State

Department, and was later appointed as the U.S. Ambassador to Uruguay, becoming the youngest Ambassador in the history of the U.S.

The political contribution of Dominicans in the United States began with these individuals, but it has not ended with them. On November 8, 2016, 15 Dominicans were elected to city councils, state legislatures, and school boards in New Jersey, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and New York among other states. Dominican women are at the forefront of those elected to office. There is no doubt that these Dominicans represent multitudes of Americans from all walks of life and proudly serve to enhance their lives.

People of Dominican descent have also made noteworthy contributions towards the welfare of the economy. Dominicans started migrating to the United States in earnest following the 1960s, even though many Dominicans had also emigrated to the United States much earlier, perhaps with your ancestors, through the famous port of Ellis Island. In the few decades following the 1960s, Dominicans—many of whom arrived as bonafide members of the working class, possessing little formal schooling and no coffers, they indeed resembled the many millions of European immigrants who entered through Ellis Island just a few decades ago. But the story does not end there. On the contrary. That is the beginning. Dominicans did what good immigrants do: they rose up with their sweat and labor and they enlarged our country's economy, and the schooling they lacked became the priority for their children. Their descendants have succeeded and achieved the American dream through their hard work, stamina, and determination, like many other immigrant groups.

In the few decades since the largest wave of Dominicans began to arrive, the community has become one of the most entrepreneurial groups in New York City and the United States at large. Their success has caught the eye of many observers, including esteemed social scientist Roberto Suro, who writes that by the 1990s, Dominicans, had risen from modest origins owning more than 20,000 small businesses in New York City alone that included over 70% of the city's *bodegas* (small neighborhood grocery stores). Dominicans had become so successful by then that Suro even called the Washington Heights community of New York City, where many Dominicans are concentrated, "a textbook example of how a successful enclave economy is built." From owning small corner stores, Dominicans continued to grow by getting into the supermarket business. The National Supermarket Association (NSA) today, comprising of several chains of supermarkets such as C-Town, Compare, Pioneer, Bravo, Associated and Met Food, etc. By the early 1990s, Dominicans were responsible for sales of over 1 billion dollars in the food retail industry. In merely two decades, Dominican entrepreneurs have quadrupled their contribution to our country's economy by reaching sales of nearly 4 billion dollars, attesting to this the president of the NSA, William Rodriguez, affirmed in 2011 that 400 supermarkets were owned by Dominicans in the five states where Dominicans are most concentrated. Dominicans have come a long way, from owning tiny corner stores to becoming the owners of large scale companies that create jobs whose salaries have a multiplying effect on the economy of the city and the larger society.

Dominican entrepreneurs have since expanded into the transportation and cosmetic industries too, often becoming the dominant ethnic group in said industries. In fact, by 2015, 8%

of Dominicans were small business owners or self-employed, again demonstrating the upward trajectory of the Dominican community in the U.S.

The economic contributions of Dominicans are not only limited to their entrepreneurial skills. The next generation of Dominicans, the U.S.-born children of Dominican immigrants, has far surpassed the educational attainment levels of their parents and that of many other ethnic groups. Even though many of their immigrant parents came to the United States as immigrants with few financial resources and little formal education, 30% of U.S. born Dominicans have now attained college degrees, reflecting the considerable strides Dominicans have made, from modest immigrant origins, to holding college degrees at the same rate as the average American. This rising new generation of Dominicans is now poised to enter the commanding heights of the New York and U.S. economies as professionals.

In short, Dominican immigrants may have come to this country with very little at hand but currently have a stronghold in the American economy. They represent the best in the ideal of the American dream, and they prove that immigrants are the bedrock of American society, working hard to make sure their children can realize the opportunities afforded by our country, while contributing to a better, more prosperous life for their fellow Americans.

In addition, Dominicans have made extensive contributions to the humanities, by adding to wealth of cultural products made in the United States. In the musical field, for instance, Dominican musicians have journeyed to New York City since the 1920s to make their mark in the music industry. And so they did. Throughout the 20th century, Dominicans crafted a personalized imprint within major musical movements from the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, to the Mambo Craze of the 1950s, and the rise of Salsa in the 1960s and 70s. Historically, these musical developments have been interpreted as exclusively influenced by the African-American and Puerto Rican populations of the city. Nonetheless, Dominican contributions were equally invaluable.

In the realm of classical music, Dominicans contributions date even further back. They include baritone Eduardo Brito; Maestro Rafael Petitón Guzmán, the composer and pianist who introduced merengue to American audiences at the 1939's World's Fair and then spent over two decades playing in the most popular nightclubs in New York City, such as Radio City Music Hall, the Stork Club, Copacabana, and the Cuban Casino; bandleader Angel Viloría, the first artist to enjoy major success popularizing merengue típico in the United States; and singer Dioris Valledares, who sang with Viloría, voluntarily enlisted to fight on the U.S. front in WWII, was then honorably discharged, and whose remains today rest in Calverton National Cemetery.

Since the 1980's, merengue has overtaken salsa in popularity. Dominican artists such as Juan Luis Guerra, Fernandito Villalona, Luis Vargas, and Milly Quezada have sold millions of records here in the United States and around the world. Bachata, a once marginalized music in the Dominican Republic, has also taken the forefront on the global stage. Today, there are bachata artists, such as Romeo Santos, that sell out Yankee Stadium and Madison Square Garden and produce records featuring major, mainstream pop, rock, and hip-hop artists such as Marc Anthony, Carlos Santana, Drake, Usher, and Nicki Minaj. These Dominican musicians have forever altered the musical landscape of this country, their numerous success stories attest to the rich cultural influence Dominicans have within the United States' culture.

In other art fields such as literature, the Dominican people have historically held a strong presence in the U.S. literary world. Dating back to the early 20th century, the higher echelons of Dominican society were contributors and owners of *Las Novedades*, a weekly Spanish language periodical published in New York. Over a century old and still hitting the presses, *Las Novedades* has often served as the soapbox for intellectual voices from Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean in the United States.

In journalism, Dominicans like Pedro Henríquez Ureña forged a legacy of humanist discourse. Pedro Henríquez Ureña was the son of celebrated poet, prominent feminist, and educational vanguard of the Dominican Republic Solomé Ureña and President of the Dominican Republic in 1916, Francisco Henríquez y Carvajal. While working as a journalist in Washington and New York in 1915 and 1916, Pedro Henríquez Ureña gained a faculty appointment at the University of Minnesota, where he taught until 1921. His acclaimed essay "The Utopia of America" has gone down in history as pivotal for students of Latin Americanism. The essay is built on the premise that the ideals of sustained cooperation, faith, justice, and hope are rooted in the creation of this utopia, where everyone's work guarantees a prosperous future for our America.

Dominican contributions to the genre of verse include the lyrical Rhina P. Espailat, a bilingual American poet, translator, and publisher of eleven collections of poetry. At sixteen, Rhina P. Espailat became the youngest member to ever be inducted into the Poetry Society of America. Since then, the Poetry Society of America honored her twice, in 1986 and 1989, with its Gustav Davidson Memorial Award. She later went on to receive the Robert Fitzgerald Prosody Award and the T.S. Eliot Prize (1998), to name a few, for her *Where Horizons Go* (1998) and *Rehearsing Absence* (2001) are two of her most acclaimed collections. In addition to her personal contributions, Rhina Espailat is well known for translating the poetry of Robert Frost and Richard Wilbur into Spanish, making these prominent American poets newly accessible to the Spanish speaking world.

The 1990s was the decade for emerging Dominican novelists in the United States. In 1991, literary pioneer Julia Alvarez treaded uncharted lands with her debut novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), making her the first American of Dominican descent to be published in a major U.S. press, Algonquin Books. The novel garnered her significant commercial success, it won the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award and it was featured in the New York Public Library's 1991 exhibit "The Hand of the Poet: Original Manuscripts by 100 Masters, From John Donne to Julia Alvarez." She went on to publish 4 other novels, 3 works of nonfiction, nearly a dozen children's and young adult books, and 3 collections of poetry from which she earned several honors including the Lamont Prize from the Academy of American Poets (1974), the Belpre Medal (2004), and the Hispanic Heritage Award in Literature (2002). Alvarez's achievements opened the floodgates for later Dominican writers who readily followed suit.

In the 21st century, people of Dominican descent continue to excel as novelists in the United States. For instance, Dominican immigrant Loida Maritza Pérez's first novel *Geographies of Home* (2000) was printed by the esteemed publishing house Viking books.

Another New York-based novelist, American of Dominican descent, M.I.T. and Columbia University graduate, Nelly Rosario published her first book *Song of the Water Saints* in 2002. The novel, which follows three generations of women from the early 1900s in Dominican Republic to 1990s New York City, won Nelly Rosario the PEN Open Book Award (2002). Fellow native New Yorker and Dominican, Angie Cruz is a notable author for her two novels *Soledad* (2001) and *Let it Rain Coffee* (2005) which was a finalist in 2007 for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Now an Assistant Professor at University of Pittsburg, Angie Cruz has published short fiction and essays in *The New York Times* and taught creative writing in several academic and nontraditional settings such as NYU, Texas A&M University, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

All of these literary craftsmen and women paved the way for Junot Díaz's ascendance in 2008, when he received the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction and the National Book Critics Award for his eminent novel *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). Born in the Dominican Republic and raised in New Jersey, Junot Díaz is also author of *Drown* (1996) and *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012) a New York Times bestseller and National Book Award finalist. Translations of Junot Díaz's novels flood international bookshelves all over the world in their respective Swedish, German, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, Catalan, Hungarian, and Japanese renditions.

In the United States, Dominican authors have crafted a distinguished history in the realm of letters. Dominican journalists, novelists, and poets have established themselves as trailblazing educators, intellectual leaders, and multifaceted and accredited authors. Their centuries-old contributions date back beyond these examples and exceed the few names in these pages. The accomplishments of Dominican American authorship are a testament to the virtues of cultural exchange and the founding ideals of the United States.

Dominicans in the United States have been far from passive residents but rather engaged citizens, who have enriched American political, civic, economic, and cultural life as voters, activists, elected officials, businessmen and women, artists and creators. Their contributions extend beyond politics, the economy, and the arts to education and the creation of institutions, such as the internationally renowned and widely acclaimed Dominican Studies Institute (CUNY)—the nation's first university-based research institute devoted to the study of people of Dominican descent in the United States—that are vital to the structure of this great society.

The long and complex history of Dominicans in the United States must not be forgotten. Through the efforts of educators and scholars, these stories are remembered and the Dominican cultural legacy still endures. As a New York City Councilman, I proudly carry the responsibility I have to the Dominican people in my district. On a grander scale, as American elected officials, I believe we have the duty to uphold the entire, diverse legacy of the United States by recognizing the contributions of all our people, especially those immigrant groups who have excelled in our society. Speaking for the Dominican community in New York City who has chosen me as their political voice, we hope to count on you to help continue the ongoing flourishing of the American dream.

Sincerely,



Ydanis Rodriguez
NYC Council Member, District 10