

CHAPTER FOUR

THE COLOR OF CITIZENSHIP IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: CHRONICLING BLACKNESS IN EDUCATION POLICY AND REFORM

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This paper will discuss how the Dominican Republic's understanding of blackness and of the socio-political status of its African-descended citizenry can be analyzed through the country's past education policies and recent reforms. Certainly, this is a tremendous task. To better manage such an undertaking I suggest that three specific underlying issues be articulated so that they can be used as a lens, of sorts, to more clearly view the intersection of education and blackness in the Dominican Republic.

First, the issue of ethnic and racial discrimination, either real or imagined, is not a uniquely Dominican societal concern. Within Latin America as a region, evidence of Euro-centric standards of beauty, culture, and, of course, educational standards, is found. The expressions *mejorando la raza* [bettering the race] and *buena apariencia* [good appearance] are commonly understood phrases used throughout Latin America that convey a disdain for, if not an aversion to, blackness.

Second, the Dominican Republic's relationship with its western, island-sharing neighbor Haiti greatly shapes the Dominican Republic's perception of race and ethnicity, especially within its own borders. Fundamentally, Dominicans imagine themselves as white, Hispanic Catholics and Haitians as black, African practitioners of Voodoo. It is hardly by accident that the Dominican Republic celebrates its independence day on February 27th, a date to recognize victory over Haitian forces rather than the end of Spain's colonial rule.¹ Further evidence of anti-Haitianism can be traced to the 1937 massacre of more than 10,000 Haitians living in the Dominican Republic near the Haitian border. This horrific episode was the result of a bloody mandate carried out by Dominican military intended to purge the country of black Haitian cultural influence and physical appearance.²

And third, education has a long history of being used as a tool for setting and re-setting the country's definition of self, especially with regard to national identity and citizenship. Previously, this manifested itself in the form of dictator Rafael Trujillo's Eurocentric influence on ethnic and racial perception. More recently, education's role in teaching the parameters of *dominicanidad* can be seen in the national re-vamping of lessons aimed to teach students the essence of, and the color of, citizenship in the Dominican Republic.

Now with these issues brought to the fore in order to frame the discussion, I will explore how the Dominican Republic's perception of blackness serves to reinforce the ideas that (1) to be a Dominican citizen one typically needs to disavow the term black as a phenotypic description of self and other Dominicans, and (2) access to and representation within the education system is strongly linked to one's citizenship and perceived ethnic and racial status.

Part 1: Is a color still a color if no one admits to seeing it?

While in power from 1930 to 1961, dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina and influential statesman Joaquín Balaguer used the nation's education system as a mechanism for re-tooling the language of, and the attitudes about, race and ethnicity in the Dominican Republic. During Trujillo's reign, Dominican students were taught that the dark complexion of more than 90% of the nation was a color named *indio*, and that they themselves were *indios*—descendants of the long extinct Taíno Indians.³ Mandatory school curriculum taught that skin color that could be perceived as *negro* belonged solely to the Dominican Republic's Haitian foes to the west. In effect, blackness had been banned in the Dominican Republic, primarily due to pervasive anti-Haitian sentiment.

The implications of this forced linguistic distancing from blackness are profound. The Dominican population finds itself struggling to define itself in terms of what it is *not* just as much as what it is, or alternately what it strives to perceive it is not. A person is a Dominican *indio* because he or she is not a Haitian black. To practically consider the implications of this polemic racial paradigm, let's imagine what would happen if a Dominican actually wanted to officially declare *negro* as his skin color. Writer and educator Blas Jiménez discovered the answer to this question when he recently renewed his national identification card, known as a *cédula*, in the capital city of Santo Domingo. The government official strongly discouraged Jiménez from listing *negro* as his skin color because, as he was told, his skin was "not nearly as dark as those Haitians. They are black. We are not." All in all, Jiménez was begrudgingly allowed to maintain the word *negro* on his *cédula*, a term that he had so strongly fought for and won when he renewed the card in years prior.⁴

What does this linguistic distancing mean for education policy? It means that school curriculum must formally teach the acceptable, preferred, nationally understood term *indio* and explicitly connect the term *indio* to Dominican identity and citizenship. Again, Dominicans are *indios*, as to not be associated with their Haitian neighbors who are *negros*, despite any obvious variation in skin color in both countries.

Ernesto Sagás in his book *Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic* (2000) describes the impact of the textbook *Historia gráfica de la República Dominicana*, last published in 1986:

The text is accompanied by detailed drawings in which Haitians are portrayed with crude and apelike features, while Dominicans are always drawn light-skinned and with European features. As a result of this manipulation and distortion of Dominican history in school, Dominican children acquire these attitudes and beliefs early in life and make them their own. They will grow up first, despising and discriminating against Haitians for their past atrocities; second, perceiving themselves as light-skinned Hispanics vis-à-vis the Haitian black; and third, rejecting blackness as alien and barbaric. Early in life, a cultural wedge is driven into the minds of Dominican children by which they learn to distinguish between “us” and the alien “others” (that is, Haitians).⁵

The influential role of the public school system and its textbooks proves to be a double-edged sword. Young Dominican children are being educated about their country’s relationship to Haiti, but they are not being educated in a critical manner that could foster a more meaningful understanding of each country’s legacy of slavery and violence.

Part 2: Everything I needed to know about blackness I learned in school

As mentioned earlier, linguistic distancing from blackness has profoundly and negatively impacted the African-descended population’s struggle for just and accurate representation. This struggle is not only evident within the restrictive boundaries of the Dominican Republic’s color coded system of citizenship, but also in the realm of public education. To address many of the systemic failings and injustices in Dominican education, in the mid-1990’s the Secretary of the State of Education crafted a ten-year plan for reform known as El Plan Decenal de Educación en Acción. One component of this ambitious plan was to re-teach issues of race and ethnicity in the Dominican Republic, primarily in early grade social sciences. For example, in a textbook lesson teaching Dominican identity to second grade students, the illustrations used do, in fact, include blackness as a part of Dominican identity. However, the

representations of blackness as shown in the figures labeled *negro* and *negra* are so stereotypically caricaturish that they cannot be reasonably understood as black.

I underscore the connection between what is taught in the schools and the popular understandings of ethnicity and race in the article “Character or caricature: representations of blackness in Dominican social science textbooks”:

Textbooks are used as a form of ethnic propaganda in the social science curriculum of the Dominican Republic. Three major themes emerge from the textbooks’ illustrated representations of blackness as they perpetuate the commonly held anti-black racial and cultural ethos of the Dominican Republic: (1) Blackness represents less desirable social status. (2) Blackness can be prevented through generational ‘blancamiento’ (‘whitening’). (3) Blackness is represented by negative and exaggerated stereotypes.⁶

So where does this bring the discussion of teaching citizenship and national identity in the Dominican Republic? While it is true that there is a federally-funded program that strives to concretely portray African ancestry as a component of Dominican identity, the issue of how blackness is taught becomes at least as important as whether blackness is taught. This seems to be an example of a good idea that has fallen victim to poor execution.

Part 3: The Washington Heights Effect

In the case of the Dominican Republic, one has to wonder if it is at all possible for the nation to include an accurate representation of African heritage in its malleable definitions of self and citizenship, especially in the definitions used in education policy and reform. Even the most recent education reforms have come under harsh fire from within the Dominican Republic. Franklin Franco Pichardo casts a critical eye, as well as disparaging comments, toward his country’s latest measures. In his book *Sobre racismo y antihaitianismo (y otros ensayos)* (2003), he includes a chapter titled “El problema racial dominicano en los textos escolares” [The Dominican racial problem in school books]. In it, he asserts that the textbook adoption process in the country is not guided by expert selection of appropriate material, but rather is guided by nepotism and a profound desire to gain financial favor with Spanish publishing houses.

Does this mean that the Dominican Republic simply cannot include an element of black identity in its popular self definition? Or maybe that the Dominican Republic does not know how to accommodate that element given its centuries old battle to prevent black Haitian influence? While there is no doubt

that the Dominican Republic has struggled with, if not altogether denied, its legacy of slavery and anti-Haitian sentiment, there still remains a means by which the nation can, and has already begun to include blackness in its understanding of Dominican citizenship and education policy and reform accurately, fairly and without stereotype.

As many Dominicans leave the country and live outside the well guarded complexion boundaries of what they call *indio*, which is not to be confused with black, they have come to create a population of Dominicans who, upon return to the Dominican Republic, brings a new definition of self and blackness. Often this new experience is the result of time spent living in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan in New York City. Many of these Dominican immigrants quickly discover that they are, in the eyes of much of the world, including in Washington Heights, black. They are living the experience of blackness, acknowledged or not. It is this new demographic of "Dominican Yorks" that is adding a facet to the national identity of the Dominican Republic. This new population increasingly self-identifies as being of African descent. Members of the "Dominican York" population are driving many of the grassroots efforts to correct stereotypes of blackness as they are graphically portrayed in the public schools and subtly but effectively perpetuated in everyday life in their native country. These efforts have reverberated in the United States and in the Dominican Republic; however, at times the response has not been entirely favorable. The word *cadenuces* has emerged as a pejorative reference to this binational community. The term is derived from the Spanish word *cadena* [chain] but its negative connotation is based upon the stereotypical image of poor, black urban youth who reflect a distinctly Hip-Hop aesthetic. Although this term is used by those who assert an essentialist nature about the character of the Dominican Republic, the United States and blackness, those who are of a different opinion recognize the ethnic, racial and linguistic tension that the term reflects. New York resident Diógenes Abréu makes a moving proclamation in his book *Perejil: El Ocaso de la "Hispanidad" Dominicana*. "Soy dominicano y no aceptaré ser excluido de la nacionalidad y los espacios socioculturales que me pertenecen y ocupo. Cualquier intento de exclusión lo confrontaré exhibiendo con orgullo y firmeza mi versión de dominicanidad diferenciada del antihaitianismo." [I am Dominican and I will not accept being excluded from nationality and the socio-cultural spaces that I occupy and that belong to me. I will confront any attempt at exclusion by exhibiting, with pride and determination, my version of Dominicanness differentiated from anti-Haitianism.]⁷

Abréu's firm statement to boldly confront and to deny anti-Haitianism, meaning a rejection of blackness, both as a skin color and a negatively marked ethnic and cultural association, is exactly the new direction of identity

development which may lead to a more just and ethnically accurate portrayal of blackness in Dominican education policy and reform, and in turn, in Dominican national culture.

Part 4: Social justice is the final frontier

As has been explored in this paper, any discussion of Dominican citizenship is inherently linked to a discussion of color and ethnic identity. However, what is yet to be outlined is the possibility of effectively re-imagining this commonly held color-citizenship-education dynamic. I propose that if Dominican educational reform were explicitly linked to fostering social justice with regard to educational access, then tremendous strides could be made in the way of dismantling the myriad manifestations of ethnic bias. A United States Department of State Report issued in 2002 very clearly explains the complicated nexus of color and educational access. The report states:

The Government refuses to recognize and document as Dominican citizens many individuals of Haitian ancestry born in the country. The Government regards undocumented Haitians living in the country as "in transit" and therefore not entitled to the constitutional right of citizenship through birth in the Dominican Republic. Since many Haitian parents have never possessed documentation for their own birth, they are unable to demonstrate their own citizenship. As a result, they cannot declare their children's births at the civil registry and thereby establish Dominican citizenship for their offspring. Some civil registry offices do not accept late declarations of birth for children of Haitian immigrants, although they routinely accept late declarations for children of Dominican parents.⁸

This passage from the report articulates the tremendous task of providing a sound education to everyone who is entitled to one. Here, the issue of perceived citizenship versus documented citizenship comes into play, as well as how anti-black bias acts as a roadblock to educational access, an issue primarily affecting children born within the Dominican border and of Haitian parents. We have a scenario described where a "real" Dominican in an official government position perceives citizenship based primarily on skin color, and in that moment expresses the exact focus of this paper. For perspective on the ambivalent nature of this topic, one should consider on the one hand that the Dominican Republic readily allows Haitian immigrants into the country in order to almost exclusively maintain the sugar industry. On the other hand now deceased Dominican politician and presidential hopeful José Francisco Peña Gómez was accused of "being Haitian" by his election rival Joaquín Balaguer. If one is perceived to be "too dark," then he or she may be denied citizenship, an education and the opportunity to assert his or her rightful place in the country's

public school classrooms and ethnic heritage, thus depriving the person of a voice with which to question the prevailing definition of Dominican identity.

Notes

¹ I previously made this observation in: "Hispanidad as Ethnic Myth and the Anti-Haitian Nation: An Ethno-Symbolic Approach to Understanding Dominican Identity," *PALARA: Publication of the Afro/Latin American Research Association*, no. 10 (2006): 51-60.

² This episode is fictionalized in the novel *The Farming of Bones* by Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat.

³ The 1882 book *Enriquillo* by Manuel De Jesús Galván was an important point of reference for the Trujillo regime as it adopted the term *indio* in the national color lexicon.

⁴ Information was taken from an informal interview with Blas Jiménez that I conducted in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic in 2000.

⁵ Ernesto Sagás, *Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000), 75-76.

⁶ Sheridan Wigginton, "Character of Caricature: Representations of Blackness in Dominican Social Science Textbooks," *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 8, no. 2 (2005): 191-211.

⁷ Diógenes Abréu, *Perejil: El Ocaso de la "Hispanidad" Dominicana* (Santo Domingo: Author, 2004), 200.

⁸ U.S. Department of State. *Human Rights and Labor: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, 2001 (Washington, DC: GPO, 2002)

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