

Modern *dominicanidad*: nation-building and politics of exclusion in Santo Domingo since the 1880s

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A tale of two cities: Santo Domingo and New York after 1950.

By Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008, 352 pp)

Nation and citizen in the Dominican Republic, 1880–1916.

By Teresita Martínez-Vergne (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005, 256 pp)

Between 1930 and 1961, the dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo took firm control of nation-building in the Dominican Republic. During this period he mobilized state historians, government departments, and the media to distance *dominicanidad* [Dominicanness] from Africa and orient it towards Europe. Trujillo's regime defined the national color as *indio* [Indian] and disseminated a racist discourse of *antihaitianismo* [anti-Haitianism] to posit the nation as civilized and modern in opposition to Haiti's poverty and primitivism. Santo Domingo, renamed Ciudad Trujillo, was the primary site for the objectification of national identity. Under Trujillo's authority, inner-city slums were cleared to make way for wide, Paris-style avenues and model suburbs. Trujillo built bridges to expand the city and monuments to concretize the importance of past heroic events to the nation (Derby 1998). Migration from rural areas to the city was restricted, and public spaces reserved for the light-skinned elite. This was Trujillo's modernity: a Dominican nation unified under a unique racial classification and with the promise of future *progreso* [progress].

More than any political power before him, Trujillo forged a unified nation in the Dominican Republic, but he did so via a politics of exclusion. The *indio* identity encompassed a broad range of skin color, but political rights and social status were

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by no means equally distributed. This politics of exclusion was divisive among the poor as well as between social classes, as *antihaitianismo* formed a barrier to social solidarity such as that seen in black power movements in the Caribbean and North America. Trujillo's politics of exclusion continues today in the form of *antihaitianismo* and spatial segregation. Regular state deportations of Haitians garner popular support, despite the fact that many deportees were born in the Dominican Republic and have the constitutional right to citizenship (Gregory 2007). Many scholars suggest that the state bears the burden of responsibility for the persistence of racism and denial of African roots (see Torres-Saillant 2000; Sagás 2000). Dark-skinned Dominicans experience discrimination in the workforce, especially residents of Santo Domingo's stigmatized barrios, whose impoverished material environment is interpreted by outsiders as a collective moral failure (Taylor 2009b). It appears, then, that Trujillo's politics of exclusion continues to define *dominicanidad* today. Far from being generated spontaneously among the population, the political and intellectual elite entrenched their version of national culture via formal and informal social institutions.

However, two recent books suggest that *dominicanidad* is determined more by grassroots practice than these appraisals suggest. Writing respectively about the periods before and after Trujillo's rule, the historians Teresita Martínez-Vergne (2005) and Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof (2008) argue that the poor majority in Santo Domingo have resisted attempts by the elite to shape them, forming their own, more inclusive brand of citizenship that the elite failed to overrule. Martínez-Vergne describes how, in the period between 1880 and 1916, elite projects of nation building were resisted and co-opted by the *clases populares* [popular classes; poor majority]. By the time Trujillo came to power in 1930, *dominicanidad* bore the mark of popular culture as much as elite desires for a European cultural orientation. Writing on migration between Santo Domingo and New York since 1950, Hoffnung-Garskof argues that although elite racism endures, poor urban populations have redefined *dominicanidad* to make a claim on *progreso*, how circumstances should improve over time, and *cultura* [culture], 'a way of thinking about belonging' (p. 11). If these authors are correct, the *clases populares* have indeed occupied a central place in nation building before and after the Trujillo era.

This view of Dominicans as ungovernable fits with elite interpretations of the Dominican character at the end of the nineteenth century, and also with contemporary popular beliefs in the nature of the Dominican character. In my fieldwork in Santo Domingo, I found that many Dominicans believed that Dominicans are so resistant to authority that state violence is necessary to achieve social order. Indeed, it is not at all uncommon for people to reminisce nostalgically about Joaquin Balaguer's *mano dura* [strong hand] during his rule (1966–1978 and 1984–1994), and even that of Trujillo, for the order and security they imposed. Frequent police murders of young, male *delincuentes* [delinquents] and deportations of purportedly illegal Haitians are widely tolerated.

This paints an intriguing picture of a people who are unlikely to adopt a top-down national culture, yet who readily recognise the need for social order and are willing to authorise the state as the agent to enforce it, whether through unconscious consent to hegemony or through explicit violence. What, then, is the primary source of

dominicanidad, and why does racism prevail within it? Does the state's version predominate, and the popular one merely modifies it? Or do we need to reconsider the assumption that a popular national culture is more inclusive than a state-derived one?

To answer these questions it is necessary to identify the roots of dominicanidad, the changes it has undergone, and aspects that have remained constant. In the period described by Martínez-Vergne (1818–1916) the Dominican urban elite, comprising intellectuals, politicians, and a burgeoning middle-class (Bosch 1992) were struggling to consolidate their power over the recently independent nation. 1865 marked the Dominican Republic's second attempt at independence, having briefly returned themselves to Spain's rule in 1861 after their initial independence from Haiti in 1844. Martínez-Vergne argues that the political and intellectual elite shaped nationalism around notions of democracy and progress. Their vision called for the implementation of 'modern agricultural techniques, secular education, and political participation as the cornerstones of the new nation' (p. 1). This idea of progress was based upon European liberalism and would ideally be inclusive of all Dominican citizens. However, "men of letters and men of state did not trust the capacity of the subalterns to make educated judgments about their own, let alone the country's, future' (p. 50). They considered that Dominican men were prone to womanising, gambling and drinking, while women's respectability depended upon their abstinence from public life. Rural populations in particular were a cause of concern. *Caudillo* leaders, not a central government, commanded political control over regional centers (see Wolf 1967), and rural lifestyles did not fulfill their standards of respectability. Before the nation could be made inclusive, rural Dominicans would have to be educated and regulated.

The large urban centers were fixed as the sites in which modern citizenship would be carved out. Martínez-Vergne writes how Santo Domingo and San Pedro de Macoris were sites of industrialization and an emerging bourgeois class, and they were easier to police than rural areas. However, the urban working class presented a significant obstacle to the maintenance of order:

For municipal authorities intent on improving the quality of city life, these populations represented serious obstacles to their goals. They circulated freely around the city, presumably cared little about their personal appearances and hygiene, exhibited "scandalous" behavior, and thus strained the resources available to their superiors and public authorities to manage their existence (p. 127).

New municipal ordinances covered a range of social, economic, and aesthetic ideals, including implementing construction codes, banning animals in the city, regulating dance halls, and taxing stallholders in public markets. Social classes were spatially segregated, occupied different grades of dwellings, and socialized in distinct venues. According to Martínez-Vergne, the *clases populares* resisted the administrative structures imposed by the municipal government. She argues,

Urban dwellers in Santo Domingo did not behave like an amorphous mass that simply reacted to the modernizing project imposed from above. Rather, they

used its framework to advance their agenda and to shape the role of government in their lives. In so doing, Santo Domingo's working class was forging citizenship (p. 148).

The evidence she gives includes the defiance of city ordinances, knowledge and use of the legal system, and the lobbying of officials for better education, lower license fees and a range of other benefits. Nor did they necessarily adopt elite cultural values and social practices. There were effectively two dominicanidades: an impossible ideal corresponding with colonial values of respectability and the domestic sphere, and a second, similar to what Peter Wilson (1973) has termed 'reputation,' that reflected the lived reality the urban poor. While elite discourses of cultura prioritized light skin and associated respectability with the domestic sphere, newspapers reported how working-class people 'consorted openly with the feared "other" or were stereotypical immigrants who introduced disease into the island, engaged in illegal activities, and worked only to spend their wages elsewhere' (p. 127).

Working-class women, as well as migrants and the Dominicans who associated with them, presented an obstacle to urban order. For the elite, bourgeois women's value lay in their capacity to transmit class characteristics and reproduce the social hierarchy, while working class women were considered irrelevant or a threat. Martínez-Vergne writes that women depended upon their reputations as moral beings in order to claim the limited space available to them in public life. However, respectability was associated with the domestic sphere, and so it was difficult to attain for working class women, who often laboured in public spaces. By virtue of their poverty and presence in public spaces, working class women were associated with blackness in a way that bourgeois women were not, regardless of phenotypical characteristics. Their bodies and the spaces they performed in revealed their unsuitability to reproduce the ideal nation.

If Martínez-Vergne defines "citizenship" as participation in public life and influencing policy development, then I readily agree with her evidence. However, as she notes herself, it is unclear whether many "resistances" of the poor were the result of a different set of values, or whether they desired to conform but lacked the economic capacity. Indeed, if 'the apparent identity of interest between labour, capital, and state that was evident in working-class manifestations in this period was the kind of negotiation that postponed class conflict rather than exacerbated it' (p. 144), then the working class were moulding citizenship in a decidedly moderate fashion. However, they certainly held more influence than most histories suggest, and Martínez-Vergne's book is valuable for having re-inserted these subaltern voices into the picture.

With the Dominican Republic under US control from 1916 to 1924, the project of modernity shifted emphasis from democracy and national identity toward infrastructure and the economy, and set the tone for the state's national project throughout the twentieth century. From 1931 Trujillo continued this modernization project and extended its politics of exclusion, requiring all citizens to carry a *cedula* [identity card] and restricting immigration from the countryside to the city. The 1937 massacre of tens of thousands of Haitians on the Dominican-Haitian border

signalled the beginning of an intensive project of racist nationalism. Part of Trujillo's success in maintaining power was his adoption of popular cultural practices. He won over rural people by making *merengue* the national dance, much to the horror of the urban elites. He courted the middle class, who had previously been excluded from power, by creating new modern suburbs and subsidizing housing. During his rule, and subsequently that of Balaguer, there was little space for political dissent, and the Dominican Republic did not experience the black power or labour movements seen elsewhere in the region.

One small exception to this controlled environment was the independent development of the *tíguere* [tiger]. Christian Krohn-Hansen (1996) writes that the term *tíguere* first appeared among working class men in Santo Domingo during the 1930s when Trujillo's tight control of political and economic spheres, and his intrusion into people's private lives, necessitated innovative and courageous evasion tactics. The *tíguere* is a man of reputation, not respectability, who uses his urban cunning to achieve his own ends. He embodies the characteristics of reputation that the elite fought so hard to eradicate from dominicanidad, especially lack of respect for authority. *Tigüeraje* [tigerness] remains a pivotal aspect of dominicanidad today. The Dominican journalist Lipe Collado, author of *El Tíguere Dominicano* (1992), notes that Dominicans in New York are often collectively referred to as *tigüeres* because they use the phrase so regularly, such as in exclaiming '¡que tígüere!' at an individual achievement, such as winning a round of dominos in a particularly impressive fashion. One may argue that this constituted little more than a 'weapon of the weak' (Scott 1985) under Trujillo, yet its endurance indicates the magnitude of popular production of national culture, even under the most trying circumstances.

By the time Trujillo was assassinated in 1961, national culture was firmly established, including its racist and oppositional elements. According to Martínez-Vergne, Dominican intellectuals in the late nineteenth century had proposed a forward-looking discourse to unite the Dominican people around the nationalist project because they believed that country's tumultuous past was not likely to generate a sense of a common purpose. By the time of Trujillo's assassination the reverse may well have been true. The past that scholars regarded with such doubt no longer appeared to be so tumultuous and divided. The fragmentations of history had been smoothed over during the twentieth century to create an official explanation of the origins of the Dominican people. *Progreso* was possible if only it could be accessed.

Hope for democracy and social change that Trujillo's assassination had brought suffered a severe setback when the 1965 revolution failed to reinstall the democratically elected President, Juan Bosch, who had been ousted in a coup after just 7 months in office. During *los doce años* [the 12 years] from 1966 to 1978, President Balaguer targeted political opposition that had been centrally involved in the revolution to suppress opposition. According to Hoffnung-Garskof, 'Rhetorical attacks on the neighborhoods as festering dens of illicit and dangerous activity helped cloak political repression under the banner of fighting "delinquency" and imposing order in the capital' (p. 39). Amnesty International reported that during 1970 a police murder victim was found in Santo Domingo's streets every 34 hours on average, and between 1966 and 1971 there were more than a thousand political

assassinations, most being PRD members (Bosch's *Partido Revolucionario Dominicano*) (Ferguson 1992:29). This repression sent political movements underground as 'social clubs', rendering communities the primary sites of opposition to the state. These clubs provided organizational space for both left-wing engagement with national political discourse, and locality-based politics whose aim was to prevent slum clearance and agitate for service provision in the barrios. The right to occupy urban space became 'the most basic aspect of urban citizenship' (p. 55).

Migration from the countryside to the city boomed after Trujillo, despite Balaguer's repression of urban dissidents. Trujillo had believed that rural people came to the city because they were 'bedazzled' by the modern promise that the city held. There was little recognition under Balaguer that Trujillo's policies had dispossessed thousands of peasants, through the creation of large sugar estates held by US companies in the early years of the regime, and later, by Trujillo's own monopolistic practices. Nor was there official acceptance of the idea that rural people had the right to partake of the benefits of modernity that their urban counterparts enjoyed. Instead, rural people were supposed to uphold traditional values of hard work, family-centred lives, and religiosity (see also Taylor 2009a). After coming to power in 1966, Balaguer made few efforts to render the countryside more liveable, however. He invested heavily in urban infrastructure, knowing that these projects were highly visible and would garner popular support. The ideal of *progreso* was so widely accepted that it was no longer simply an elite project, but rather demanded by citizens.

Rural people, though they often regretted leaving the countryside, did not wish to remain in this allochronic relationship. If the state would not extend *progreso* to the countryside, then rural people had to migrate to the city. Hoffnung-Garskof describes a traditional working class barrio of Santo Domingo called Cristo Rey and how in the 1960s it transformed from a rural space to an inner-city suburb. He writes how one long-term resident was surprised by the question of whether the barrio was more beautiful when it was in its natural state, exclaiming 'No, it is much more beautiful today' (p. 48). The new beauty of Cristo Rey derived from its urbanization, which made possible the attainment of *progreso* and *cultura*. These ideals could not be achieved in the countryside. This notion of *progreso* as urban was widespread but not universal. Not everyone believed in the superiority of the city, but 'popular spirituality and even nostalgia for the countryside were silenced from written record' (p. 60). Today, many barrio residents contrast the morality and healthiness of rural life with the corruption and pollution of the city, claiming that they would prefer to live in the countryside but it is an economic impossibility (Taylor 2009a).

City life permitted residents to gain higher incomes and engage in mass consumption that marked them out as modern Dominican subjects. Indeed, Hoffnung-Garskof suggests that a modernity based on mass consumption also increased opportunities for social inclusion as its forms of distinction were more readily attainable. He writes, 'If a refrigerator or a gold chain marked a person's level of civilization, rather than skin color, university degrees, or a box at the ballet, or membership in a hereditary oligarchy, then consumer triumphs ... offered a new kind of hope in the barrios, a kind of consumer populism' (p. 9). Over the next few

decades consumption and style became integral elements of *dominicanidad*, although not without vigorous public debate over the ills of the individualism that consumption represented.

With this new consumption came a shift in the meaning of *progreso*. Previously conceived as a national strategy (albeit an exclusive one), *progreso* became something that pertained to individual houses and a way of talking about social mobility. To progress was not so much to work together as a nation but to improve one's own circumstances through constructing or renovating one's home and filling it with modern material goods. Given that there is a stark disparity of income in the Dominican Republic, not everyone has the same ability to consume, and consumption has become a symbol of social status. Individuals, families, and even entire regions are relegated to the bottom of the city's social hierarchy due to the visible poverty of their material environment. This creates competition to achieve *progreso* and *cultura*, and increases the incentive for households within stigmatized barrios to distinguish themselves from their neighbors to counter their marginalization. Social unity is undermined as the struggle for modernity is rendered as a game that not everyone can win.

As Martínez-Vergne suggested for the period 1880–1916, the social nature of one's consumption choices also impacts upon the perception of morality. Individualistic consumption signals a loss of *cultura*, whereas investing money into the construction of a house signals commitment to family and traditional values. The former practice is often attributed to migrants from the countryside to the shantytowns, and also to returnee migrants from the US. Both categories of migrants are perceived to replace traditional Dominican values with the negative aspects of modernity.

Dominicanidad, then, entails balancing the attainment of *progreso* with the retention of *cultura*, defined by local traditions and in opposition to those perceived to have Haitian roots. Throughout Dominican society, *cultura* is deployed as 'a tool for racial oppression, and a strategy for racial inclusion based on the exclusion of others' (Hoffnung-Garskof 2008:13). Yet *cultura*'s racism is obfuscated by its overt nationalism. In popular discourse, blackness is a symbol of Haiti's threat to national autonomy and progress. Since the Haitian occupation of 1922–1944, Dominican fear of being overrun by their stronger neighbor has transformed into fear that Haiti's poverty and primitivism is undermining the *progreso* that the Dominican Republic has achieved.

As Martínez-Vergne describes for the late nineteenth century, there is a sharp divide in the barrios today between discourse and practice. A casual visitor to the barrios will readily identify racism in everyday speech, but may not notice that some of this racism seems little practiced. I can attest from my own fieldwork in La Ciénaga, one of the city's poorest barrios, that people's social relationships often belie the racism they express. Individuals who claim that they detest Haitians and that black people are criminals commonly turn out to count Haitians among their closest friends and have parented children with dark-skinned people. Some of this cooperation is borne of economic necessity: poor urban residents cannot afford to make enemies, as they depend upon their social capital to survive through crises (Gregory 2007). Economic crises can increase the temptation to scapegoat Haitians,

but it can also break down distinctions if the poor cannot afford to distinguish themselves from each other. One Haitian friend of mine commented to me how Dominicans have begun to eat certain affordable foods that they used to disdain:

Before, Haitians had no value, if you lived here they treated you like a rag because you weren't in your own country. They used to say that *arrenque*, black beans, cornflower, and sardines were Haitian foods. They didn't eat these things. Bananas were Haitian food. Now there are vitamins in them! Maize flour, *arrenque* is vitamin and nourishing, all this nourishes. Before if you ate this you must be Haitian, but now, ooh! Now it's tasty for them because things are bad everywhere (Carmencita).

However, I think it would be a disservice to barrio residents to conclude that cooperation is merely a response to material crisis. Their crowded quarters and social proximity make them more aware than the other social classes of the similarities and shared social histories of the two nationalities. The *clases populares* have perhaps a greater capacity than most sectors of Dominican society to sense that a unified path can exist.

While racism continues to be a matter of grave concern, drawing a distinction between what people say and what people do can point to ways to overcome it. Various social groups, including intellectuals, the Catholic church, and grassroots organizations, are attempting to capitalize on everyday forms of cooperation among barrio residents to generate a culture of universal inclusion for all barrio residents, regardless of colour, place of origin, or gender. The impetus for this movement is more transnational than local- or state-derived. The Catholic church takes its cue from liberation theology, and ideals of racial equality have slowly been entering the Dominican Republic since Trujillo's demise provided freedom of speech for academics and the press. As Hoffnung-Garskof discusses at length, migration to New York and elsewhere challenged dominicanidad as its racial classifications clashed with those of the United States. Within the region, tourism and fashion has instilled an appreciation of brownness (Robotham 1998) that articulates with a Dominican pride in being *indio*. Dominicanidad increasingly encompasses people outside of national borders as well as within them.

Dominicanidad's exclusivity has cultural manifestations but its roots are political. By this I do not mean that it has simply been bestowed upon citizens by the state, nor do I believe that the evidence shows that grassroots citizenship is always broadly inclusive. In questioning the dominance of the state, Martínez-Vergne and Hoffnung-Garskof demonstrate how dominicanidad has developed over time via a complex politics of inclusion and exclusion involving different social classes, the state, and the transnational sphere.

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