Mayes, April J.
Reseña de “Black behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops” de Ginetta E.B. Candelario
Instituto de Estudios del Caribe
San Juan, Puerto Rico

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=39215001009
which constituted an “American Mediterranean” in the nineteenth-century. What Guterl has given us is a worthwhile study of how one national group of slaveholding elites imagined this wider transnational polity.

References


April J. Mayes
Department of History
Pomona College, U.S.A.
april.mayes@pomona.edu

In this accessible and masterfully crafted study, Ginetta E. B. Candelario examines the complex, contradictory, and countervailing historical processes that have shaped Dominican national identity since the nineteenth century until the present day. The book addresses three interrelated questions: first, why did Dominicans construct a discourse of indigenismo and mestizaje that celebrated a mythological, indigenous past and denied its African heritage; second, how have Dominican elites and popular groups reinforced and sustained Indo-Hispanic national identity; and, third, does Dominican migration to the United States in any way challenge normative representations of Dominicanidad?

Candelario begins the book with a comprehensive introduction that situates her argument within multiple scholarly debates. Indeed, her analysis represents a careful and rigorous integration of foundational theoretical concepts from her discipline—sociology—with the
intellectual and political concerns that have motivated recent scholarship in Dominican social history and Latino/a Studies. For example, rather than adhere to a single conceptualization of “identity,” Candelario draws on numerous theories regarding identity formation to underscore her hypothesis that Dominican identity formation is structured by power relations that are at once transnational, geopolitical, and personal. Candelario also uses the introduction to discuss her methodology, one that she calls a “bricolage approach.” Her study, as she writes, uses “discourse analysis, content analysis, a local ethnography, open-ended-in-depth interviewing, and photo elicitation” (p. 6) to illuminate the process of national and identity formation in a transnational context.

In answering the first question, why did Dominican elites choose to create a mythic indigenous history and deny, or better yet, demonize the nation’s African connections, Candelario examines travel narratives written by European and U.S. Americans from the late eighteenth until the early twentieth centuries. Candelario argues that European and U.S. American travelers represented Dominicans as whites, in sharp contrast to Haitian blacks. These “imperial projections” of race and nation were designed for a specific purpose: to negate the historical challenge that Haiti, as a Black Republic, posed to the slaveholding community and, at the same time, to present the Dominican Republic as an acceptable territory ripe for European for U.S. colonialism. Interestingly, these imperial narratives traveled into and intersected with the Dominican literary-historical imagination and reassured a generation of Dominican intellectuals that they were “not black” like Haitians. Given the imperial rivalry over the island, denying blackness had tangible implications as both the Dominican Republic and Haiti jockeyed for economic investment.

In the twentieth century, Dominican intellectual and political elites institutionalized Indianism, or Indo-Hispanic identity, either through violence, such as the 1937 massacre of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans during General Rafael Trujillo’s dictatorship, or through state-sponsored, cultural institutions such as museums. For example, in the 1980s, President Joaquin Balaguer, one of the principal architects of Dominican anti-Haitianism, turned the Museo del Hombre Dominicano (Museum of the Dominican Man), founded in 1926, into the site for the exaltation of Dominican Indo-Hispanicity. Candelario highlights an important point: even though the Museo purports to teach Dominicans the “truth” about the ethnic and racial roots of their dominicanidad, it does so relying on representations of Dominicans written by European and U.S. travelers and archeologists. In other words, in order to make the case for Dominican Indo-Hispanicity, museum curators and cultural intellectuals uncritically accept travel literature as primary sources, as
evidence of Dominican whiteness. Ironically then, as Candelario argues, “the ideological code ordering and organizing Dominicanidad as text in the Museo del Hombre Dominicano in its conceptual presupposition of ‘el Dominicano’ [the Dominican] as a racially typifiable and racially progressive man” (p. 84) relies to some degree on imperialist fantasies crafted to justify Dominicans’ subordination to more powerful nations.

Given the transnational and internal structures of power that have buttressed Dominican whiteness, how is it possible for Dominicans to confront and transform Indo-Hispanidad? This is a question at the heart of current debates about the impact of immigration on Dominican identity. The debate is not merely theoretical: since the end of the Trujillo dictatorship in 1961 and the Civil War of April 1965, a generation of scholars has insisted that Dominicans’ embrace of their [our] negritude is a first, necessary step in democratizing Dominican political culture and empowering popular classes. These same scholars optimistically claim that such a reimagining of Dominican identity is more likely to occur abroad. In chapters three through five Candelario tests this hypothesis by asking: Are Dominicans living in the United States more or less likely to embrace Indo-Hispanic identity?

Candelario finds that some Dominicans living in the U.S. reject Indo-Hispanic nationalism. For example, descendants of Dominicans who migrated to Washington, D.C. in the 1940s and 1950s are more likely to identify as “black” and feel some kind of identification with African Americans, although they continue to take pride in their Spanish language and Dominican heritage. This movement towards blackness is possible because many of these children were born to mothers who were from English-speaking communities in the Dominican Republic. Access to English language and Protestantism gave both migrants and their children a way to enter African American communities and/or be confused as African American. Also, the majority of these early migrants were domestics who worked for the families of Dominican political elites. Their status as domestic workers also gave them common ground with African American women who occupied a similar position in Washington, D.C.’s labor force. At the same time, Dominicans who arrived in Washington in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s constituted a distinct, Spanish-speaking minority in a city without a critical mass of Latino immigrants to which Dominicans could readily blend into. This last fact, in addition to the higher educational achievement of these children born of Dominican migrants—often at Howard University, a historically Black college located in Washington, D.C.—resulted in first generation, U.S.-born Dominicans being open to and, at times, embracing a black identity.

The same could not be said about Dominican migrants who arrived
to New York after 1965. Based on field research and photo elicitation, Candelario concludes that Dominicans in New York staunchly resist any identification with African Americans or with blackness in general. Instead, Dominican migrants and their children retain a close identification with an Indo-Hispanic identity and play an active role in reinforcing it. Candelario finds that in addition to museums and school textbooks, the beauty shop is an important institution for the cultivation and preservation of Dominican Indo-Hispanidad. The centrality of the beauty salon in the formation of Dominican identity makes sense given two important findings that Candelario highlights earlier in the work. First, from the earliest accounts of the island’s peoples and their habits, hair texture has long been a way of marking color and, as a result, social status. This explains, in part, why Dominicans fixate on whether one has *pelo bueno* or *pelo malo* (good hair or bad hair). Dominicans obsess about hair, too, because texture signifies progress, the possibility of social mobility by attaining the attributes—like lank hair—associated with whiteness. Candelario underscores the point that Dominican women, as hairdressers, do the bulk of the physical labor associated with achieving this beauty standard and Dominican women perform the ideological labor of embodying and perpetuating the Indo-Hispanic ideal.

Candelario concludes her study by emphasizing Dominican agency in the crafting of their [our] identities. Since hair has been the historical dividing line between Haitians and Dominicans (and now between Dominicans and other African-descended populations in New York) and since the Dominican Republic, as a nation, has been quite powerless in the face of European and U.S. imperialism, Dominicans have transformed what it means to be white or black through “techniques of the body” (p. 256)—either by shifting their blackness “behind the ears” or, as in the case of Washington, D.C. Dominicans, by “[displaying] their blackness up front” (p. 261). As in the past, Dominicans have used the ambiguity of their race to stake their own claims in light of global and local structures of power. Candelario’s analysis, suitable for use in any undergraduate classroom, is a significant contribution to the study of race and national identity in the Dominican Republic. It is a work that establishes a new standard of historical and sociological inquiry.
Black behind the Ears makes important contributions to our understanding of the Dominican experience. In this book, Ginetta E. B. Candelario shows processes of identity formation among Dominicans in different historical and geographical contexts, and she looks at the nuanced relationship between ethnic and racial identities. In my opinion, this is one of the best books written on the subject of racial, ethnic, and national identity formation in general.

José Itzigsohn, author of Developing Poverty: The State, Labor Market Regulation, and the Informal Economy in Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic by Ginetta E. B. Candelario. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007. Pp. xi+340. Personal Access. If you have access to this journal as a benefit of membership in the sponsoring organization, log in through the member link in the right column. If you have an individual subscription, or if you have purchased this article separately, click on the link below. Sign in.