

OTHER ARTS AND HUMANITIES

Caribbean Exceptions: The Problem of Race and Nation in Dominican Studies

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The analytic paradigms of race and nation have dominated scholarship on the Dominican Republic and have framed social and cultural analysis in ways that have limited the theorizing of Dominican materials to a narrow focus on identity. These gatekeeping concepts have been especially influential in shaping Dominican studies in the United States and in defining the predominant questions of interest in the field. This article assesses the conceptual limits of race and nation as persistent modes of analysis applied to the Dominican Republic and evaluates how these restrictive themes both shape and are shaped by conventional ideas about Dominican society. We argue for deeper engagement with homegrown scholarship and voices on the ground in order to move beyond repetitive and provincial concerns with “Dominicanness” and to trouble the far-too-common portrayal of the country as a novel racial problem.

Los paradigmas analíticos de raza y nación han dominado las cuestiones académicas sobre la República Dominicana y han enmarcado el análisis socio-cultural de la isla de manera que se ha limitado la teorización a un estrecho enfoque en la identidad. Estos conceptos barrera (“gatekeeping concepts”) han sido especialmente formativos en la creación de los estudios dominicanos en los Estados Unidos y han definido las cuestiones dominantes en este campo académico. El siguiente ensayo crítico evalúa los límites conceptuales de raza y nación como modos persistentes de análisis aplicados a la República Dominicana y analiza cómo estos temas limitantes forman ideas convencionales sobre la sociedad dominicana. Argumentamos por un compromiso más profundo con la producción académica de la isla y también por un compromiso con otras voces locales no-académicas para ir más allá de nociones repetitivas y provinciales sobre la “dominicanidad”. Complicamos la muy repetida imagen del país como un siempre nuevo problema racial que merece más investigación.

The time is ripe for a review of Dominican studies and to take account of current trends and directions in the interdisciplinary study of the Dominican Republic. In this article, we identify the broad-reaching effect of several gatekeeping concepts on the production of academic conventions that have heretofore shaped scholarly discourse about the country. Academic writing on the Dominican Republic, particularly of late, has been dominated by several prevailing themes especially influential within the North American academy. These overriding themes are race and nation—theoretical metonyms for Dominican racial and national identity and Dominican/Haitian relations. We examine the historical origination of these themes and their frequent application to Dominican materials, speculate as to how they both shape and are shaped by conventional ideas about Dominican society, review several implications that follow from these trends, and consider how these approaches have come to characterize the field of Dominican studies today. We argue for deeper engagement with homegrown Dominican scholarship and voices on the ground and conclude with suggestions on growing the field.

Arjun Appadurai (1986), in an essay reviewing the development of anthropological theory, has drawn attention to the tendency for places or regions to become showcases for specific issues over time. He cites analytical paradigms such as hierarchy in India, filial piety in China, and honor and shame in the circum-Mediterranean as classic examples of what he calls “gatekeeping concepts” or ideas that “define

the quintessential and dominant questions of interest in a region” and thus limit theorizing about a place in question (1986, 357). Several dominant tropes have framed social analysis in Caribbean anthropology for some time now; perhaps prime among them the concept of creolization (Khan 2001).¹ It has become clear in recent years that in interdisciplinary scholarship on the Dominican Republic, powerful gatekeeping concepts like race and nation have established the country’s ostensible defining characteristics and delineate the predominant idioms governing social scientific, not to mention historical and literary renderings of Dominican social and cultural realities.

The risk in overreliance on a limited range of conceptual perspectives should be clear. Gatekeeping concepts can lead to the overdetermination of certain social and cultural realities over others, obscuring or distorting the contingencies of local accounts, native viewpoints, and the nuances of social interaction and signification in a complex modern world (Khan 2001, 294). Applied to historical materials, these same concepts can mask as much as they reveal. To date, the influence of specific conceptual models on the imaginative and intellectual horizons of Dominican studies has gone unremarked. The sources and implications of the tendency to privilege some overarching themes over others are poorly understood despite exercising great authority over academic interpretation and description. The question we wish to ask below considering recent scholarship is why scholars continue to return to several well-worn topics. Do these gatekeeping concepts reflect something inherent or unique about the country itself or are they merely indicative of scholarly trends and the interests of scholars who follow them (cf. Appadurai 1986, 358)? How does the promotion of a narrow catalog of themes and perspectives constrain the potential of Dominican studies as an interdisciplinary project? The stakes, it seems, are clear: the definition of Dominican society, not only in academic discourse, but also more broadly in how the country is conceived in both local and global contexts.

Dominican Studies Comes of Age

To the extent that Dominican studies constitutes a coherent interdisciplinary field of study, it remains relatively small.² It claimed even less space in North American academic circles in the 1980s and 1990s, when it was largely ignored by the broader fields of Latin American and Caribbean studies—areas of budding social scientific and humanities concern that otherwise saw booming growth during this period.³ By the 1990s a nascent field of Dominican studies in the US gained important traction and a measure of institutional legitimacy with the founding of the City University of New York Dominican Studies Institute in 1992, establishing the nation’s first university-based research institute devoted to the study of Dominicans, whose stated mission is “to produce and disseminate research and scholarship about Dominicans and about the Dominican Republic.” The institute houses the Dominican Archives and the Dominican Library dedicated to collecting primary and secondary source material about people of Dominican descent. However, it was not until the 2000s that the North American academy saw signs of the viable consolidation of an emerging Dominican studies paradigm following the publication of several higher profile books on the region; an increase in publications dealing with Dominican materials; a growing academic interest in the country at graduate, undergraduate, and professional levels (likely due, at least in part, to the greater representation of Dominicans and Dominican-Americans in US institutions of higher education); and an increased number of scholars of the Dominican Republic holding positions at premier universities. Equally important developments were occurring simultaneously in popular culture. The burgeoning recognition during this time of Dominican-American novelists like Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz played a decisive role in bringing the Dominican Republic into national and international consciousness; this, along with the internationalization and popularization of bachata music beginning in the 2000s and the ascendant

¹ Also reputation and respectability, colonialism, globalization, and transnational migration. Compare with Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1992, 25) who has argued instead that the Caribbean’s heterogeneity and unique colonial history has precluded the formation of dominant tropes or gatekeeping concepts.

² Dominican studies, as it is currently constituted, is a loosely connected network of interdisciplinary scholarship across the humanities and social sciences addressing Dominicans and the Dominican Republic. Scholars writing from a variety of perspectives and disciplines have advanced Dominican studies by working on Dominican materials, not by explicitly locating their work within an area studies paradigm per se. In this essay we confine our discussion of Dominican studies to scholarship written in English about the Dominican Republic published in books and journals chiefly oriented toward the English-speaking academies of North America and Europe.

³ One example of this is Doris Sommer’s *One Master for Another* (1983), one of the first monographs written in the US to take Dominican literature and culture as its primary focus and an early intervention in the field of literary criticism, but which failed to make any kind of significant splash on Latin American studies generally.

dominance of Dominican baseball players in the major leagues, together coalesced to mainstream Dominican culture for US audiences as never before.

Attending this increasing visibility of the Dominican Republic in scholarship and in popular media has been a conspicuous emphasis on research and publications focused on the comprehensive themes of race and nation and their various conceptual iterations. With little doubt these foci have been the richest source of new material on the country, not only in the form of scholarly publications, but also in panel and conference themes, editorials, seminars and academic talks, calls for papers, and recent dissertation and masters theses (e.g., Cappas-Toro 2013; Guilamo 2013; Miranda 2014; Contreras 2015; Tallaj-Garcia 2015; Hintzen 2016; Romain 2016). Attention to these topics has increased with growing academic interest in the critical situation of Dominicans of Haitian descent, and urgent public debates about citizenship in the Dominican Republic (see Nolan 2015). In 2016 alone, at least three books were published on the explicit topic of race and nation in the Dominican Republic (García-Peña 2016; Paulino 2016; and Ricourt 2016).

Although picking up steam in the past couple of decades, academic interest in the subjects of race and nation in the Dominican Republic is not new and began much earlier. One early text in particular that set the tone for current research in this regard is Franklin Franco's *Los negros, los mulatos, y la nación dominicana* (1969), which inaugurated attempts by academics to acknowledge the "presence of the African-descended ... as a legitimate component of the Dominican nation, with a recognition of the marginalization of the black experience in the discourse of the country's heritage" (Torres-Saillant 2015, 7). In his introduction to the English translation, Silvio Torres-Saillant declares Franco's work a "classic if there ever was one," a text so seminal to Dominican studies he compares it to Herodotus and the invention of the field of historical study! According to Torres-Saillant (2015, 7), following Franco's classic work, at least eighty-six books have been published between 1970 and 2014 (not including countless articles and several titles since) on blackness, ethnic identity, and race relations in the Dominican Republic (e.g., Cordero Michel 1968; Mir 1969; Hoetink 1970; Tolentino 1974; Deive 1975; Lizardo 1979; Davis 1987; Fennema and Loewenthal 1987; Batista 1989; Andújar 1997; Franco 1997; Ayuso 2003; and Despotovic 2012, to name just a few in a long tradition of work in Spanish produced largely, though not exclusively, by Dominican scholars). Furthermore, Carlos Esteban Deive (2016) has recently published a 152-page bibliography of more than 790 sources on the subject of Dominican/Haitian relations and race in Hispaniola (e.g., Maríñez 1986; Báez Evertsz 1986; Lozano 1993; Chez Checo 1997; Silié and Segura 2002; Heredia 2003; Abréu 2014; Hernández 2014).

In the North American and European academies, the topics of Dominican racial and national identity and Dominican/Haitian relations have been especially productive since the mid-1990s (notable publications include Martínez 1995; Baud 1996; San Miguel 1997; Austerlitz 1997; Torres-Saillant 1998, 1999; Sagás 2000; Howard 2001; Matibag 2003; Duany 2006; Candelario 2007; Simmons 2009; Rodríguez 2011; Victoriano-Martínez 2014; Mayes 2014; Reyes-Santos 2015, among others). Studies on the national border and the Dominican Republic's antagonistic relationship with Haiti as well as studies on so-called Dominicaness constitute undeniable segments of this literature (see Sagás 1993; Wucker 1999; Turits 2002; Johnson 2002; Martínez 2003; Martínez-Vergne 2005; for studies on the national border see Derby 1994; Adams 2006; Fumagalli 2015; for studies on national identity see Castillo and Murphy 1987; Sørensen 1993, 1997; Martínez 1997). These studies have established nationality and national identity alongside race studies as dominant concerns of English-language scholarship on the country over the past several decades. This production has been impressive given the relative size of, and interest in, Dominican studies up to this point.

Scholarship in the areas of race and nation in the Dominican Republic is not entirely uniform; scholars hail from a variety of disciplines that employ differing modes of inquiry and explanation. Nonetheless, whether the study is historical or contemporary, about blackness or nationhood, racism or Dominicaness, Afro-Dominican culture or anti-Haitianism, or the gradations of calculi therein, the expository possibilities of work in these areas are contingent on race and nation as conceptual vectors for analysis. The fact that scholars from across the disciplinary spectrum have found this particular lens similarly productive only highlights the overwhelming influence these gatekeeping concepts exercise on the imaginative horizons of Dominican studies. Obviously, exceptional work continues outside of this trend; it is unlikely, however, that any other topic has garnered as much sustained attention by humanities and social science writers. As scholars of the Dominican Republic based in the US, we routinely face the vexing fact that what others know about the Dominican Republic is too often limited to some vague notion of Dominican racial exceptionalism and the country's strained relationship with Haiti. Those of us who are asked to serve as peer reviewers for journals and other publications, or who are regularly solicited to review applications for grants and fellowships, can attest to the frequency of the themes discussed here as they are routinely applied to the country time and again. If the Dominican Republic has become a showcase for specific issues, themes, and

concepts over time, it must be conceded that it is here in the broad areas of race and nation that Dominican studies in the US has made its most indelible mark.⁴

Race and Nation in the Dominican Republic

Scholars interested in studying and writing about the Dominican Republic are frequently drawn to seek answers to the oft-repeated observation that Dominicans, in general, rarely acknowledge their African ancestry with pride and are unlikely to self-identify as “black,” despite their categorization as such by US racial logics. Dominican black denial is a commonplace refrain encountered in US academic scholarship on the region and a familiar premise of popular media coverage of Dominican racial identity (Chetty and Rodríguez 2015, 2; see, for example, Henry Louis Gates’s PBS series *Black in Latin America*), providing much grist for the race-conscious scholar’s mill. The social construction of race in the Dominican Republic, because it differs from that of the US, is frequently viewed as an aberration, an anomaly to be explained. Why an apparently black country refuses to see itself as such is viewed as an unusual delusion that must be accounted for, and black denial consistently but misleadingly read as a special kind of self-hatred. Indeed, for quite a few scholars and, increasingly, for the larger public drawn to Dominican studies, the troubling question since the 1990s has been: How did Dominicans, “obvious” descendants of enslaved Africans, come to regard themselves as anything but black?⁵

Dominicans on the whole have never been as conflicted about nor as enchanted by their own ethnic or racial identities as the scholars who write about them. Dominicans are, clearly, more than simple racial miscreants or blind custodians of a reviled false consciousness; they are, in the main, no more confused about their supposed racial or ethnic origins than anyone else. National identity is neither static nor agreed upon, and several competing discourses of identity circulate that articulate different ways of being Dominican that challenge any singular interpretation of *dominicanidad* as one way or another (see Sorensen 1997, 297). The meaning of racial categories is neither shared nor fixed, having been embraced and/or contested across the wide spectrum of Dominican experience since the very first colonial governors took office in Santo Domingo. It cannot be stressed enough that there is nothing inherently exceptional about Dominican racial logics, other than the simple fact that the racial categories themselves, and those who are assigned to them, differ from those in the US and elsewhere, proving what most of us already accept to be true—that race is a social construct, that is to say, a function of context and perspective. In the Dominican Republic, who counts as white or black (or *indio/a* as the case may be) may vary considerably from who gets assigned to those very same categories in the US, all while invoking different meanings due to the country’s unique colonial history, its protracted struggle for independence, its position within global and regional power structures, its contested cultural and political history, and its record of international and regional migration (see Simmons 2009).

In addition to a pervasive aesthetic preference for lighter skin (evidenced in local beauty pageants and dominant representations of beauty in local television and advertising), to be counted as *blanco/a* (white) in the Dominican Republic comes with significant social advantages while those stigmatized as *negro/a* (black) face discrimination and other social obstacles. Indeed, as of yet, there is little in Dominican popular culture that would incentivize public affirmation of black identity akin to the Afrocentric and Black Power movements of yesteryear observed in the US, especially as black ethnic identity is most often associated with the much-maligned Haiti and “Haitianness.” The predominant national mythologies that obscure if not outright deny ancestral origins in Africa are the handmaidens of cultural and political elites who are invested in a national image that deemphasizes foreign black culture and black African heritage and who sponsor in its place the promotion of Hispanic descent, Euro-Christian values, and (increasingly) white North American cultural ideals. Anti-Haitianism (see Sagás 1993), a racist discourse of exclusion, works in tandem with this worldview to reinforce national narratives of Dominican *mestizaje* or “mixed” identity (some vague

⁴ Not to be ignored, Junot Díaz’s rise to prominence and vocal criticism of the Dominican Republic has also brought renewed interest in the country by foreign scholars. His literary output alone has produced a notably productive archive for literary scholars, inspiring a glut of publications in literary criticism over the past several years (e.g., González 2015; McCracken 2016; Hanna, Vargas, and Saldivar 2016; Ostman 2017). Díaz’s very public criticisms of Dominican racism, especially as it has been realized in the stripping of citizenship from Dominicans of Haitian descent, have drawn more attention to the issues of race and nation in the country (see Díaz et al. 2013; Hindin and Ariza 2016).

⁵ More recently, some scholars have written against this trend, highlighting evidence counter to the black denial narrative from a variety of angles (e.g., Ricourt 2016). For a call to move beyond the theme of black denial see Chetty and Rodríguez (2015).

combination of Spanish, indigenous, and African ancestry), in an operation that occludes black origins, rendering Dominicaness not as white, but as “not black.”⁶

As an antidote to elite renderings of the country as “mixed-white”—or at least “not black”—scholars have looked to recover black identity at the margins, to account for alternative imaginings of Dominican identity that are instead diverse, inclusive, and that positively identify black African heritage and culture and that contest any monolithic view of Dominican identity as stable, uniform, finished, or unchanging. Calling attention to the top-down erasure of black identity from the cultural landscape, some of this literature looks to resuscitate what was always there but muted by power and the interests of a racist elite intent on whitewashing the country’s image, especially in relation to Haiti (see, for example, Torres-Saillant 1998, 1999; Stinchcomb 2004; Simmons 2009; Ricourt 2016).

Within the Dominican Republic, scholarly attempts to recover the African heritage of Dominican culture are not scarce but have tended to consign black traditions to the domain of folklore; that is, conspicuous cultural forms regarded as relics to be celebrated at specific times and in specific places. Here, black or “Afro-Dominican” culture can be found in magical religious beliefs (e.g., Dominican *vodú*), in carnival and festival traditions (e.g., *el gagá*), or in folktales, dance, and traditional music (e.g., *palo*) (see Andújar 1997; Tejeda Ortiz 1998; Aracena 1999), but not usually in everyday social and cultural life, conceding, however erroneously, that ordinary Dominican culture is inherently nonblack since black culture, to be present and operative, must be distinct or distinguishable from it (hyphenates like Afro-Dominican imply that Dominicaness on its own is absent of black cultural attributes and therefore requires a modifier). To the contrary, others have shown convincingly that black and African cultural influences *are* in fact expressed in everyday life, particularly embedded in family dynamics, language, value orientations, culinary conventions, expressive culture, and elsewhere, making black heritage a significant, inextricable property of contemporary Dominican society (see Deive 2013; also see Jiménez 2010; Thornton 2016), and the country itself an important site of transnational black cultural production and exchange.

Establishing Race and Nation as Analytic Paradigms

Race and nation in the Dominican scholarly literature are constitutive categories that just as often recall one another whenever they are invoked. Almost predictably the themes of race and nation converge on the question of Dominicaness—at one time an interest of state builders and the intellectual elite, has piqued the interests of US-based scholars, many of whom grew up in the context of multiculturalism and contentious identity politics and who find in the topic fertile material for historical and literary analysis. The topic itself is not new. What constitutes “true *dominicanidad*” has been a contentious subject on the island for some time, eliciting strident polemics from across the ideological spectrum. Issues of identity are always high-stakes—the politics of belonging always concern access to material resources—and important debates over *identidad* play out all over Latin America in both scholarly and public forums (e.g., Jacobs 2006; Gutierrez 2010). However, even while Latin Americanist scholarship continues to address issues of identity in terms of race and nation (e.g., Appelbaum, Macpherson, and Roseblatt 2003), nowhere else does it appear to represent the dominant analytic paradigm to the exclusion of all others. Dominican studies stands out from the crowd in its almost singular focus on issues of racial and national identity.

It must be affirmed that there is nothing inherently more or less racial or nationalistic about the Dominican Republic, and yet these themes endure as seemingly the most obvious and worthwhile areas of inquiry and analysis. We might ask why Dominicaness has become a preoccupation of contemporary Dominican studies while Haitianness or Jamaicanness seem far removed from dominating their respective area studies catalogs. Even as ideas about nationhood and belonging are ever evolving and regularly disputed, they are by no means new to the vast majority of citizens or unique to the Dominican Republic, belying the idea that nationality or cultural identity is of particular relevance or special concern to Dominicans above and

⁶ According to Samuel Martínez (1997) the “official” ideology of the nation equates racial distinction—between black and nonblack—with the political and cultural boundary that defines Dominican and Haitian people. Dominicans, he argues, may be said to conflate race and nation by identifying Haitians as black and themselves, not as “white,” but as “non-black” (1997, 229). Official history and national identity thus “dovetail with anti-black/anti-indigene racial conventions, to place ‘darker’ citizens not just disproportionately at the bottom of the social ladder but at the margins of constructs of cultural citizenship that give pride of place to ‘lighter-skinned’ citizens” (229). The local color term “*indio/a*” gestures toward this mixed, neither-white-nor-black identity that Dominicans presumably share and which functions as a native category of Dominican creole identity (see Sorensen 1993 and Torres-Saillant 1998).

beyond any other nation in today's globalized world.⁷ Dominicans are not exceptional in this regard, and so it is curious that Dominicaness would claim such a prominent place in English-language scholarship on the Dominican Republic.

The Caribbean's distinctive history of colonialism, transatlantic slavery, transnational migration, variously successful independence movements, and its central role in the making of the modern world has made the region as a whole an especially apposite locale for the study of race and identity, as well as modern nationalisms. The anthropology and sociology of the region, influenced by the likes of Melville Herskovits, M. G. Smith, and Sidney Mintz, have been dominated by studies focused on the legacy and effects of New World slavery, African cultural retentions, forced and voluntary migration, and themes of cultural diversity, conflict, and transformation enlivened by the varied encounters of Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Historically, however, the Dominican Republic has not been a major focus of scholarly interest when compared with other West Indian locales, despite its notable status as the first colony in the Americas and its standing as the second largest country in the Caribbean.

The indifference to Dominican materials in Caribbean studies, while lamentable, is not entirely surprising. The Dominican Republic has never been a comfortable fit in the "savage slot" envisioned for it in the scholarly imagination of the American academy (cf. Trouillot 2003). Dominican culture and society have consistently been viewed, however erroneously, as too ordinary, too Christian, and much too conventional to constitute an interesting Caribbean subject for North American scholars, especially for those seeking a tantalizing foreign other to discover, celebrate, and/or to liberate. The Dominican Republic has never been sufficiently exotic, alien, or *alter* enough to elicit the same kind of interest as, for example, Haiti (perhaps the quintessential exotic black other), or as politically captivating a place as Cuba (an alluring communist exception), or as religiously compelling a locale as Jamaica (birthplace of charismatic Rastafarians, who inspired a global music genre and requisite international subculture).

Many scholars of late, influenced by postcolonial social theory, have sought out resistance in the "Third World," looking to highlight acts of opposition and defiance from below and to uncover the hidden transcripts of the weak and powerless (à la James Scott); to lay bare the roots of cultural hegemony and its undoing in Latin America (following Antonio Gramsci); and to outline discourse and power relationships wherever they may be encountered (in the spirit of Michel Foucault). Scholars inspired by this theoretical turn in area studies are stirred to find resistance to power but are often loath to find accommodation with it. From the outside, the Dominican Republic appears to evince the latter: a country that endured authoritarian rule for thirty years; a society intent on persecuting its black immigrant neighbors; a country where skin-lightening creams are a ubiquitous feature wherever beauty products are sold and hair-straightening customs perfunctory for many if not most Dominican women. The Dominican Republic does not appear to be the ideal subject of cultural resistance and is, therefore, an imperfect subaltern subject, especially for ethnic and postcolonial studies.

Dominican refusals to "be black" strike a chord with many scholars and observers alike; after all, the thought goes, if Dominicans are not black, who on earth is? Whether exploring, complicating, debating, affirming, or refuting this claim, the outcome has been a prolific wave of publications aimed at understanding Dominicans as racial/racialized subjects (from Torres-Saillant 1998; Howard 2001; Candelario 2007; Simmons 2009; Mayes 2014; García-Peña 2016; to the recent call for a "Dominican black studies" by Chetty and Rodríguez 2015). Needless to say, it poses a problem for pan-African, black diasporic solidarity for the descendants of New World slavery to deny kinship with other black populations. This and the very real effects of anti-black racism have led some work to endeavor to "convince" or to educate Dominicans about their racial origins, their African ancestry, and debt to blackness (e.g., Torres-Saillant 1999; Stinchcomb 2004; Abréu 2014; Jiménez 2008, 2010; Batista 2014).⁸ Others have proffered scholarly narratives that seek to highlight oppositional discourses to racial domination by outlining spaces of resistance to cultural hegemony and black erasure (e.g., García-Peña 2016; also see Rodríguez 2011).

⁷ This is not to say that questions of nationality are not urgent or even, for some, matters of life and death; to be sure, for many black Dominicans and Dominicans of Haitian descent it is exactly that. Questions of citizenship and belonging are always contentious as citizenship is a discourse of exclusion as much as it is a prescription of rights and duties. These questions become all the more pressing in the neocolonial context of places like Puerto Rico and Martinique, where constructions of nationhood and nationality bump up against the precarity of statehood and eroding geopolitical boundaries.

⁸ In their introduction to a special issue of *The Black Scholar* titled "Dominican Black Studies," Raj Chetty and Amaury Rodríguez (2015, 4–5) rightly caution scholars not to essentialize "black origins" and to be wary of narrow conceptions of black racial consciousness when critiquing Dominican racial attitudes that do not necessarily accord with familiar forms of black identity politics.

Whether or not—why, to what degree, under what circumstances, and how—Dominicans consider themselves to be black, mixed, white, Hispanic, *indio*, or whatever, is one (albeit multifaceted) question, though not a particularly urgent one, despite its frequent invocation in the literature. For one thing, versions of this question have been asked for several decades and the proposed answers seem always to return to familiar conclusions: identity is fluid, political, culturally and historically constituted, discursively constructed, and always contested. Despite the prospect of novel interventions, work on Dominican identity continues to unfold within the familiar conceptual limits of race and nation that routinely take Dominicanness (at home and abroad) to be a racial problem that needs repeated disambiguation. It remains unclear, however, why the question of *identidad*, per se, continues to be such a priority for Dominican studies when Dominicans themselves are so ambivalent about their own racial and national identity (see Wheeler 2015), and a preponderance of publications already exists expounding in great detail the tribulations of race in the Dominican Republic.

The Problem of Representation

It is necessary to critically evaluate the pervasiveness of these themes in Dominican studies, not as an obvious reflection of an essential Dominican problem or issue unique to the Dominican experience as we have questioned above, but possibly instead as a product of those who wish to write about them, revealing as much or more about the individual interests of scholars as it does about the country itself. Thus far, the field of Dominican studies, such that it is, lacks critical reflexivity and has not asked why we as scholars choose to take up some themes and concepts over any number of others. The regrettably narrow conceptual range of contemporary Dominican studies is not without consequences. Overemphasis on race, for instance, leads to the tacit conclusion that the country is somehow exceptional in this regard—it has been treated as such for years. It would seem that for many scholars, the Dominican Republic is racially pathological (or racist, or racially abused) or it is simply not interesting. But what exactly does it mean to conceptualize a place as a “racial problem?” Studies abound on Dominican racial formation, identity, and reckoning, not because the country challenges the almost universally accepted fact that race is a social construct, but perhaps because by defining the Dominican Republic as a racial exception, the country better fits a deep-seated preoccupation in American scholarship—regardless of a scholar’s political affiliation or ideology—with tropes of racial alterity when it comes to writing about Caribbean societies. Consider, for example, early interest in the Caribbean region represented by sensational accounts like William Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* (1929), Hesketh Pritchard’s *Where Black Rules White* (1900), and Faustin Wirkus and Taney Dudley’s *The White King of La Gonave* (1931), as well as the contemporary overemphasis on metaphors of conflict, development, and heterogeneity that dominate the social science of the Caribbean today. Looking to the Dominican Republic, “blacks who hate blacks,” or “blacks who don’t know they’re black” appear to be especially provocative formulations in the postmodern moment. From this perspective, the Dominican Republic is rendered an anomaly, an aberration that must to be explained and ultimately righted.

Aside from the gatekeeping concepts of race and nation, it is worth mentioning that English language scholarship on the Dominican Republic has, though to a lesser degree, also found novelty in the study of dictatorship and sex tourism. Considering the scope of these additional themes alongside the dominant issues of race and nation, Dominican studies has time and again framed the study of Dominicans in terms of political, social, and sexual deviance in ways that position the Dominican Republic firmly within the exotic, rendering it a more familiar, perhaps more “proper,” Caribbean subject for analysis. The considerable reluctance of scholars to pursue research questions outside of this frame (or at least the failure of such research to find widespread acceptance beyond it) cannot be explained without acknowledging what appears to be a compelling scholarly proclivity for ascertaining difference over sameness and a stubborn insistence on viewing the Caribbean as alter/other in order to theorize the Dominican Republic as a racial exception.

Scholarly representations of Dominican alterity are markedly noticeable of late in the form of “the suffering subject” or “the subject living in pain, in poverty, or under conditions of violence or oppression” (cf. Robbins 2013, 448).⁹ Revitalized academic interest in the concepts of race and nation have followed from *la sentencia* in 2013, a court order that stripped Dominicans of Haitian descent of their citizenship in the Dominican Republic, effectively leaving an estimated two hundred thousand people stateless. Some have

⁹ Joel Robbins (2013), in an incisive article considering changes in the primary object of attention in anthropology since the 1980s, argues that the “suffering subject” has replaced the “radical other” of anthropological imagination, a shift occurring in the analytic interests and perspectives of the field, not rooted in any particular historical event or changes in any human capacity or inclination. Analogously, our argument here is that the focus on race and nation in Dominican studies is not a natural reflection of some fundamental Dominican reality but an arbitrary construct of scholars who study the country.

pointed to the recent passing of *la sentencia* as an obvious impetus for new and continued studies in the areas of race and nation. However, the critical situation of Dominicans of Haitian descent is not new. It did not begin with *la sentencia*; rather, it came to a head, the culmination of decades of state antagonism toward Haitian immigrants and their children. Local writers, activists, NGOs, and religious organizations, as well as several international foundations and global organizations (the United Nations among them), had for years invested time and money into this issue long before recent scholars took notice. The legalized victimization of Dominicans of Haitian descent seems to have consolidated an already strong disciplinary interest in race and nation and the Dominican/Haitian divide and collapsed them together into an especially alluring scholarly narrative of “black suffering subjects of the state.” Even as much of this work presumably proceeds from a genuine concern for the rights of the oppressed, it no less coincides with a long tradition in North American scholarship of portraying countries of the Caribbean as simultaneously black, troubled, and in need of liberation.¹⁰

Prioritizing Dominican Voices

One way we as Dominicanists might avoid the problems of representation observed above is to be careful not to sideline or dismiss native voices—scholarly or otherwise. Serious engagement with local Dominican scholars should be a priority; it is essential that their work not be neglected.¹¹ Sincere attention to local scholarship will likely unsettle the conspicuous repetition of publications on Dominican identity as well as inspire original interventions reflective of native concerns. Rigorous and purposeful engagement with the local canon invites dialogue with homegrown expertise and nurtures conversation with domestic knowledge in ways that are vital to appreciating context-based specificities with regard to race and nation, and necessary to framing relevant reconstructions of Dominican political and social realities. To this point, we frequently hear complaints from Dominican academics that US scholars are “only interested” in the country’s pathologizing of race, a particularly ironic state of affairs, from their standpoint, considering the United States’ own issues with racism. That being said, some Dominican scholarship has attempted to prop up the ideological interests of the ruling elite by advancing a racist narrative of Dominican exceptionalism (e.g., Núñez 2001; Balaguer 1983); yet today, there are probably just as many or more who, rather than reproduce discourses that support racial oppression, are committed to alternatives that go against the grain of this particular brand of nationalist sentiment and look to rewrite a more polyvocal national narrative (e.g., González 1999; Lora 2012; Batista 2013; Mella 2013).¹² Local sources and experts must be consulted and their work taken seriously; otherwise we have little more than foreign fantasies about the Dominican Republic that reify foreign categories of analysis and may very well tread dangerously close to trafficking in exoticism.

As a related priority, it is equally important to give average Dominicans a voice in the scholarly literature. Specifically, there is a desperate need for comprehensive ethnographic research rooted in local experiences that give a voice to and therefore render audible the perspective of Dominicans on the ground. This approach is crucial to uncovering meaningful insight into the salience of social categories like race and the complexity of *identidad* to Dominicans themselves (the people for whom these categories have immediate material relevance) and not just the scholars who study them. We would submit that it is preferable to critique exclusionary racial and ethnic discourses by advancing the voices and experiences of those most negatively affected, putting a face on oppression and outlining the material and psychological wages of racism in local terms. This will necessitate thorough, sustained research that is sensitive to the concerns of context, native viewpoints, community dynamics, and individual interests, and therefore attuned to the nuances of lived experience and expression. Dominicaness then may be revealed to be as much about language use and ideology, gender and sexuality, religious commitments and convictions, value orientations and ethical alignments, performance genres and expressive culture, aesthetic elections and consumption practices, as it is about racial or ethnic identity alone.

Although questions about race and nation are important, they do not always reflect or even approximate the primary interests or motivations of local actors. Two of the most significant Dominican social movements over the past several years (notably in 2012 and 2017) were inspired by government corruption, poverty,

¹⁰ In this way even the most avowed antiracists can fall into the trap of promoting an image that shares a dangerous affinity with early twentieth-century neocolonial narratives used to justify imperialist military interventions.

¹¹ Chetty and Rodríguez (2015, 3) note the tendency of some US-based scholars writing in English about Dominican race relations to overlook the work of Dominican scholars in this area.

¹² Important work in this regard is also being done by scholars of Dominican descent in the US (e.g., García-Peña 2016; Paulino 2016; Ricourt 2016; and Torres-Saillant).

and resistance to the abuses of political authority following widespread dissatisfaction with incumbent politicians and broad disparities in wealth, power, and flourishing between political elites and the general populace. In 2012, thousands of Dominicans staged massive demonstrations against fiscal reform (President Danilo Medina's *paquetazo*) that sought to cut an enormous deficit by raising taxes on average Dominican citizens. More recently, tens of thousands of Dominicans took to the streets of Santo Domingo and elsewhere to protest wide-ranging political corruption at the hands of the state. The Odebrecht scandal served as the catalyst for these initial demonstrations; *el movimiento marcha verde*, or the "Green March movement," as it has come to be called, is the outcome, decades in the making, of increased anger and frustration over government abuses and the impunity of state officials. The extant literature on race and nation presently dominating Dominican studies simply does not account for the context and meaning of this social upheaval and fails to provide, on the whole, a conceptual language for understanding political unrest of this kind.

More than another account that attempts to demystify issues of race in the Dominican Republic, more than another reproach of black denial, more than another treatise on race and nation, we need more practical work that seeks out active solutions to anti-black racism (and its ally anti-Haitianism) on the island—now more than ever. This way the "problem of race" in the Dominican Republic would be more appropriately centered on material realities (how people identified as black are treated) rather than on ideological propositions (Dominicans *are* or *are not* black). Too much scholarship on race and nation in the Dominican Republic turns on nuanced variants of the latter, a position which risks creating new problems even as it looks to solve old ones (by trading one essentialism for another), while the former position speaks to the relative material conditions of everyday life and could be used to identify concrete areas for ameliorative action. The current danger, as we see it, is the potential for more publications that identify a familiar problem and its origins without articulating a proactive solution. More and more it seems race and nation represent prestige commodities for exchange in the academic marketplace—something to write a book about—and not critical analytic categories that might be used to unveil hegemony and dismantle oppression. Too often losing sight of the situated and constructed nature of both race and nation belies their imaginary or invented ontological status as "real." Race is a social fiction, racism its material effects; any socially engaged scholarship would do well to heed the difference.

Orienting Dominican Studies

It is important to underscore the fact that Dominican studies is by no means limited to these gatekeeping concepts or dominant themes but is greatly influenced by them as a result of their persistent application to Dominican materials and recurrent evocation in academic conversations about the country. Of course, research publications outside of these frames do make an appearance from time to time and do have an impact. Yet, when scant research dollars, fellowships, and conference space are allocated regularly to studies in only a select few areas, the state of the field suffers, hindering opportunities for advancing Dominican studies as a broad-reaching interdisciplinary project and putting limits on expanding our knowledge of all things Dominican in ways that would otherwise plainly benefit the field as a whole.

So much of the Dominican studies literature available to US-based scholars today is work in the familiar areas of race and nation. It is scarcely possible in the current moment *not* to engage with it. Many of us (the authors included) are indebted to the contributions made by this scholarship, which today continues to inspire intellectual interest in the country. The canon informs our work to one degree or another and it can be argued that advancements in the field follow as a result of this work, not in spite of it. It is imperative, however, that future scholarship not be limited by the dominant categories that have heretofore defined the field or be constrained by the narrow scope of theorizing envisioned by the available corpus.

A focus on Dominicanity as understood primarily through the lens of race and nation creates a blind spot over other potentially illuminating categories of analysis like social class, ethics, family and kinship, aesthetics, performance and creative art, gender and sexuality, sports and recreation, religion, and other important articulations of state, identity, society, and culture in the country. More than that, constantly invoking race and nation has a dulling effect and tends to oversimplify and render monolithic the otherwise complex diversity of Dominican social realities that animate racial and national consciousness. Persistent and exclusive reference to these categories to the exclusion of others creates a specter of race and nation that becomes determinative in its own right. The Dominican Republic of scholarly literature becomes only ever always about ubiquitous racial logics—Dominicans always ever only subjects or sovereigns of racial domination. By reading the Dominican situation in the exclusive terms of race and nation, however complex and nuanced, we concretize a mistaken belief about so-called nonwhite peoples: namely that their ideas, dreams, desires, and motivations are never agential or creative but always a reaction to the dictates of

racial structures or antagonisms, implicitly repeating the pernicious fallacy that race explains nonwhites and nonwhites only. Whiteness studies alongside critical race theory inform us that it is precisely these imaginaries that function to reproduce racial hierarchies by ranking and ordering alterity and normalizing whiteness as nonraced and unmarked.

The limitations do not stop there, the reliance on an abbreviated catalog of themes—no matter what they may be—alienates a potentially broader academic audience since research on race and nation in the Dominican Republic, for instance, often relies on esoteric or expert Dominican material, drawing on local histories and experiences that are difficult to put into conversation with academic discussions occurring elsewhere. For example, some of the work that has come out on Dominican racial identity fails to contribute meaningfully to contemporary theorizing about race, leaving us to wonder: What do we learn from more and more nuanced analyses of Dominican racial imaginaries, or yet another genealogy of Dominican blackness? Dominican studies likely continues to be peripheral in both Latin American and Caribbean studies because too often it fails to engage with comparative material. Topics like *dominicanidad* have narrow relevance outside of the country itself. Failure to orient research questions within prominent regional discussions and themes, such as, say, clientelism or neoliberalism in Latin America, or creolization or development in the Caribbean, has alienated Dominican studies from broader area studies. It is incumbent upon us as Dominicanists to foster dialogue and to create intellectual lines of communication that connect with scholarly communities in places other than the Dominican Republic.

Dominican studies would profit from a reorientation toward a breadth of approaches that move beyond the restricted themes of race and nation and push the field past chiefly provincial concerns about identity that limit its comparative utility and cross-cultural appeal. One way is methodological; the other way is theoretical. Dominican studies is desperately thin when it comes to ethnography; to correct this lacuna, a more comprehensive pursuit of emic and prosaic perspectives on the island is needed (for good examples see Finlay 1989; Vargas 1998; Martínez 2007; Brennan 2004; Candelario 2007; Padilla 2007; Thornton 2016; Werner 2016; also see Decena 2011). Lack of ethnographic insight means that scholars too often speak *for* rather than *through* or *with* the subjects they discuss. For all the work done on Dominicaness, very little of it has the support of deep, long-term local involvement with folk, the everyday participants who actively shape, advance, and challenge the propositions of *dominicanidad*. More critical engagement with explanatory models that build on theoretical developments in conversation with local data would enrich Dominican studies immeasurably and likely lead away from exclusive concern with race and nation into other areas of importance to Dominicans, by decentering the analytic interests of the outsider and situating those interests more squarely with the concerns of subjects, that is to say, insiders themselves. Thornton's own ethnographic work with Pentecostal Christian converts in Villa Altigracia, for example, demonstrates that, for many Dominicans, ethnic/racial and national identity are subordinated to religious, social class, and other affiliations that they themselves deem to be more salient to their everyday lives (see Thornton 2016). Looking to new conceptual orientations that build on ethnographic knowledge and that respect native viewpoints, however challenging, is a necessary counterweight to the prescriptive bias of gatekeeping concepts and a vital corrective to the analytic blind spots they create. Earnest consideration of contemporary local experience will go a long way to help explain emergent political movements like *marcha verde* and contextualize prospects for future social mobilizations (be they religious, moral, artistic, sexual, or racial), if we only make a better effort to prioritize Dominican voices on the ground.

There are, of course, alternative themes that we feel could push Dominican studies in fertile new directions, namely research agendas with an eye on women and gender, neoliberalism, political economy, sexuality, clientelism, queer theory, historical memory, labor studies, globalization, economic development, feminist theory, and religion—all historically productive conceptual frameworks that cut across disciplines and would add to and even enhance existing and ongoing research in the more familiar areas of racial and cultural identity, nationality, and Dominican/Haitian relations, while bringing Dominican studies more in line with topics of enduring interest to Caribbean and Latin American studies. We might also think of creative new areas of inquiry and analysis that have yet to be developed or applied to Dominican materials. This does not mean abandoning the themes of race and nation—these issues are not trivial. Rather, we should regard them as valuable interpretive tools among many others in our ever-expanding analytic toolkit, at the same time taking stock of what has been done by others before us in order to move forward in novel directions. Moreover, it is crucial that we not ignore the broader political economy in which race and nation are important, but not singular, and seek to carve out imaginative space for social analysis that accounts for the contemporary Dominican experience in all of its complexity.

To this end we might take a cue from research being published elsewhere and compare Dominican studies to other regional or area studies. Dominican studies could draw more deliberately from the wider Caribbean literature for theory or for conceptual breath and would certainly benefit from work coming out of the Francophone and Anglophone Caribbean, not to mention research programs anchored in Cuba or Puerto Rico. One illustration of this could be employing Fernando Ortiz's transculturation, an underappreciated analytic in the Dominican Republic but one that has enjoyed considerable application throughout the Caribbean. It could also be something timelier like narco-economics, given the country's evolving relationship to the international drug trade, or maybe clientelism, a popular lens for examining political authority in Latin America. Studies of gender have been able to gain some traction of late (e.g., Horn 2014; Hutchinson 2016; Thornton 2016), as have studies on neoliberalism, corruption, and political authoritarianism (e.g., Derby 2009; Krohn-Hansen 2009). Alternatives abound.

Another example of this extension might be seen in recent work taking up a transnational perspective on Hispaniola, broadening Dominican studies to include Haiti and Haitian studies.¹³ Although new scholars to the region should be wary of reproducing well-worn tropes linking Haiti and the Dominican Republic to race, racial formation, ethnicity, blackness, and, of course, nation, this new orientation comes with the promise of deeper engagements with shared histories, cultures, and peoples whose similarities and reciprocal influences are more often overlooked than not (for recent examples see Suárez 2006; Johnson 2012; Eller 2016; Nessler 2016). Likewise, *The Dominican Republic Reader* (Roorda, Derby, and González 2014) is a well-considered collection that looks to light a broad, relatively interdisciplinary path for Dominican studies moving forward through a more comprehensive and diverse view of history, culture, and politics in terms other than simply race and nation. Ideally, new research directions together with innovative conceptual approaches will lead to novel theorizing that affords robust new insights upon which future research might profitably develop.

Possibilities for a vibrant and more influential field of Dominican studies will be contingent upon diversifying scholarly approaches to Dominican subjects with a commitment to viewing them not as racial problems but as sociological ones in the broadest sense. It is imperative that we as scholars become critically conscious of our role as gatekeepers in defining for academic audiences the dominant and quintessential questions of interest as they apply to the Dominican Republic and actively work against the arbitrary foreclosure of alternative themes and perspectives that might invite richer analyses and greater scholarly dialogue with intellectual communities beyond the island.

The analytic paradigms of race and nation have dominated scholarship on the Dominican Republic by framing social and cultural analysis in ways that have limited the theorizing of Dominican materials to a narrow focus on identity. It is a challenge to think beyond these gatekeeping concepts and to imagine the Dominican Republic as something more than a racial problem. At the very least, the current moment begs for self-reflection, for these trends are not without consequences. A decentering of, rather than a departure from, race and nation as dominant modes of inquiry has the potential to generate new insight into the diverse and meaningful areas of meaning-making that shape Dominican life. The second largest country in the Caribbean is an interesting case study for more than just a select few issues; this much is obvious, and it is up to all of us to push Dominican studies into new and productive directions even as we do not abandon important discussions of identity, violence, and exclusion, central to contemporary debates on race and nation in the Dominican Republic, as elsewhere.

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¹³ Recently pioneering this effort is the *Transnational Hispaniola* working group (see Mayes et al. 2013).

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