

Political Discourse and Racial Politics in Dominican Republic

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Political Discourse and Racial Politics in Dominican Republic Borderlands, the sites and symbols of power, constitute the imaginary somatic and cultural differences that categorize the elite from the poor. Physical barriers between states serve as a metaphor for the ethnic segregation beyond the tangible divisions. As a result of nation building tactics and selective appropriation of culture, identity becomes politicized and translated through symbols of power as a fixed national image.

In the Dominican Republic, the complex racial politics are locally and nationally contested with the everyday pursuit of an idealized state of democracy. The centralized power of patrimonial-style politics, embedded in the nation's history, combined with the resonant forms of enforced democratic government formalized the imaginative, idealized Dominican Republic solely beneficial to the elites. When the national symbol of being Dominican is being Hispanic and not being black, true democracy becomes forsaken (Sagaas, 36). The complex web of Dominican race relations created through the performance of authoritarian politics work in tandem to create a cyclical restriction and limitation to the envisioned utopia of democracy. As a result, the nation's imagined narrative is truly written by the pockets of centralized, symbolic power.

Dominican Republic's foundation of neopatrimonial rule has been the cultural foundation of political leadership; thus, leaving political democracy to be sacrificed and scant (Hartlyn, 2). The rise and appearance of neopatrimonial figures, such as Rafael Trujillo, is due to the country's tragic history of "foreign occupation, economic ruin, and civil wars during the nineteenth century" (Hartlyn, 2). Hegemonic forces imposing the restructuring of a nation's political system limit the true realization of an envisioned "free" nation. The prevailing authoritarianism portrayed as democracy has been maintained as a cultural thread throughout Dominican Republic's history. Authoritarian, caudillo-like, political culture has been the underlying force and the primary reason for democracy's failure in the D.R (Hartlyn, 2). The face of democracy was masked by caudillo-like figures which were culturally receptive but held the power to soon formalize and militarize the national image of Dominican Republic.

In the face of international vulnerability, the year 1916 marked the beginning of a series of consequences to come with the United States occupation (Hartlyn, 12). The origins of caudillo politics have legitimate roots that strengthened social networks and political arrangement before the occupation of foreign power began to shape the reorganization of the Dominican Republic. Informal politics constituted the insecure groupings of elite families, a weak and dependent church, and no national military institution (Hartlyn, 12). Hartlyn describes

the evolution of Dominican Republic "from the time of independence until the U.S occupation of 1916 ended the period of caudillo politics, Dominican Republic was not characterized by a powerful triad of oligarchy, church, and military" (Hartlyn, 12). Informal and weak social forces and national institutions pre-1916 was steadily compatible with patrimonial-style politics.

Caudillo-like, authoritarian political culture nonetheless is transformed to fit the face of a democratic government through militarized and institutionalized forms. The intention of bringing "good government" to Latin American peoples becomes antithetical to the consequential milieu that would strengthen and legitimize neosultanistic rulers. Wilson's administrations ultimately failed due to culturally resonant institutions that produced a hybridity of structures. The immediate actions upon U.S intervention were to quickly establish and centralize control over the country in order to secure peace and stability (Hartlyn, 37). The U.S occupation placed military officers in major posts in the executive branch, while press censorship was imposed and steps were taken to disarm the population (Hartlyn, 37). The military implemented "technocratic progressive" reforms under the assumption that certain socioeconomic, financial, and administrative changes would foster the conditions for political and constitutional stability (Hartlyn, 37). As a result, land titles were regularized and U.S sugar companies expanded their holdings dramatically (Hartlyn, 37).

Until the extrication of troops, the U.S military sponsored important reforms independent of there being democratic elections. To this end, the U.S helped oversee the naming of a provisional president and the enactment of new electoral laws, including the Junta Central Electoral- a separate electoral oversight agency (Hartlyn, 38). The militaristic transformation taking place had shifted political power and institutionalized "democratic citizenship" from weak social groupings and informal establishments. The urbanization of the Dominican Republic taken place during the U.S military occupation completely changed the nation. The call for greater social cohesion and mobilization of a new national identity was motivated by the interconnectedness of highways and improved communications. The major regions of the country were now even more firmly linked to Santo Domingo (Hartlyn, 40). Newly formed and newly trained centralized police forces as well as the disarming of the population are the remnants of the intervention's legacy (Hartlyn, 40).

The ultimate consequence of "bringing good government" to the Dominican Republic in order to establish stability and formal economy is contradictory to its intentions. The transition into a democratic nation marked with militarized institutions shifts the power into the hands of authoritarian figures which had hitherto been allocated diffusely. The democratization of formal institutions, militarized police force, and centralized power is inadvertently given under a singular, authoritarian figure. The appointment of a neopatrimonial face would grant the power to homogenize the nation, culture, and identity to define the newly formed "democratic" nation. As a result of a shifting government and economic system, Dominican racial identities and ideologies were structured as the newly independent nation was being characterized by dominant hegemonic U.S and European bases. "White supremacy" ruled the political power discourse and became firmly ingrained in nation-building tactics (Sagaas, 180). The historical influence of foreign powers and international organizations catalyzed the desire of a nation once ruled by disperse, elite families to find a shared, common, national symbol. Growing feelings of nationalism and need for greater independence among its people is correspondingly a response

to the legacy of U.S political and economic intervention. However, the "U.S. continues to influence Dominican politics, producing tensions between those who would like greater control over their national destiny and those who fear the dangers of a policy of "benign neglect" on the part of the United States" (Dent, 149). Despite the efforts of Dominican leaders to detach themselves from foreign political and economic occupation, the establishment of the globalized market, trade patterns, investment interest, and migration flows is dependent upon its current state of hegemonic partnership (Dent, 150). Thus, the centralized allocation of political, social, and economic systems of power narrated the national portrait of the Dominican Republic on the foundations of racial identity.

Nationally recognized authoritarian figureheads, such as Francisco Moscoso Puello, a mulatto, described the Dominican people as "constitutionally white" (Sagas, 1). In the mid twentieth century, historian Manuel A. Pena Battle branded the Dominican national as "Spanish, Christian, and Catholic" (Sagas, 1). Battle and Puello's assertions highlight the enduring obsession of contemporary Dominican intellectuals with racial discourse between Haitian and Dominican national identity. Elites, representing the wealthy and U.S intervention friendly, have "erected barriers of prejudice and racism to distance themselves from their poor, dark skinned neighbors" (Sagas, 1). Anti-haitianismo has been a cultural contour that has endured since Spanish rule; however, the newly formed authoritative led democracy built the platform to militarize and institutionalize prejudice attitudes. The democratization of the Dominican Republic through formal institutions and militarization mobilized a stage to reproduce and politicize racial identities. The question, thus, becomes how racial politics serve as a nation building tool to define citizenship, democratic practices, and Dominican identity.

In order to secure and curb challenges to elitist status, these same forces found race to be a useful political tool (Sagas, 2). The false mirage of the racial situation in the Dominican Republic is marketed as apparent racial harmony, but nonetheless has an underlying theme of "unofficial" prejudice and racism (Sagas, 2). Much like the myth of democracy in the Dominican Republic, elites have objectified nationalist-cultural myths to reproduce their racial views and political power (Sagas, 3). An apparent "color-blind" myth hopes for racial harmony in the Dominican Republic, but nonetheless underserves darker skinned outliers of the symbolic national identity, in order to serve the racial views of the Dominican elites and protect their political and economic interests (Sagas, 3-4).

The foundation for racial identities and ambiguous ethno-racial classification is a result of the emergence of the anti-Haitian credo. Sagas defines anti-haitianismo "as a set of socially reproduced anti-Haitian prejudices, myths, and stereotypes prevalent in the cultural makeup of the Dominican Republic" (Sagas, 4). The ideological framework of anti-haitianismo is designed to treat Haitians as the "scapegoats of a society" that are racially and culturally inferior to the "constitutionally white" Dominicans (Sagas, 4). Nonetheless, antihaitianismo is an ideological method of political control in order to bring cohesion to a historically heterogeneous racial identification. This form of political control and ideological cohesion marked being "black" as being Haitian. Darkened skin color becomes the marker and symbolic representation of the subordinate class. Thus, Afro-Caribbean members of Dominican society take part in anti-haitianismo prejudices. In order to defend status quo, antihaitianismo denies dark-skinned

citizens, often the makeup of the poor class, their own sociocultural space which limits their agency and power to "make demands or otherwise participate in politics" (Sagas, 4).

Antihaitianismo ideology has historically been rooted in the Dominican national discourse and collective thought due to its cultural affinity with elite ideas and power relationships (caudillo figures) (Sagas, 4). Although the ideology has formally been imposed from above to create national cohesion and identity, it has been accepted by the nation to define racial categories and shift national identity to "Spanish, Christian, and Catholic". Post 1916 and the U.S intervention in Dominican Republic, authoritative figures such as Rafael Trujillo and Joaquin Balaguer, by means of ethos, exploit the concept of nation by appealing to the sense of belonging and group identity. The dangerous discourse of caudillo-like figures in a "cohesive democratic" state threatens the hetero-somatic makeup of the Dominican Republic. The poor, dark-skinned Afro-Caribbeans of the Dominican Republic are tied to its physical space and politics but are subjugated to nation-building tools built on the black and white dichotomy.

According to Lewellan in his chapter on *The Politics of Identity: Ethnicity and Nationalism* he states that "identity may be constructed or reinforced when a group emphasizes in-group unity in order to maintain control of an economic niche. Groups artificially created by foreign powers may assume the classification of the oppressor in order to gain political power" (Lewellan, 164). Centralized and focused power of formal institutions in the Dominican Republic has created an imaginary race and nation that establishes the shared culture and traditions in order to establish the nation as a distinct unit (Sagas, 5). Lewellan's theoretical explanation of social capital gain by seeking ethnoracial identification away from Dominican Republic's threat of racially "black", meaning Haitian, explains why dark-skinned Dominicans tend to politically identify with lighter ethnoracial categories (Contreras, 213). Ethnoracial stratification worsened with the establishment of large-scale production post U.S intervention. The maintenance of this "economic niche" sustained itself on two social classes: "a black, low wage underclass largely from the British West Indies and Haiti, and a bourgeoisie comprised of foreign sugar producers and merchants" (Contreras, 212). Through policy and formal institutions, culturally produced notions of race are reified in order for the foreign sugar producers and merchants to justify their economic capital. Ethnoracial classification of the oppressor is a strategy used by Dominican Afro-descendants to maintain their national identity and be subject to further marginalization.

In their quest for legitimacy, Dominican authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regime exploited the Dominican and Haitian boundaries to exercise political control. Encouraging anti-haitian nationalism unites the people while defusing lower-class threats that are politically, socially, and economically based (Sagas, 12). The elitist discourse reproduced into the Dominican worldview portrayed Dominicans as "devout Catholics, while Haitians were voodoo sorcerers who believed in spirits and utilized black magic in mysterious ceremonies" (Sagas, 36). Distinct somatic and cultural borders are drawn by Dominican elites who thought of themselves as "white", proudly descending from proper Spanish culture; whereas Haitians were the true "blacks", primitive in their somatic and cultural inheritance of African slaves (Sagas, 36). Nation-building tactics were narrated by the newly formed elitist class post-democratization of the Dominican Republic that developed official national symbols such as the Hispanic peasant with his traditional merengue and the "Fathers of the Dominican

Republic": Juan Pablo Duarte y Diez, Matias Ramon Mella y Castillo, and Francisco Sanchez del Rosario (Sagas, 36). Nurturing a national identity through symbolic appropriation is reproduced as the cultural cement that binds the Dominican ethnic identity and their "nationalism is linked in varying degrees to a past, present or hoped-for future national territory and nation-state sovereignty" (Donnan and Wilson, 6).

The Dominican Republic's post U.S intervention nationalistic efforts have been successful in creating political ideological control but limiting in the hopeful realization of democracy. Antihaitianismo ideology maintains a socioeconomic structure in which dark-skinned citizens occupy the lower rungs of the social pyramid and are taught to solely perform manual labor (Sagas, 125). Formal policies reify racial discourse based on ethnic borders that are threatening to Dominican Republic's economic, cultural, and/or social structures. An ethnographic study of the Dominican towns of Boca Chica and Andres in *The Devil behind the Mirror*, Gregory states that "the ability of residents to secure a livelihood, whether in the formal or informal economy, was conditioned by the strength of their claims to citizenship" (Gregory, 36). The pathway to citizenship is based off the nationalistically produced conception of personhood that is dependent upon a member's ability to identify with ideologies of a common national culture. Most commonly, those unable to secure a "livelihood" were the poor, lower class, Afro Caribbean Dominicans.

In order to establish one's legality through state authorities, possession of documents certifying their Dominican nationality, such as birth certificates and national identification cards, were ritually asked upon and granted entry into the formal economy. Gregory's theory, "policing of citizenship", was the ritually situational checking of identity papers used by the police and other authorities that "governed the movement of people within and across the social division of labor" (Gregory, 36). However, being "sin papeles" left many out of the jobs in the formal economy which stratified access to goods, services, and rights associated to citizenship. In other words, the policing of the "laboring poor" is equivalent to the dark-skinned citizens who occupy the lower rungs of the socioeconomic structure. The act of being "sin papeles" subjected them to "arbitrary harassment and arrest by the police" with little social capital to act upon to defend themselves (Gregory, 36). The foundation for the act of "policing of citizenship" is a result of the democratization and institutionalization of the U.S interventionist legacy that intended to stabilize and formalize the Dominican Republic. Instead, the elitist painted portrait of the idealized Dominican Republic reified its anti-Haitian credo through formalized government. A resonant U.S militaristic intervention held its legacy.

Daily attempts to navigate the Dominican Republic's "democratic" process were confined by the inequitable attainment of citizenship among poor, dark-skinned Dominicans. Gregory defines citizenship as a "continuing series of transactions between persons and agents of a given state in which each has enforceable rights and obligations" (Gregory, 39). Citizenship is contested and challenged through rituals among state authorities and the diverse population under control. The testing and exercise of power relationships and practices marked struggles over access to employment, political participation, and other rights (Gregory, 39). According to Donnan and Wilson's chapter: *The Symbols and Rituals of Power*, "anthropologists recognize that one of the most important interfaces between symbols and politics occurs in ritual[...]ritual is 'symbolic behavior that is socially standardized and repetitive'[...] and are perhaps the most

formal behavioral patterns in any society" (Donnan and Wilson, 68). In the midst of the policing of citizenship ritual, determining power relationships are contingent on the symbolic meaning of skin, occupation, birth certificate, national identification cards. The repetition of these rituals reifies power and institutionalizes limitations to citizenship and democratic practice.

Nonetheless, transactions between state authorities and citizens stratify the movement of people through space and incorporation into labor markets that categorize and "mark subjects with weakened or nonexistent claims to the nation and its resources" (Gregory, 39). The ritualistic behavior of the policing of citizenship was able to repeatedly transform symbolic differences of race, class, gender, and national origin into the real manifestation of power created by a foundation of economic, political, and cultural division. The limited agency given to the poor, dark-skinned Dominicans to take place in the initial envision of democracy was indebted to their imaginary sense of true Hispanic origin and Spanish surname.

The self-righteousness of the United States' intentions to bring about "good government" was the beginning of a series of consequential cultural adjustments from the previous political structure of the Dominican Republic. The centralized government called for a desire to bring about a cohesive ethnic identity through selective appropriation. However, nation building tactics politicized racial identities that stratified inchoate ethnoracial categories that ultimately appeared as a black and white dichotomy. For Dominicans to truly live in a democratic system, the extension of democratic rights to the country's largest minority must be recognized. The contradictory nodes of maintaining a racially built nation yet democratic constitution is a multi-layered cultural battle that the Dominican Republic faces to ensure true "stability and peace".

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