

Too Black to Belong

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National identity issues in the Dominican Republic related to blackness and whiteness are still prevalent. Yadira Perez Hazel highlights the importance on body politics and how our senses of taste, smell, touch, sight and hearing constantly respond to markers within our society. Those markers serve a distinct role in how we connect and interpret our interactions with individuals. Those markers allow us to interpret social, gendered and racial ideas through standards of normality embedded in our culture (Hazel, 2014). Kimberly Eison Simmons highlights the historical colonization of the Dominican Republic and the lasting effects of growing up in a racialized system. These effects contribute to ideologies of “Dominicaness” while constructing a national identity (Simmons, 2008). Hazel’s approach is geared towards standards of whiteness that have been dictated by political governing forces, which continue to impact the everyday life on the streets in the Dominican Republic. Simmons, on the other hand, emphasizes the experiences African American students encounter along with Dominican American students during their study abroad course in the Dominican Republic. Both anthropologists explain the meanings associated with the various tones of skin complexion and the detachment of the Dominican national identity from African ancestry. They highlight the unequal treatment dark skinned Dominicans have faced as they remain marginalized due to their skin color.

In an interview conducted by Amnesty International in 2007, with a Dominican of Haitian descent regarding Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic, he states “if you are black, with identity card or without it, with birth certificate or without, it is the same, it has no value... In the streets with migration officials, you don’t have any rights” (Hazel, 2014). Here we see that a person’s blackness is more of an indicator of their national identity than official legal documentation. In 2013 the Dominican Constitutional Court ruled in favor of the revocation of birthright citizenship of children whose parents were “in transit”, meaning that if the migrant parent was in the Dominican Republic for 10 days or less their child born on Dominican soil would not be considered a Dominican citizen (Hazel, 2014). This ruling directly affected Dominican children born of Haitian parents. The meaning of “in transit” was then expanded to include migrant Haitian workers regardless of how long they had lived in the Dominican Republic. This law rejected the birthright of any Dominican child of Haitian parents. Along with the revocation of birthright citizenship, the legislation passed the Naturalization Law 168-14 to retroact the birthright citizenship dating back to June 1929 (Hazel, 2014). This in turn “denied Dominican nationality to thousands of Dominicans of Haitian descent born in the country, creating a community of stateless individuals” (Hazel, 2014).

Hazel and Simmons argue that the rejection of blackness is associated with historical practices of the European colonizer and with modern ideals of Westernization. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries “Dominican elites cemented the ideas of Dominicaness in terms of race and nation” recognizing the whiteness as “*blancos de la tierra*” the “white of the land” (Simmons, 2008). During the mid-20th century Rafael Trujillo, the dictator in Dominican Republic worked towards creating a unified national identity while ridding the republic of blackness (Simmons, 2008). Trujillo began national-building projects to “deaffricanize the country and restore European Catholic values” (Hazel, 2014). The wave of Dominican nationalism allowed them to reconstruct their national identity without a positive historical reference to their African ancestry (Simmons, 2008). This process was part of Trujillo’s plan while he also physically removed Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent through the 1937 massacre along the border and the parsley test massacre where 12,000 to 20,000 black Dominican and Haitians lost their lives (Hazel, 2014). After the massacre of 1937, Trujillo offered land to non-blacks, such as Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, Spaniards, Hungarian refugees, and Japanese immigrants (Hazel, 2014). Trujillo’s dictatorship efforts of whitewashing the Dominican race was in hopes of taking steps towards ‘progress’ and modernity. His goal was to advance the country and enter the global world market.

Through Hazel’s ethnographic research she shares stories of her interactions with Dominican men and women that reinforce these notions of what is Dominican and what is not. Body politics serve as sensors to alert the individual when encountering someone who may look Dominican in phenotypical features but are not ‘truly’ Dominican. The five senses scan for compatibilities and differences, a process that occurs in the individual as we filter the world around us. In her encounter with Seve, a Dominican man who describes himself as strong, like black coffee, because there is not even a hint of milk in his complexion. He argues that racism does not exist in the Dominican Republic and that most struggles occur due to corruption not racism (Hazel, 2014). Many Dominicans argued that racism cannot exist when their skin complexions have a broad range, from light to dark. Can someone be racist if they have a white mother and a black father? Questions that deter the focus from the grand social structural forces, not considering the influence racism could have on the political economic interest. The validity of racism is reduced to an individual perspective failing to acknowledge the laws and historical events that created a clear distinction between black and non-black Dominicans. This has led the Dominican Republic to portray a false image of a “paradise free of human rights violations against their own citizens” (Hazel, 2014).

According to Hazel and Simmons, Dominicans had only accepted part of their history. They knew they were a mixed race, however, accredited their dark skin color to their native ancestors. Dominicans identified as White European mixed with *Indio* (Native Taino Indians). Simmons explains that after the island was decolonized in the early 1800s the history of the Dominican Republic and Haiti intertwined, waves of Haitians migrated to the Dominican Republic. Due to this migration and the hundreds of years the two had been separated, Dominicans and Haitians created a sense of themselves. They ‘othered’ each other to learn what made them different. What made one Dominican and what made the other Haitian.

Haitians embraced their African ancestry, for Dominicans if Haiti was associated with the Blackness of African ancestry then they were not, otherwise they too would be Haitian. Dominicans associated their blackness to their Native ancestors. Dominicans were able to accept and embrace their color while rejecting their race (Hazel, 2014). As they identified themselves as “culturally white, Hispanic and Catholic” (Simmons, 2008).

Blackness is associated with Haitians given their African ancestry. In Simmons’ article we see the effects that the Dominican perception of blackness has on black non-Haitians. Simmons shares the experience Dominican American and African American students had during their study abroad course. Dominican American students signed up because they wanted to learn more about their heritage while African American students applied for the course because they wanted to learn about other countries that shared a connection to African Ancestors (Simmons, 2008). Once the students learned of the history and stepped out onto the streets of Santo Domingo, they noticed how racial markers assigned them a national identity. Braids or dark skin are associated with Haitian women (Simmons, 2008). Light skinned African Americans were considered Dominican. Much like Hazel’s piece, the visual marker is one of the determinants of the person’s national identity. One can tell who belongs and who does not based on how black or light their skin is. During their time in Dominican Republic students were constantly reminded of their perceived otherness. African Americans students were labeled by locals as either Haitian or Dominican. The African American students found it difficult to grapple with this idea of their being different ‘kinds’ of black. The racial discrimination African Americans have faced in the United States made it confusing for the students to understand how people of color discriminated amongst each other. “Dominicans are confused about who they are... they don’t know that they are Black” some students argued when gathered mid semester to speak about their experience (Simmons, 2008). Simmons tried to explain that much of what is going on in the Dominican Republic also occurred in the United States.

Simmons, unlike Hazel, refers to the history of African descendants in the United States. She highlights the unique racialization process that every black person has faced in America. The “one-drop rule” categorizes every person of color, regardless to how light or dark their skin is, as black (Simmons, 2008). She later explains that Dominicans too believe in a “one drop rule” but contrary to how it is seen in the US. One drop of White blood in the Dominican Republic indicates that you are mixed. Being mixed means that you are not black but are of European descent. Many of these ideologies were set in place by the colonizers and later enforced by a communist leader. This way of thinking remains relevant today and made it challenging for the African American students to accept.

From 1976 to 1997 the idea of being ‘mixed’ headlined Dominican media and newspaper outlets as they sold the story and the image of the Mestizo. According to Simmons the term “mestizo” is used in the Dominican Republic to identify children whose parents were Spanish and Indio Taino (Simmons, 2008). Promoting the face of the so called ‘real’ Dominican “privileges the European and Native ancestry over the African ancestry” (Simmons, 2008). The ads and newspapers setting a public national standard of dominicaness supports Hazel’s and

Simmons' stance on views of national identity and the struggle black Dominicans face in belonging. Simmons also addresses skin whitening products sold even today at local stores in the barrio. All of which surprised many of the African American and Dominican American students.

Simmons touched on the visible marker regarding skin color and hairstyles and how people identify you based on how you look. Assumptions may be drawn if one's skin is very dark and automatically think, if your dark you're Haitian. If one is wearing hair in braids and is light skin assumptions may be made that the individual is mixed and has one parent who is Dominican, because of the light skin and the other parent is black/Haitian because of the association of braids with African ancestry. Hazel, much like Simmons addresses visual markers but elaborates on other social markers used for filtering one's interactions with individuals.

Hazel explains how we experience differences through our five senses. She shares a story about her stay at Tata's house, a Dominican woman who was standing in the front porch of her house, when she sees a young girl with dark skin and two braids walk past the house.

Tata then said with a sad face "Oh what a girl with large brown eyes, who waters the land in which-once again-she will see the cane grow that her father will cut" (Hazel, 2014). As Hazel analyzes Tata's statement she realizes that it explained the racial positioning in society between Tata, the little girl and herself (Hazel, 2014). Tata's narrative placed them in separate political and socio-economic worlds (Hazel, 2014). Hazel explains that Tata's preexisting knowledge of the American racial politics and Dominican national politics compelled her to comment on the blackness of this young girl, to divert racial tension of Tata's own blackness. She stated the struggles the young girl will face due to her blackness and removed herself from the marginal black space. Tata was aware of the negative perception that is associated with blackness in the Dominican Republic and wanted to make sure that Hazel understood that the young girl and Tata were in two separate categories. The sense of sight is what Tata used to observe the young girl's skin color and braided hair. These markers indicated the distinction and instantly marginalized the young girl and placed her into the "other" category. The young girl was simply too black to be Dominican.

Although sight is the most obvious sense responsible in a first impression, Hazel focuses on explaining scenarios where each sense filtered for markers, to indicate appropriate Dominican behavior while belittling the Haitian customs. Hazel shares a story of staying at a friend's house in Santiago where a pig was giving birth. Her friend's husband was cleaning the piglets one by one and placing them at the side of the pen. Hazel was told that if one handles a pig outside of the womb they would "smell like a Haitian and that scent doesn't wash off" (Hazel, 2014). Another instance she shared was at her friend Caridad's house who had a Haitian domestic worker named Lina. Caridad and her husband had several arguments because he refused to eat food cooked by their Haitian domestic worker. He claimed that Haitians do not have the *criollo* touch, which refers to typical Hispanic Caribbean homemade flavors. The sense of smell and taste are evident in the examples and experiences Hazel shares of her research in the Dominican Republic. Dominicans emphasized their sense of self and higher status by rejecting and belittling the Haitian culture, whether it be their skin, food or smell it is not Dominican.

Simmons as well as Hazel highlights the sense of hearing as she references the parsley test during the time of Rafael Trujillo. During his dictatorship thousands of Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent lost their lives because of their creole accent. The phonetic marker was significant enough that many men and women of color paid the ultimate price with their very lives, as they were othered and rejected for their blackness. The last sense that Hazel draws on as a racial marker is the sense of touch and is mostly evident in occasions when hair texture is implicated. Simmons also draws on this social marker as some of the African American students shared how offended they were when their Dominican homestay mothers invited them to the salon to rid them of their braids and dreadlocks and make their hair pretty and straight (Simmons, 2014).

The lasting effects of colonization are still evident in the Dominican Republic. The displacement and denationalization of Dominican Haitians is a violation of human rights. Negative stigmas of blackness imposed by the colonizing force continue to permeate the culture in the Dominican Republic. These ideals of beauty, wealth, education and progress have shaped the lens of how Dominicans view Dominican Haitians. Social markers, such as one's skin color, accent, smell, hair texture all allow individuals to assess whether or not you belong to the national identity. Ethnographic research revealed that Dominicans questioned about the unequal treatment due to race did not openly agree. We see that the inequality is much more subtle, where many themselves deny such ideals. Although their words reject these ideals, Simmons and Hazel's prove that it's not the case in the everyday lives of Dominicans. The standards of norm have been embedded into the fabric of the Dominican society throughout the course of history by laws that maintain the black Dominicans marginalized. Creating a greater disparity and lack of opportunity for success to Dominicans of Haitian descent as they remain nationless. Hazel researched around locals and challenged the idea of racial problems in the diverse Dominican Republic, she used her personal experience to answer how embedded the racial politics are in their everyday life of Dominicans. Simmons draws on the history of whitewashing in the Dominican Republic and the experience African American students encounter with racial politics. Although many Dominicans deny the racial issues, they are still relevant today and are used to identify Dominicans from Dominicans of Haitian descent who are no longer acknowledged as citizens of their own country.

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