

Racial Perception in the Dominican Republic¹

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Much is owed for this work to the research of Ginetta Candelarioⁱ and Kimberly Simmonsⁱⁱ about race in the Dominican Republic.

As Kimberly Simmons affirms, "Like other identities, racial identities are constructed, learned, and internalized."ⁱⁱⁱ

Racial perceptions on the American continent have been determined by diverse factors. They share a common history of slavery, while the varied forms in which slavery was carried out in different regions have produced diverse social categories. The ideology that emerges along with slavery is one in which differentiation and valuation of people according to their origin, skin color, and status as free or slave is justified.

Racial perceptions change according to the history and culture of each country. We have observed that some students from the United States who visit the Dominican Republic have difficulty in realizing that race has not always been perceived in the States the same way that it is today. They sometimes fail to take notice that racial perception in their own country is a concept that has evolved with the history of U.S. society. This is quite understandable since, due to their age, if they have not dedicated time to studying this theme scientifically, they are likely to exhibit an understanding that is based on their own socialization and not on historical perspective.

It is common that upon their arrival to the D.R., visiting students notice that racism exists and also that there are differences between the way that they were educated about perceiving race and the predominant perceptions of race among Dominicans.

Beginning in the first decades of the 20th century in the United States, a classification system according to groups characterized by skin "color" has existed without accepting mixture between groups. Instead, there have been rigidly

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defined spaces that group each skin "color:" *black, white, native, Asian*, amongst others. But in the most recent census nuances in differentiation have been established, without which it would be difficult for many people to classify themselves.

In the Dominican Republic, from very early on, including during its colonial past, mixture has been accepted as a form of classification of skin color, since different shades of coloration were related to the social status of a person.

It is also important to note that in the Dominican society, once the definitive abolition of slavery occurred in 1822, it did not structure itself with a criterion of racial segregation. While racial prejudice remained a factor of differentiation between people, physical spaces that were exclusive depending on skin color were not established. Obviously, though, prejudice was reproduced as a consequence of slavery and colonialism— both phenomena were based on racial prejudice as a mechanism for domination that valued skin color as a social quality.

After the Civil Rights movement in the United States, the African-American Community promoted a pride for and recuperation of their African origins and heritage. One factor that can make students from the U.S. uncomfortable during their time in the D.R. is their perception that Dominicans do not feel a particular pride for their African origins and heritage, but instead praise what some have called their "Taino roots." The Tainos were the group of indigenous people who inhabited the island prior to the period of colonization.

How Dominicans perceive themselves can also awaken discomfort in students from the United States. The Dominican population, though coming from different ethnic groups, does not identify themselves by these ethnic groups or racial identity, but rather by nationality. We do not have Italian Dominicans, Arab-Dominicans, Asian-Dominicans, or African-Dominicans. There is one culture, one history, one language, and one folklore, with which all members of society identify regardless of their skin color.

However, often students do not notice that despite these differences in racial perception, there also exist some aspects of racial classification in the

Dominican Republic that can be compared with classification systems of certain time periods in the United States. This is not to say that perceptions are the same independently of the society which they represent, but it is undeniable that we can establish some parallels between the United States and the Dominican Republic. In order for students to understand these similarities or parallels, it is necessary that they understand that racial perceptions are not static, but rather evolving and corresponding to each historical moment that the respective societies are experiencing at a given time. Students' increased awareness of these similarities, and their willingness to search for subtle differences, can allow them to have a less-challenging process of adaptation during their time in the D.R.

One similarity, from a historical perspective, is that during certain times in the history of the U.S., intra-group naming or intra-group color categories within the African American community existed, such as *brown*, *light*, *dark*. In the D.R., we have *indio claro* (light indian), *indio oscuro* (dark indian), *indio lavado* (washed indian), *indio Quemado* (burned indian), *Moreno*, *chocolate*, *café con leche* (coffee with milk).

Other similarities between the African American community and the Dominicans are the cultural practices of marrying up, lightening creams and hair straighteners^{iv}.

During the 18th and 19th Centuries in the U.S., there were different categories—octogroon, hexadecaroon, quintroon, quadroon, and terceroon.^v Until 1920, the category *mulatto* existed in the U.S. census. Before the Civil Rights movement, the term *colored* was used, which nowadays is considered pejorative. That term was followed later by *black*, and then *African American*.

In the 18th Century, in the Royal Archives of Bayaguana and of Higüey^{vi}, primary documents produced during the time of Spanish Colony in Santo Domingo, only slaves were assigned a "color": *negro* (black), *mulato*, *tercerón*, *cuarterón*, *pardo* (brown). Not a single document mentioned the skin color of a slave owner (it would appear that they were transparent), the assumption being that all wealthy people were white or equivalent. The term *Moreno* did not necessarily refer to a

color, but rather was used to refer to a person who had previously been a slave but who had obtained his or her freedom. And to many Dominicans' surprises, the term *indio*, which is so commonly used today, does not appear in any of those 18th Century documents. *Indio* is the most common color category within the Dominican population nowadays and has been converted into the default classification.

During the period of political unification of the island under the Republic of Haiti, from 1822-1844, the categories *negro*, *blanco*, and *mulato* existed, but they were not commonly used, appearing in only 7 of more than 6,000 primary documents of Notarial Protocols^{vii}. The term *Moreno* was used the same way as before 1822, signifying a former slave who had attained his or her freedom. The term *indio* does not appear in documents from this period either.

By the end of the 19th Century, the Dominican Republic adopted use of the term "person of color," which was used frequently in official documents, periodicals, literary works, and social reflections. At the beginning of the 20th Century, the term *mulato* appeared as a racial category and later, in 1935, during the Trujillo Dictatorship, this term was officially substituted by the term *mestizo*, while *indio* was designated to denote skin color. This, as I have already mentioned, remains the color with which the majority of the Dominican population continues to identify to this day.

During the 1970s, due to the flux of migration of Dominicans into the United States, the color category *trigueño* (wheat-colored), was added. Since all Dominicans were classified as *indio*, or *indian*, in their passports, upon becoming U.S. citizens they were classified in the group whose nomenclature most represented this category—*Native Americans*, a group to which, according to U.S. authorities, they did not truly belong. Therefore, the U.S. Government demanded that the Dominican Government eliminate the category *indio* from its passport. In 1998 the term *mulato* was once again included by order of the law in Dominican *cedulas* (Dominicans' identification cards), but this term has still not become widely

used by the general population. Currently, amongst groups of social activists, the tendency to refer to oneself as *afro-descendent* has become common.

Just like in the United States, the Dominican Republic has a “one-drop” rule, but it is employed in the opposite manner: in the U.S., if you have one drop of *black blood* you are not *white*, and this can place you in a marginalized position. In the D.R., on the other hand, if you have one drop of *white blood* you are not *black*, and this can place you in a privileged or “mainstream” position.

Another theme that is very common amongst students from the United States when discussing race in the Dominican Republic is that of Haitian immigrants and the discrimination that they suffer in the D.R. Haitians are doubly discriminated against, for their national origin and for the color of their skin. The latter form of prejudice, as we have seen, exists between Dominicans themselves as well. But students tend not to see the similarity of this phenomenon with their own society, where it is commonly acknowledged that not all the U.S. population treats immigrants equally and members of immigrant groups can be perceived differently and often times discriminated against. Furthermore, in both countries this theme is made more complex by the occurrence of political manipulation of issues surrounding immigration.

One aspect that marks the difference in racial perception between the D.R. and the U.S. is the role that money and social class plays in racial categories and sub-categories. While color-based prejudice exists in the D.R., there are many racial categories and sub-categories that have permeable borders, and money and physical appearance can play a large role in assigning a person to one category or another. How one wears his or her hair, the quality of clothing one wears, and how one maintains hands or feet (such as maintaining nails freshly manicured and devoid of the damage caused by manual labor) are contributing factors when classifying people. These characteristics and classifications transmit messages about access to money, which in Dominican society often determines one’s racial assignment. In the U.S., a person’s economic standing is not a factor when deciding into which racial category or group to place that person. In the D.R., class

and race are more linked, and a person's economic position can influence his or her classification.

In the Dominican Republic, "race" and "color" are spoken about openly and publicly, while focusing on these themes in the U.S. can be perceived as politically incorrect depending on context. Many Dominicans vehemently affirm that the Dominican practice is not racist, and that Dominican Society is not a racist society. Many of these people understand the only form of racism to be racial segregation and because there has not been racial segregation since 1822, they perceive that racism does not exist in Dominican society. Others argue that discrimination against Haitians is not racial, but rather nationalistic, using justifications such as "they are from another country."

Many of these perceptions are transmitted through the teaching of the Official History that is still predominant today in the D.R. However, there also exists in the country a wave of criticism that is confronting this antiquated vision, and it is being propelled forward by professionals in the social sciences, human rights activists, and NGOs that work in the areas of gender, discrimination, and migration. These groups have been fighting in order to change Dominicans' perceptions. And although we can point out that much advancement has been made, we must also remember that mental perceptions change slowly over time. Understanding how color categories and a society's perception of those colors are assigned is one of the ways to advance towards a change in antiquated perceptions about human beings.

I suggest that during discussions about race and racial perception with students who are about to embark on a study abroad experience, it is helpful to present them with the idea that racial perceptions are historical and cultural. Therefore they cannot be uniform across all societies, nor will they remain static in any given society through time.

As Kimberly Simmons says, "When people encounter new racial systems they have to negotiate 'who they are'..."^{viii}

ⁱGinetta Candelario, *Black behind the ears*. Duke University Press. Durham & London, 2007.

ⁱⁱKimberly Eison Simmons, *Reconstructing racial identity and the African past in the Dominican Republic*. Gainesville. University Press of Florida. 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱP. 10, Kimberly Eison Simmons, *Reconstructing racial identity and the African past in the Dominican Republic*.

^{iv}P.4, pp 74-77, Kimberly Eison Simmons, *Reconstructing racial identity and the African past in the Dominican Republic*.

^vP.71, Kimberly Eison Simmons, *Reconstructing racial identity and the African past in the Dominican Republic*.

^{vi} María Filomena González Canalda. *Personas propietarias y esclavizadas en la Bayaguana del siglo XVIII*, en *Historia del Pueblo Dominicano*, tomo II, en prensa. Academia Dominicana de la Historia.

^{vii} María Filomena González Canalda. *Libertad Igualdad, Protocolos notariales de José Troncoso y Antonio Abad Alfau*. AGN. 2013.

^{viii}P. 68, Kimberly Eison Simmons, *Reconstructing racial identity and the African past in the Dominican Republic*.