

# The Myth of the Indio: Race and the Dominican Performance of Identity

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## **Preface**

I recall a photograph. It's a black and white portrait of my grandmother and grandfather taken the day of their wedding in 1941. He is wearing a suit and she is wearing a simple white dress. My grandmother isn't smiling but looks calmly and intently at the camera. It is much harder to read my grandfather's expression. When I first saw the photograph, I recognized that his face had been subjected to a photographic technique called dodging. An image is transferred by placing a negative in front of a light focused towards a piece of photographic paper. While the image is transferring to paper, an opaque object such a piece of cardboard may be waived over a section of the image in order to make that section appear lighter. In real life, my grandmother's grey-blue eyes and fair skin may be read as markers of a Spanish presence in the Dominican Republic. My late grandfather, in contrast, was *negro* (black). In the wedding photograph, my grandfather's face had been dodged to appear a pale and fuzzy shade of gray.

The desire to erase blackness is not unusual in the Latin American decolonized nations with legacies of the African slave trade. However, I believe that Dominicans,<sup>1</sup> many of whom have African ancestry, particularly deny any African heritage and instead strongly embrace an *indio* (Indian) identity, referring to the Taino-Arawak pre-Columbian inhabitants of the island. This phenomenon is related to the Dominican Republic's unique relationship to Haiti, with whom it shares the island of Hispaniola. The Dominican Republic is the only Latin American country that celebrates its independence day not from when it won independence from Spain, but from when it gained independence from Haiti. Since independence, there has been alternating collective aggression and ambivalence towards Haiti and a constant racism towards black Dominicans and Haitian migrant workers. I believe that it is this complicated and nuanced relationship to Haiti that results in the myth of the *indio*, in which Dominicans so strongly resist the label of *negro* and embrace the racial marker of *indio*.

## **Introduction**

In the documentary film, *Repercussions: Caribbean Crucible*, Dominican ethnomusicologist Fradique Lizardo explains that in the Dominican Republic, "no one describes himself as black but as pure Indian, or white Indian, etc. This is not the reality; it's what we're taught . . . Everyone ignores the *negro* elements in our culture. The average Dominican thinks we're a white people with blue eyes" (Haydon and Marks). Contrary to the popular conception of race described by Lizardo, the Dominican Republic is a racially mixed country.<sup>2</sup> It has inherited a colonial legacy of African slavery common to other islands in the Caribbean. A

clear census report of the racial makeup of the population of the Dominican Republic poses problems since citizens are entitled to classify their own skin color. Skin color does not necessarily involve objective analysis, rather, it is closely tied to class and other markers of cultural capital. In addition, there have historically been initiatives in which census and government registration card employees were instructed to avoid classifying people as *negro*, when at all possible (Howard, 3). It is important to remember that these categories are highly-subjective; someone who is *indio oscuro* (dark indian) to one, may be seen as *negro* to another. To complicate things further, there is an exhausting amount of terms used by Dominicans to describe skin color including: *blanco* (white), *cenizo* (ashen), *pinto* (light with moles or large freckles), *trigueño* (wheat-like), *manchado* (dark with white streaks), *negro* (very dark), and *morado* (purple-black). Significantly, describing someone as Haitian is the same as describing them as *negro* or *morado* while carrying historically loaded connotations of fear and hatred (Wucker, 33). The most commonly used term to describe one who is not *blanco* is the term *indio*.

Social scientists generally accept the following percentages for classification of race in the Dominican Republic: 65% mulatto, 15% white, 15% black, 5% other (Howard, 3). Most Dominicans and Dominican-Americans would agree that the population is mostly „mixed', however, most non-white Dominicans and Dominican-Americans prefer to racially identify as *indio* as opposed to *mulatto* or *negro*. In his recent groundbreaking work, *Coloring the Nation*, David Howard posits that the legacy of the African in the Dominican Republic has suffered under the “celebration” of European and indigenous heritages. Howard states that the term *indio* is a psycho-linguistic device that allows Dominicans to avoid using the terms *negro* and *mulatto* (which implies the presence of the *negro*). He also diagnoses that Dominican identity is constructed through a negative identification with the Haitian/*negro* identity (Howard, 3):

Responses to the question, „What does it mean to be Dominican?” frequently provoke the reaction, „Not Haitian.” The Other would appear to have significant potency in the construction of identity—not rich, not black, not gay, not from there—yet changes in near schizophrenic leaps depending upon the context of the situation. Schizophrenia splits the mind, incorporating contradictions and self-denials that are evident in the widespread Dominican negation of African ancestry and antagonism toward Haitians. The Other is invariably perceived as black, heathen and alien to white, Spanish *dominicanidad* or „Dominicanness.” Haiti in popular prejudice, stands for all that is allegedly not Dominican: *négritude*, Africa and non-Christian beliefs. (Howard, 5)

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This essay doesn't intend to prove that those who say they are *indio* are actually mulatto. (I treat this as a fact and consider the *indio* identity one that is rooted in the collective Dominican imagination. The modern day *indio* is a myth.) Rather, the essay will examine the performative choice of Dominican *negros* and *mulattos* to identify as *indio*. The first section will look at an online discussion forum about Dominican racial identity. The second section will look at the concepts of mimesis and surrogation in relation to the myth of the *indio*. It will consider the appropriation of Native American identities by African-Americans in the United States to highlight similarities between the phenomena. The third section will examine intertwined notions of race and nationhood in the Dominican Republic.

#### ***Dominican racial confusion***

Online interactions on discussion forums and chat rooms may be seen as textual and virtual performances (Rodriguez, 118). On the web, one may be stripped of the physical body and be identifiable only by the digital body (Dominguez, personal communication). Accordingly, the internet provides a unique space in which to discuss race. Screen names and written posts perform an identity disembodied from skin color, speech, dress and other physical markers. These factors don't completely transcend race and nation, rather, the web, through vast and numerous interactions, becomes its own imagined community.<sup>3</sup> Juana Maria Rodriguez writes that:

Like the grids of nation-states that lie across the lines of topographical maps, cyberspace is an imagined terrain . . . Information, once digitized, is afloat in a ubiquitous network of nodes. Through these multiple networks, users can construct their own avenues of engagement with these sites, entering and moving through various links to actively participate in their own production of knowledge. Sites emerge and disappear; linkages are assembled and dismantled. The unregulated nature of these sites dismantles authoritative versions of knowledge production, creating a multitude of problems and possibilities. (121)

In this imagined community of pseudo-anonymous online entities, the digital body might be more willing to discuss socially sensitive issues rather than in person. This is one reason why the internet is ripe space where one might attempt to address hegemonic notions of identity.

www.MundoAfrolatino.com is a website that features an extensive collection of articles and links about Afro-Latino culture. The menu sidebar leads to pages focusing on music, art, film, books, and events. The site is presented in Spanish and English and hosts a number of discussion forums that can be viewed by anyone on the web, however, only members are allowed to post

entries. The entire forum has a member list of 177 users. Member names range from „real“ first and last names to cryptic nicknames or nicks. Some nicks include such names as „Latinsoul“, „AFRODOMINICAN“, „pilly“, „Oshun“, „kiskeya-labella“, „La Negrita“, „Gatonegro“, „Afro-Boricua“, „Mandingo“, „diaspirin“, „harlemandy“, „negritailinda“, and „AfroCubanita“. Selecting a nick is the first step in the process of presenting an online identity (Rodriguez, 128). Given the website’s overall theme, the large percentage of Afro-Latino-centric names is not surprising.

Most of the site’s discussion forums are in English with themes including „Culture and Heritage“, „Diaspora“, „Music“, and „Travel“ and there is also a separate designated Spanish-language forum.<sup>4</sup> The forum with the most postings is „Culture and Heritage“, and within that forum there are about 100 separate topics posted by individual members.<sup>5</sup> Some topics within the „Culture and Heritage“ forum include „WHERE DO AFRO-LATINOS (& AAs) STAND ON IMMIGRATION?“, „Afrolatinos and Sports“, „Trivia“, „Do Afro Latinos hate African Americans?“, „Largest Population of Afro-Latinos“, „For Colombia’s Angry Youth, Hip-Hop Helps Keep It Real“, „Intercultural Romantic Relationships“, and „WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER AFRO-LATINO“. By far, the topic with the most replies bears the title „Dominican racial confusion“. <sup>6</sup> While there are 224 reply posts, the topic itself has received 3,546 views or „hits“. The original post on August 26<sup>th</sup> 2003 was by „willventura“ who identified as having a Dominican father and African American mother. Part of his post states the following:

I have met and confronted so many Dominicans who swear, whole-heartedly, that they are not black . . . Most Dominicans I meet, including my father, look like any afro-american, and I find it unbelievable [sic] that they could possibly think afro-americans are black and they are not. What is the deal? Is it the way they are taught, or do they honestly think that they arent black? I do realize that most of the families (including mine on my fathers side), are all mullato [sic] and there are few people in them that look "pure black", so the idea of them thinking they are different from the so-called "prietos"<sup>7</sup> might not be that far fetched. But this delusion that alot [sic] of them have, is still outrageous, and desperately needs to be corrected.

The posting provoked a heated debate; however, most agreed that Dominicans with dark skin tend to call themselves „indio“ as opposed to „negro“ or „mulatto“. Many related personal stories of discrimination by black Dominicans towards African Americans. Some thought that the Dominican denial of blackness was no different from any other Latin American country. Some blamed the Dictator Rafael Trujillo, who had a Haitian grandmother but led a bloody crusade against Haitians. Others said that *indio* was just a substitute

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word for *mulatto* and that either label wasn't really a big deal. Most agreed, however, that the denial of blackness is a widespread phenomenon amongst Dominicans. One posting by "cuco valoy" on August 27<sup>th</sup> states the following:

the mestizos never have a problem acknowledging their history, but dominicans will never acknowledge their genesis. it's sad. a lot of people smile in my face, but are quick to call me a ni\*\*\*r once i split. this is coming from my supposed latino brothers. in case someone is in denial, note that it's just about always the black cultures that suffer these deep cycles of self hate. when dominicans watch tv, and they don't see personalities that resemble them, they start to feel as if hailing their roots doesn't pay off. the young cats who are born here are starting to stray away from their parents ideology based on their personal experiences here, where they're being followed around the grocery store by the mexican, or the ecuadorian woman who won't enter the same train car you're in cause you're standing by the door. dominicans calling themselves an indian culture is just a way to get away from the reality that we are black. look at david ortiz, sammy sosa, raul mondesi, joseito mateo or jose reyes, where is the indian?

The user clearly voices his frustrations over racism that exists within Latino cultures. Not only is the person of darker complexion discriminated against by Euro-Americans but by other Latinos as well. He points to the complexities of breaking from inherited racist attitudes and facing one's blackness while being confronted with racist acts on an everyday basis as well as under-representation and misrepresentation in popular media. "cuco valoy" illustrates how Afro-Latinos experience the same racism aimed at African-Americans. By being lumped into the same racial category, nation fades away and is replaced by a common „black“ identifier. He mentions a number of baseball players in the Major League and a musician who are all very clearly, phenotypically, „black“. Posing the ironic question, „where is the indian?“ in contrast to these cultural icons, challenges the common Dominican cultural practice of referring to people with black skin as *indio*.

Another posting from "Ana" on the same day, attributes the denial of blackness to Dominican history:

[I]t is very weird to see someone who is very dark with African features claiming that they are not black but "indio oscuro". I find that most Black Cubans acknowledge that they are of African descent. But their history is slightly different and that's why they acknowledge it. For a long time in the Dominican Republic, the

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dictator Raphael Trujillo was determined to rid that side of the island from Haitians who were "Black" and keep DR purely "Spanish". So for many years, Dominicans wanted to avoid being labeled black and therefore Haitian . . . I think that things are changing for the younger generations, they are acknowledging [sic] their roots and that fact that they share a common heritage with African Americans.

"Ana", like "cuco valoy", points to the disconnect between looking black while claiming indian identity and also looks to the changing attitudes of the "younger generation." She writes of the Dominican dance around nomenclature in which black becomes *indio oscuro* as well as the desire to keep the country "purely „Spanish"". Here we see the indio rendered a neutral source of heritage in comparison to the socially loaded stain of black blood. "Ana" also cites Rafael Trujillo's role in shaping a uniquely Dominican aversion to the „black" label. Another posting from "guest" on August 28<sup>th</sup> mentions Trujillo's "whiting projects" (Perez, 1) including the seemingly beneficent invitation of German Jews to immigrate to the Dominican Republic after World War II when his real agenda was to help to visually whiten the Dominican people:

Its funny how dominicans deny their blackness when they [sic] are more blacks in DR than any other spanish speaking country. Trujillo who had to powder his face every morning to appear lighter is a prime example of self hate. Lucky now their [sic] are bleaching creams and soaps that does that job I guess Trujillo was ahead of his time. This guy even allowed any non blacks to emigrate to the DR(mostly Germans after [W]WII) in the Santiago section to intermix with the native dominicans. (mejorar la raza<sup>8</sup>) This is a pure form of genocide.

The user's use of the word genocide brings out the irony in the position of Jews who were victims of an attempted genocide in Europe and their invitation to the Dominican Republic by Trujillo to help wipe out blackness. Trujillo attempted to erase blackness through mass killings (as will be described later in this essay) as well as through cosmetics and genetic engineering. He writes about a self-hate that did not begin with Trujillo, but was re-enforced and practiced by the country's most notorious political leader. On August 30<sup>th</sup> the author of the original posting, „willventura", seems worn out by the discussion. He writes:

Since I started this post I have discussed this subject with numerous dominicans, and they're all the same. They look at me crazy when I explain to them that DR is a predominantly black country. Its always the same thing "Indian", "White". In addition

one guy told me that the reason some dominicans have dark skin is because [sic] they were raped by haitians in the past (he was being serious). Practically all of them think this way. When I say "Your [sic] black" they're offended like it's an insult. I almost got into a fight with this one guy, he wanted to get violent. I realized that there is no use convincing all of them. The Trujillo ideology that you all explained, is embedded in practically all of their minds. I have since stopped getting so upset over the subject. I think I was too preoccupied [sic] with race and realized that it really doesnt matter. Its unfortunate that dominicans won't realize the extent of their african heritage, and that they have more in common with people in african countries than anybody in Europe, but there is no way to change all their minds. If in Latin America people put their nationality before their race, maybe it doesn't matter. We are all humans and I guess that is what is most important.

"willventura"'s conclusion that "we are all humans" is troubling and problematic in countless ways. Complacently accepting the phenomenon of the collective denial of blackness in Dominicans and Dominican-Americans perpetuates long-standing racist attitudes and gestures and sustains an ideological genocide that erases blackness as mentioned by several of the discussion participants. By writing that race "really doesnt matter", he contradicts many of the previous, as well as subsequent, postings which state that the "younger generation" is finally questioning the established and commonly accepted notions of race. While I disagree with "willventura"'s conclusion, he did take a step towards debunking the myth of the *indio* by posting the online discussion. The internet is an opportune space for these types of discussions to proliferate. As of April 26, 2004, people are still posting their thoughts and opinions to the "Dominican racial confusion" discussion thread. As the excerpts from the discussion forum demonstrate, the negation of the *negro* can be seen as a kind of performance of identity. The following section will examine the myth of the *indio* using theories applicable to Performance Studies.

### **Construction of the indio as mimesis and surrogation**

Michael Taussig's book *Mimesis and Alterity* provides a theoretical framework in which to situate and examine the phenomenon of the *indio* in Dominican culture. We can regard the Dominican *mulatto* or *negro* inhabiting the psychological and social space of the *indio* as a kind of mimesis. According to David Macey, mimesis is a Greek word meaning imitation. Explaining one of the key aspects of the concept, Macey writes, "mimesis is, at one level, a representation of human actions that founds the possibility of both history and what would now be termed realist fiction" (253-254). The mimesis of the *indio* is

a manipulation of history resulting in the widely accepted myth that the *mulatto* population is in fact *indio*. In the face of historical research which strongly asserts that indigenous natives of the island mostly died out by the mid-sixteenth century (implying that the indigenous ethnicity is in fact by far the smallest percentage of the current population), many Dominicans still choose to identify as *indio* in order to cope with present day racist prejudices. In this mimesis of the *indio*, history is re-written to adapt to today's racist practices. Howard writes, "History has been re-negotiated, re-signified and reinvented to create a sense of the past appropriate to the social and political present" (8). The history of the enslaved African ancestor of the *negro* can be willingly forgotten by the *indio*. The overt racism employed by current Dominican society can be brushed off by the *indio* because it does not really effect him—race and racism are only problems for the *negro* or *mulatto*. Past racial conflicts are erased and replaced by the identity of peaceful and domestic island natives.

In the chapter entitled "The Color of Alterity", Taussig analyzes the anthropological work of R.O. Marsh with the white Cuna Indians of Panama. This serves as an interesting point of comparison to the Dominican *indio* as the white Cuna Indians embody the identity of the colonized desired Other. The fact that there are *white* Cuna Indians makes them even more desirable objects:

While the white Indians for whom Marsh is searching are at least fixed by their mysterious location at the headwaters of the river in an unknown valley into which no black man will venture, the black people of the coastline and of the riverine villages on the way to that valley create irruptions and unexpected time-warps. The blacks of Panama (and the coasts of Colombia) upset white histories and the attempts of their authors to come to terms with the overwhelming turbulence of modern times. But the Indians are there to fix history and restore its sublime order. They are Origin—and as such they are also White and Woman (Taussig, 156-157).

In a similar way, white Dominicans can pardon themselves from the legacies of slavery and racism by ignoring the black and focusing on the *indio*. By not acknowledging thousands of Africans forcibly imported to the country, whites can forget about the centuries of brutality inflicted upon African slaves. Instead they can turn to the seemingly static history of the *indio* who was there before everyone else came and is romanticized as the peaceful, „noble savage“.

While we may describe the Dominican appropriation of the *indio* as a type of mimesis, we can also look at it as what Joseph Roach calls surrogation. In his book, *Cities of the Dead*, Roach examines the relationships of memory, performance and substitution in what he describes as the circum-Atlantic world—a name that highlights the centrality of the history of the slave trade in Africa and



North and South America in the emergence of modern culture (Roach, 4). In the vein of selective memory, surrogation is a mode of cultural re-creation in which, "improvised narratives of authenticity and priority may congeal into full-blown myths of legitimacy and origin" (Roach, 3). By assuming an identity as *indio*, one participates in "public enactments of forgetting" (Roach, 3). The *indio* „forgets“ that he inherits a genealogy of enslavement. The *blanco* as well can „forget“ the history of violence imposed by his ancestors and continually borne by his darker-skinned neighbor.<sup>9</sup>

Because the Dominican Republic is a mulatto culture, visibly it is easy for the darker-skinned individual to refer to himself as *indio*. We can compare this situation to Roach's discussion of the figure of the octoroon in American history in which he describes the liminality of those persons who passed for white but were legally black. He writes, "In this strange world, where bipolar laws and customs attempted to sort out kaleidoscopic tints and hues, mulattoes of any kind might be expected to induce crises of surrogation, but even more so when the marks of mixture were ambiguous or invisible" (Roach, 182). The octoroon's decision to pass as white was socially advantageous in a society that severely discriminated against blacks. In the Dominican Republic, the choice to racially identify as *indio*, offers some relief and distance from being associated with the lowly Haitian or *negro*. Because a mulatto's brown skin may be read as ambiguous, the surrogation of the *indio* for *negro* or *mulatto* is easily induced in a society that clearly harbors prejudice against and fear towards black Dominicans and Haitians alike.

Another way to examine the phenomenon of the *indio* in the Dominican Republic is to compare existing studies and scholarship conducted on African-American appropriation of Native American identity. Zora Neale Hurston famously asserted that she was "the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother's side was not an Indian chief" (Lovett, 192). Here she refers to a similar widespread trend in which African-Americans describe their heritage with a sense of increased prestige by claiming a Native American lineage. Hurston, along with her teacher, Melville Herskovits, participated in a study in 1928 at Howard University where almost one third of the 1,551 students surveyed claimed some Native American blood lineage (Lovett, 193). In her essay, "African and Cherokee by Choice: Race and Resistance under Legalized Segregation," Laura Lovett examines the processes of racial identification under conditions of institutional, governmentally-sanctioned racism in Indian-Black communities. In commenting on the 1928 study, she notes:

Herskovits's study exemplifies how the discourses of scientific and legal segregation both reified racial difference and influenced the construction of racial identity. His interview subjects made claims of Native American ancestry in a severely segregated society divided into two races, a "superior" white race

and an “inferior” Black race. Their pride in their heritage, I argue, should be understood as an effort to negotiate an alternative positive identity within the then-dominant discourses of segregation and scientific racism. (Lovett, 193)

In comparison, the present day Dominican society is one in which racist segregation has helped to induce the myth of the *indio* as a technique of survival. In 1928, as people in the United States were dealing with Jim Crow legislation and other widely accepted forms of institutionalized racism and segregation, the island of Hispaniola was also approaching the height of its modern era of racialized violence.

The most significant episode of racial violence in the twentieth century in the Dominican Republic is a massacre taking place over several days which came to be known as *El Corte*, literally The Harvest. It was named *El Corte* because of the vast number of Haitians killed by machetes—the same manner in which stalks of sugarcane are cut down during the harvest season (Wucker, 49). In the decades leading up to *El Corte*, Haitians had been steadily crossing the border to work on Dominican sugar plantations. Sugar was the country’s primary export until the Great Depression hit in 1929, which weakened an already struggling economy. The Dominican government blamed the economic decline on Haitians, claiming that they were occupying jobs that would otherwise be filled by Dominicans. As a result they increased the border patrol and deported thousand of Haitians back across the border. (Wucker, 47).

In October of 1937, the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo ordered tens of thousands of Haitians be rounded up and executed. Dominican soldiers were told not to use rifles or bayonets but to use machetes and other farming implements so that the incident would appear to be a mass peasant uprising against the Haitian immigrant farm workers. And how did they know who was Haitian? Predictably, the soldiers would confront anyone who was *negro*. If the soldiers bothered to determine whether or not the person was *haitiano* or *dominicano* they would give him or her a language test. They would dangle a piece of parsley in front of the accused’s face and ask „What is the name of this?“ If the person could answer with the word *perejil*, rolling the *r* correctly, then they were dismissed as a Dominican. If they showed any difficulties trilling the *r* then they were killed. This test illustrates a literal performance of identity. It was a performance of nationality that resulted in life or death for the performer. It is not officially known how many Dominicans were killed in *El Corte* but the total death toll has been estimated to be somewhere between 15,000 and 35,000 (Wucker, 48-51).

*El Corte*, demonstrates how important it was to dis-identify with being *negro*. Even though Haitians and black Dominicans are no longer rounded up and executed in the Dominican Republic, there remains an intense legacy of fear of being identified as Haitian/*negro*. In an inherited technique of survival, black

Dominicans continue to disassociate themselves from black or African or Haitian identities.

**Race and nationalism**

The myth of the *indio* is deeply entrenched within issues of race and nationalism. Here I will address these issues more explicitly. First, an examination of the term „nation“ is appropriate. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* offers an insightful definition from which we can base our discussion; Anderson offers a definition of nation in which:

It is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (5-6)

Anderson highlights that the very notion of nation is an intangible construct. A nation is imagined as *limited* (because of its finite boundaries), as *sovereign* (since the concept of Nationalism came about when the Enlightenment and Revolution were countering the authority of the dynasty and the “divinely-ordained”) and as a *community* (7). It is this idea of community which is most relevant to our particular discussion of the Dominican national identity. A commonly used term to discuss the Dominican national identity is the word *dominicanidad* which can be translated as Dominicanness. This term implies that there exist characteristics common to all or most of the Dominican people. When relating this to Anderson's notion of nation as an imagined political community, we could similarly classify *dominicanidad* as an imagined construct since it is not possible to know the characteristics of everyone who might identify as a Dominican person.

The notion that the community is imagined makes it especially appropriate to a discussion on the role of nationalism in the myth of the *indio*. Anderson writes:

Finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings (7).

In the case of the Dominican Republic, the culture is united by the idea of a common Spanish, *Indio* and African ancestry. While the African ancestry is

given the least amount of enthusiastic acknowledgement, it is grudgingly accepted as a part of the country's past. This shared racial history is perhaps the strongest binding element to the Dominican sense of national community. Howard notes that the concepts of race and nation are practically co-dependent in the Dominican Republic. He explains, "Dominicans rarely speak of the *nación dominicana*, they are far more likely to mention *raza dominicana*. Race and nation are effectively entwined, *nación* is a term seldom used in everyday language. The national territory is racial territory; national belonging denotes racial belonging" (154). Also, as previously mentioned, the Haitian and *negro* are nearly equivalent terms in the Dominican national consciousness.

While we now see that the myth of the *indio* is a racist concept that materialized into the Dominican consciousness, *dominicanidad* is a racialized and exclusionary ethos as well. Etienne Balibar expands on this notion of nationalism and its relationship to racism through what he calls the "projection mechanism" of constructing an imagined national identity (60):

By seeking to circumscribe the common essence of nationals, racism thus inevitably becomes involved in the obsessional quest for a „core“ of authenticity that cannot be found, shrinks the category of nationality and de-stabilizes the historical nation. This can lead, in an extreme case, to the reversal of the racial phantasm: since it is impossible to *find* racial-national purity and guarantee its provenance from the origins of the people, it becomes necessary to *create* it in conformity with the ideal of a (super-)national superman. (Balibar, 60-61)

When applying this notion to the Dominican Republic, we witness the creation of the ideal of the *indio*, a noble savage uniting the race. While the white European occupied the space of the cultural and racial ideal, Dominicans had to account for their darker skin color. Thus the ideal of the *indio* was created to more easily embody a representational national core. This hierarchy remains in place today. The whitest *blancos* are the racial elite, while the „*indio*“ majority is in the middle, and the *negros* are relegated to the lowest caste.

It is also useful to examine the effects of decolonization on racism in the nation. Balibar critiques Anderson's view of decolonization as incomplete. While Anderson addresses the lack of counter-racism occurring during decolonization, he fails to mention the other types of racisms which emerged from Third World decolonization. Balibar writes:

There is a plethora of devastating racisms, both institutional and popular, between „nations“, „ethnic groups“ and „communities“. And the spectacle of these racisms, in its term deformed by global communications, is continually feeding the stereotypes of

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White racism by keeping alive the old idea that three-quarters of humanity are incapable of governing themselves. Doubtless the background to these mimetic effects is constituted by the replacement of the old world of colonizing nations . . . ( 44)

In our discussion of race and nation, we are led back to the concept of mimesis. Here, Balibar illustrates that not only is the Dominican miming the *indio* as a mode of survival against racist practices, he also inhabits the psychological and social space of the colonizer by rejecting the despised *negro* and embracing the romanticized, Taíno-Arawak identity.

#### **Conclusion**

This essay has attempted to analyze the Dominican myth of the *indio*. While the de-emphasis on African influence is common in Latin America and Latino-American communities, I believe that by identifying and examining the phenomenon of this particularly severe collective denial, Dominicans, as well as other Latinos, can begin to acknowledge and embrace the African aspects of their identity. By doing so, we can attempt to heal ourselves from centuries of psychological oppression and begin to address modern day racist practices plaguing the Diaspora. In her essay, "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance," bell hooks writes, "A culture of domination demands of all its citizens self- negation . . . once our denial falls away we can work to heal ourselves through awareness . . . Mired in negativity and denial we are like sleepwalkers. Yet, if we dare to awaken, the path is before us" (19-20).

As evident by the online discussions of Dominican racial identity, the dialogue about race is finally beginning to be addressed. Transmigration has forced individuals to grapple with self-identity markers that were overlooked on the island. I believe that by raising awareness of Dominican blackness, by breaking from the mimesis and surrogation paradigms, we may actively participate in an anti-racist movement to counter white supremacist notions of black inferiority. hooks explains that decolonized societies are continually bombarded with images that pathologize blackness. Consequently, as seen in many Dominican people, non-white people have come to internalize the views and values of white supremacy. As my grandfather's image was manipulated to hide his blackness, histories of oppressed peoples have been distorted to favor the images of the conquerors. It remains my naïve hope that moving towards the future with a less fragmented and obscured past, we help to open the paths towards social justice, self-determination, and self-acceptance.

#### **End Notes**

1. Throughout this essay, unless otherwise specified, the term "Dominican" is meant to refer to those of Dominican heritage in the Diaspora. Dominican President Leonel Fernandez Rena in 1997 declared that Dominican Americans and Dominican immigrants would always be considered Dominican (Perez, 27). A large percentage of Dominican citizens live in New York City and, while

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there are differences between those on the island and those abroad, there do remain certain ideological and cultural constants.

2. The term „race“ is a complicated one which Omi and Winant have shown to be typically tied to paradigms of ethnicity, class, and nation. This essay does not want to essentialize race, rather, it acknowledges the existing paradigms of race while viewing it as an unstable and “decentered” complex tied to political organization, social conflict, and cultural and ideological meaning (Omi and Winant, 48 and 55).

3. See Benedict Anderson *Imagined Communities*.

4. The Spanish-language forum is comparatively thin with only 100 posts compared to 1738 English-language posts as of April 26, 2004. This points to the misguided assumption that the world wide web is a completely universal space in which all are free to participate. However, I do maintain that it is a relevant space to examine popular discourse. A more thorough ethnography would examine other spaces of dialogue as well.

5. Throughout this essay figures [www.MundoAfrolatino.com](http://www.MundoAfrolatino.com) are as of April 26, 2004.

6. The next most popular topic, „Largest population of Afro-Latinos“ had 99 replies and after that the topic „Should blacks in Latin America declare war...“ had 57 replies as of April 26, 2004.

7. People with dark black skin.

8. Improve the race.

9. This is not to imply that there was no violence done to the native peoples of the Hispaniola.

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