

Being la Dominicana: Race and Identity in the Visual Culture of Santo Domingo

Rachel Afi Quinn

Review by Lydia Platón Lázaro

“Art is going to save this ship” (157) theater director Isabel Spencer tells Rachel Afi-Quinn in an interview, an idea that supports many of the arguments brought forth in *Being la Dominicana: Race and Identity in the Visual Culture of Santo Domingo*. The book is an important contribution to the way ethnographic practice can be both academically rigorous and empowering for the subjects at the center of its study, mostly Dominican women “being” within mixed-race and self-making contradictions in their contemporary visual culture productions. The book includes a varied selection of art forms: from murals, social media, film, literature, music video, theater, as well as examples of experiences of performances of activism. As Afi Quinn states in the introduction, she seeks to demonstrate “the ways that Dominican women’s mixed-race identities are not only in constant movement but also that they “see/saw” in relation to others in a hierarchical scale of power.” (5) This idea, encompassed in that ship that art saves, returns at the conclusion of the study, “Feminist rage and the right to life”, a powerful homage to the strategies and power in surviving everyday life in the current Dominican context.

Being la Dominicana -invites us then to reflect on the question itself of “being” from multiple subject positions in contemporary Dominican visual culture, from an honest and respectful gaze. Rachel Afi Quinn starts with her own questions about racial identity, allowing the researcher to include herself in the

process of writing about Dominican complex racial identifications. The question surrounding the ethics of auto-ethnography and translating the untranslatable are part of the methodology Afi-Quinn relates to, stressing the dynamic relationship of being both insider and outsider throughout the book, based on more than forty interviews conducted in Santo Domingo around 2010. Afi Quinn accompanies the analysis of the diverse artistic practices and sites of political activism of her subjects by providing a solid contextualization, weaving the work of Dominican scholars in the diaspora and in the Dominican Republic, like Lorgia García Peña, while also including a historical perspective in the work of writers like Frank Moya and Sylvio Torres-Saillant, to name just a few that provide the framework for navigating the complex structure of Dominican identity-making practices. Afi-Quinn clearly explains the deep-rooted racism due in part to its colonial history, often-times hued by the contentious Dominican-Haitian relationship and made even more precarious by extreme neo-liberalism. Haiti and Dominican Republic are two countries in one island that have yet to come to terms with the violence of their interactions, the political and social consequences of this violence continue to spawn racism and oppression. Afi Quinn brings to light artists that are working beyond the official position of the Dominican government, focusing rather on their shared history and the importance of valuing Afro-descendant culture in the Dominican Republic

especially when it refers to Haitian cultural practices, rich visual production, and powerful artistic practice.

The image of the “Muñeca sin rostro” or doll without a face, found in tourist shops all throughout Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic, symbolizes Afi-Quinn’s ethnographic incursion and the metaphor with which she begins her narrative. Afi Quinn “gives face,” to young women and queer identified Dominican artists and activists, through her writing about self-fashioned racial and gender identities explaining presence in social media, stage, and varied expressions of contemporary visual culture. However, it is not a naïve generalizing filling in the features of the faceless doll, as she states: in “Alicia en el Pais de las Maravillas” in the introduction: “To be clear, I do not believe that there exists some authentic Dominican woman for me to document in my research.” (23). The variety of people and projects documented and discussed in *Being la Dominicana* allow the reader to access a curated archive of self-identification practices in contemporary Santo Domingo. This is one of the outstanding features of the study. In tandem with the ethnographic research, Afi-Quinn is advancing theories on surrealism as a possible aesthetic movement and practice to organize the work she is featuring. Although many times insightful, some of the claims about surrealism may be debated with Caribbean aesthetic theories that seek to advance aesthetic reading of the work produced in the Caribbean region as readable from practices that place improvisation, the absurdity of everyday life and the imagination in a creative plane for artistic practice irrelevant of European artistic movements, although extremely aware of these. The author is cautious with her use of Surrealism and makes clear that she is not ascribing her definition to the objectifying practices of European and even Latin-American

and modernist Caribbean versions of surrealism, but rather on what she terms “Afro-surrealism”, maintaining the vantage points of surrealist modes based on fragmentation, dream sequences, and the inclusion of several artistic languages.

In the first chapter, “Sites of Identity: Facebook, Murals and Vernacular Images”, the work of Krista Thompson, Caribbean art historian working in the United States is pivotal to understanding Caribbean defined visuality and visual practice. Social networks are the center of this chapter, bringing to life the most current of visual landscapes that promotes racial and gender affirming activism. Chapter 2: “Me Quedo con la Greña: Dominican Women identities and Ambiguities” is not so much about artistic practices, but rather about the racial distinctions that make up Dominican identities, with hair (la greña) braiding the narratives of blackness, colorism, and theories of identification, including Afro-Latinx current revisions of the way race and gender intersect with positions of power in the Spanish speaking Caribbean and Latinx contexts. It also presents how populations living in transnational realities due to migration come in and out of ambiguous identification. Chapter 3 goes back to artistic practice, this time in the work of Queer Dominican writer, musician, and performer: Rita Indiana Hernández in “Whiteness, Transformative Bodies, and the Queer Dominicanidad of Rita Indiana.” This chapter is an important contribution to the studies of Hernández corpus of work, since it brings up conflicting issues in Hernández’s multi-faceted representations of being Dominican successfully across different outlets: books, stages, social media, and video. In this and the following chapters, it is surrealism that holds together the “discomfort of racism” as it is

expressed in film and theater, as well as in popular representations.

“A Thorn in Her Foot: The Discomfort of Racism and the Ethnographic Movement” delves into public and private spaces and reveals how essentializing notions of whiteness and blackness truly are for women through the anecdotes of the people she interviews. The chapter concludes with “La Nigüenta”, the image of a white girl removing something from her foot, popular for bringing good luck in Dominican homes and how this image is transformed by filmmaker Leticia Tonos into a Black child. Here Afi-Quinn also applies the possibility of surrealism in really understanding what this subversion by the artist reveals about whiteness in the Dominican Republic. Subversions as surreal, however, could be further discussed due to the implications of power in the artist’s gesture. This idea is further explored in Afi-Quinn’s chapter on the staging of Federico García Lorca’s *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* by theater collective: Teatro Maleducadas (Chapter 5: “The Camera Obscura: Teatro Maleducada’s Production of *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*”) which is a very engaging take on the dynamics of seeing gender and race that has been questioned from different viewpoints throughout the book. The chapter includes interviews with the play’s director as well as with several actresses. It focuses on the role of the gaze of the audience, as well as the performers’ own interpretations, all the while working on a classic Spanish text- that although is a powerful play about women and oppression, in the Dominican context will also signify both the literary colonial canon and the possibility of decolonizing the text for this collective’s particular version, as Afi-Quinn states: “Yet the Dominican actresses of Las Maleducadas uniquely compliment

Lorca’s vision for the original text by expanding its visual significance and symbolic register.”(148). This Afro-Caribbean version of Lorca brings the book back to the ship that art saves.

The final chapter, aptly titled “Feminist Rage and the Right to Life for Women in the Dominican Republic,” rounds out how violent the interactions she has been describing in the prior chapters actually are, including the legacies of slavery, dictatorship, American imperialist practices, domestic abuse and feminicides: “Patriarchal oppression as a legacy of colonialism in the Dominican Republic is undergirded by a constant threat of violence, real acts of violence, as well as a long history of colonial violence integral to systems of slavery.”(176) The way to counteract the feeling of hopelessness is to go back to what the book does in all its chapters, visit the creativity of these women, strategizing identity to be able to express their rage or “The art of rage” as Afi-Quinn calls it. As way of a conclusion, the author invites us to be aware of how new technologies can allow us to continue studying Dominican strategies and ways of being and seeing constructions of race and gender that change current realities that no longer need to be “saved” but rather transformed.