

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Color-Blind Nationalism, US Empire, and the Conundrum of Race in the Late Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Spanish Caribbean

Glenn A. Chambers

Michigan State University, US
chamb311@msu.edu

This essay reviews the following works:

Borderland on the Isthmus: Race, Culture, and the Struggle for the Canal Zone. By Michael E. Donoghue. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. Pp. ix + 333. \$25.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822356783.

Scripts of Blackness: Race, Cultural Nationalism, and U.S. Colonialism in Puerto Rico. By Isar P. Godreau. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 291. \$35.00 paper. ISBN: 9780252080456.

The Mulatto Republic: Class, Race, and Dominican National Identity. By April J. Mayes. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014. Pp. viii + 187. \$69.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780813049199.

Cuba's Racial Crucible: The Sexual Economy of Social Identities, 1750–2000. By Karen Y. Morrison. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 327. \$32.00 paper. ISBN: 9780253016546.

The scholarly discourse on race and nation has evolved significantly over the past few decades in Latin American historiography. Often couched in the language of modernity, scholars have critically analyzed the ways in which emerging nations in the region have struggled to incorporate racially and ethnically diverse populations into the homogenizing national discourse around citizenship. In Caribbean nations such as Cuba, Puerto Rico, Panama, and the Dominican Republic, the expansion of the United States into the region after 1898 witnessed the rapid influx of US capital, political influence, and cultural mores (and in the case of Cuba and Puerto Rico, colonization). These nations were forced to contend with two competing nationalisms, one centered around US racial classifications centered on hypodescent, and the other much more fluid Latin American system. Within these nations shaped by the United States, it is easy to dismiss any racial discrimination against people of African descent as the result of US influence. However, racism and the marginalization of people of African descent were not unique to North America. In any society in which the dominant economic system revolved around the enslavement of African peoples, elements of racial injustice and inequality continued to manifest themselves after emancipation through various societal mechanisms, most notably through nationalizing discourses aimed at constructing a sense of a modern political and cultural identity.

In *The Mulatto Republic: Class, Race, and Dominican National Identity*, historian April J. Mayes argues that a racist, patriarchal, and authoritarian state emerged in the early twentieth-century Dominican Republic. This was the result of exclusionary governing practices that disfranchised rural Dominicans, a reaction to the increase in black (Haitian) labor, and the US military intervention (6). For Mayes, rural Dominicans were not inherently anti-Haitian but became that way as a response to the consolidation of power by the state and the imposition of US influence.

Mayes situates the Dominican identity debate within the long-standing scholarly discourse on antiblack and anti-Haitian sentiment in the country. Dominican scholars such as Ernesto Sagás, Pedro San Miguel, and

Silvio Torres-Saillant, North Americans such as Lauren Derby, and others have addressed this theme.¹ Mayes in her analysis considers whether the antiblack/anti-Haitian narrative is the result of the legacy of former dictator Rafael Trujillo, as scholars such as Torres-Saillant have argued. She also interrogates Dominicans' embracing of *hispanidad* as representative of a nationalism unique to the history and culture of the nation, influenced by its proximity to Haiti but not completely defined by it. In her assessment, Mayes contends that the trend toward hispanidad in the Dominican Republic was present throughout the nineteenth century and reflected a desire on the part of elites to incorporate wealthy whites with power and influence into the nation. This was important as the nation was beginning its modernization campaigns and developing its agricultural base with money and immigrants from other areas such as Cuba and Puerto Rico in the Spanish Caribbean, and later the United States (7).

In addition to "white" immigrants, US companies also employed English-speaking West Indian workers from the Eastern Caribbean, who changed the racial and cultural makeup of the country. The epicenter of these converging realities was the eastern sugar town of San Pedro de Macorís. Mayes asserts that through her choice of San Pedro de Macorís as the site for this study, the debate on race, class, and nation shifts from both the capital of Santo Domingo (Trujillo) and the border with Haiti to demonstrate the depths to which race, ethnicity, class, and migratory status shaped Dominican perceptions of the nation. By including Afro-Antillean migrants into the story, the debate on race shifts from being simply an anti-Haitian one to a complex reality in which concepts such as Garveyism and *latinidad* supplied its followers with a new interpretation of the world which was both racialized and racist (143). This understanding of race, and where blacks and Latinos fit within it, was in part the consequence of the US intervention from 1916 to 1924, in which the idea of the Dominican Republic as a "mulatto nation" in the minds of its racially obsessed US occupiers questioned the ability of the nation to govern itself and regain its sovereignty. It is within this context that Dominicans ultimately embraced the notions of *latinidad* that elevated whiteness and European heritage above all others, but still allowed for racial mixture.

Mayes, unlike other scholars on Dominican identity, is one of the first to present an analysis in which Dominican conceptions of race are shaped by global currents rather than relegated to the nation's antagonistic history with Haiti. US expansion, intra-Caribbean migration, and the awakening of West Indians to global notions of Pan-Africanism and the African diaspora, combined with Dominican intellectual engagement with broader Latin American notions of *mestizaje*, all shape the development of Dominican constructions of race. Haiti is a huge part of the conversation but at times takes a peripheral role.

Similar to Mayes's book, Isar Godreau's *Scripts of Blackness: Race, Cultural Nationalism, and U.S. Colonialism in Puerto Rico* complicates notions of blackness and its role in shaping conceptions of national identity. However, in this study the author focuses on Puerto Rico and the intersection of North American and Caribbean constructions of race and cultural norms. Because Puerto Rico has been a colony of the United States since 1898 (only two years after legally codified segregation in the United States was solidified with the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court case), its racial realities are influenced by this political relationship. Yet Puerto Rico, like much of the Caribbean, has a long history of African enslavement and contends with the legacies of racial and ethnic inequality that the institution fostered. Godreau "de-essentializes" blackness and integrates it into the national narrative in Puerto Rico centered on *mestizaje* (5). However, she maintains that blackness in the nation often centers on the construction of institutional and local representations of blackness that often depend on the ideological influence of the United States. To further this claim, Godreau's study shifts from San Juan, Loíza, Caguas, and other areas in which scholars have articulated Puerto Rican constructions of blackness to Ponce, specifically the area of San Antón, in which a neighborhood revitalization project sheds light on the differences in the ways local residents and the state viewed what constituted blackness and its role in the history of the community.

Unlike Mayes's *Mulatto Republic*, in which the author offers a traditional historical analysis of Dominican society, in terms of its methodology and use of sources, *Scripts of Blackness* is an ethnography in which the barrio of San Antón is at the center. In focusing on the residents of San Antón, Godreau highlights the process by which Africans and their descendants have historically been erased from the national narrative in Puerto Rico, constructed by white elites throughout the twentieth century. In this narrative, which focuses primarily on the period after emancipation from slavery in 1873 through the late twentieth century, the

¹ See Ernesto Sagás, *Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000); Lauren Derby, *The Dictator's Seduction: Politics and the Popular Imagination in the Era of Trujillo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Pedro San Miguel, *The Imagined Island: History, Identity, and Utopia in Hispaniola* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); and Silvio Torres-Saillant, "Creoleness of Blackness: A Dominican Dilemma," *Plantation Society in the Americas* 5, no. 1 (1998): 29–40.

author demonstrates how the former slaves (and their descendants) simply became laborers or wage earners in modern society and acquired their lands through squatting (94). This is a common narrative in the history of the Caribbean, particularly in sugar societies in the British Caribbean, in which major events such as the Morant Bay rebellion in Jamaica in 1865 involved issues over workers' rights and access to available, unused lands, among other things. The brutality of the institution of slavery and the obstacles that the formerly enslaved faced in the transition period to free labor is silenced within this narrative. The assumption that many scholars make within this argument is that the experience of African descendants in Puerto Rico and their contribution to the nation begins at abolition. Scholars of Puerto Rico such as Francisco Scarano, Jay Kinsbruner, Rosa Carrasquillo, and others note that there was a sizable population of free blacks in Puerto Rico prior to abolition.² In San Antón, many of them were employed as carpenters, tobacco workers, masons, typographers, barbers, tailors, seamstresses, and in other professions (94).

Godreau argues that the politics of erasure in Puerto Rico creates a cultural climate in which the contributions of free people of color are silenced because their very existence complicates simplistic, state-sponsored narratives of slavery and freedom. She asserts that in the dominant discourse, "slavery is either completely erased from the narratives or it is simplified via scripts that efface the efforts of free people of color to survive and seek dignity within a system that tried to deny it to them" (96). This is most evident in interpretations of the folkloric musical traditions of *bomba* and *plena*, in which the official narrative depicts the music as a continuation of African musical traditions that survived the Middle Passage and enslavement. The contributions of free blacks to the development of the music in the nineteenth century are ignored. Slavery and freedom are mutually exclusive. Such a rationale falls in line with an antiquated historiography in Latin America that reduces blackness to enslavement and freedom to everyone else. Moreover, the fact that these traditions survive at all is linked to the alleged benevolent nature of the institution of slavery under the Spanish.

Mayes's *Mulatto Republic* traces the origins of this discourse and its roots in nineteenth century Hispanophilia, which favored Spanish colonial whiteness. This is the same ideology that intellectuals such as the Puerto Rican Eugenio María de Hostos helped to implement in the development of hispanidad in the Dominican Republic. In part as an attempt to quell feelings of racial and cultural inadequacy on the international scene, many Latin American intellectuals began to adopt notions of a homogenous culture in which a true nation was defined by a common language, culture, and national identity. Hispanidad grows out of this process. The ills of society were blamed on the degeneration of the masses caused by the inferiority of nonwhite populations. Some leaders accepted European racial theory at face value, while others chose to define themselves arbitrarily according to what seemed to fit the particular situations within their country. In countries with large indigenous and mestizo (mixture of Spanish and Indian) populations, liberal governments and the intellectuals whose work influenced them claimed the mestizo identity as the apotheosis of human development.³ In nations in the Caribbean with a legacy of plantation slavery and an overwhelmingly African-descended population, intellectuals held race mixture as a national achievement from which to move forward. In these instances, education was seen as a way to combat racial inferiority and ultimately led to notions of a racial democracy in which one could move beyond the stigma of race through education and economic prosperity. Any perceived hindrances to this goal, such as nonwhite immigration, were viewed by many intellectuals as a threat to the nation. If nations could not conform to the national image genetically, then they could do so culturally by cleansing themselves of the "degenerate" traditions and culture of Africans and their descendants.

Combined with the persistent interpretation of *mestizaje* as a racially harmonious project, Puerto Rican intellectuals viewed themselves as morally superior to their North American colonizers throughout much of the twentieth century. However, by using mixed historical and anthropological methods, combined with a thorough analysis of ethnographic data, Godreau is able to show that the politics of erasure of blackness

² For a more detailed analysis of the literature on slavery and postemancipation debates on race, see Francisco A. Scarano, *Sugar and Slavery in Puerto Rico: The Plantation Economy of Ponce, 1800–1850* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Jay Kinsbruner, *Not of Pure Blood: The Free People of Color and Racial Prejudice in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), and Rosa E. Carrasquillo, *Our Landless Patria: Marginal Citizenship and Race in Caguas, Puerto Rico, 1880–1910* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

³ Mexico offers one of the clearest examples of the evolution of mestizo identity through the twentieth century. See Jose Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race/La raza cósmica*, translated and annotated by Didier T. Jaén (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). Enrique Krauze also traces the homogenizing discourse of Latin American intellectuals throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in *The Redeemers: Ideas and Power in Latin America*, translated by Hank Heifetz and Natasha Wimmer (New York: Harper Perennial, 2012).

in Puerto Rico and the blatant racism of the United States are both rooted in a desire on the part of elites and state actors to silence the voices of Africans and their descendants. Godreau makes a convincing case. By separating the enslaved population from free people of color in exposing the politics of erasure, and emphasizing the contributions of both groups to the folkloric traditions in San Antón, the author demonstrates that blackness in Puerto Rico is anything but scripted.

Karen Y. Morrison's *Cuba's Racial Crucible: The Sexual Economy of Social Identities, 1750–2000* is an ambitious study that explores many of the same themes outlined by Mayes and Godreau. However, whereas intellectuals, state actors, and elites factor largely in the previous works, and constructions of race, nation, and family are discussed as separate entities, *Cuba's Racial Crucible* demonstrates the inseparability of these concepts in defining concepts of *cubanidad* or Cuban identity. While racial mixture is central to modern Cuban national identity, whiteness was elevated throughout the colonial period as the racial and cultural standard. The Cuban Revolution under Fidel Castro was supposed to rid the nation of its racial past, however contemporary scholars in Cuba and North America have noted that, like previously discussed discourses on *mestizaje*, antiblack discrimination and the relegation of Africans and their descendants to certain spaces (culture) and not others reinforces the racial divide.

While racial mixture is at the forefront of Morrison's study, her approach is unique. She incorporates an "intersectional feminist and social constructionist approach to race that demonstrates how Cuban racial meaning and identities have emerged as much from the reproductive practices of sexual behavior, familial life, and kinship recognition as they have from political and economic activities" (xv). Rather than relying on traditional top-down, elite-centered approaches to analysis of the archival data, or rehashing Gramscian theoretical notions of the role of the "subaltern," Morrison offers one of the few historical studies in which women are at the front and center of transformative change in Cuban society, while at the same time they are allowed to be "ordinary" citizens. Her analysis demonstrates that the choices individuals make, in terms of whom to procreate with and why, can be political acts that reshape the racial and cultural landscape of a nation. For Morrison, the domestic reproductive behaviors of everyday Cubans are equally as important as the public politics or intellectual discourse of elites.

The study opens with an assessment of an interview with a nearly white Cuban woman who was in her second marriage to a Spaniard, with whom she had no children. Her first marriage produced several children whom she described as mulatto, indicating that her first husband was of African descent. She noted that she did not want to produce children with her second husband because it would cause "racial confusion" in her family due to the varying skin complexions, an issue she had already dealt with in her own family. Rather than produce "white" children and embrace a Cuban racial ideology that encouraged *enblanquamiento* or whitening, the women in this account chose family over ideology. Equally important, the fact that she had to make this choice at all represents the tragedy of nationalist racial policies.

Through an examination of this process of family formation through oral histories, archival evidence, and various theoretical and methodological frameworks, Morrison uses the stories of women such as the previous one to explore the sexual economy of race among Cubans, particularly those of African descent. She argues that in order to understand the complex nuances of race in Cuba, it is crucial to recognize the human relationships upon which race was constructed. Though ideologies of racial mixture and whitening were political and cultural realities in Cuban society, the ways in which this process was implemented (and resisted) rested on the actions of individuals, particularly women of color. People crossed racial boundaries in multiple ways to validate their family structures, and in the process challenged racial categories to the point where they forced the state to rethink its positions on what it meant to be Cuban. Unlike in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, this process was shaped more by the Cubans themselves than by external forces such as the United States.

All of the works thus far have centered on the Spanish Caribbean and draw on the ways in which these societies negotiated blackness through nineteenth-century racial discourses of *hispanidad* or *mestizaje*. Spanish colonialism lasted longer in Cuba and Puerto Rico than in other areas in the Americas. The Dominican Republic was severed from Spanish rule in 1804 as a result of the Haitian Occupation; it achieved independence from Haiti in 1844 but reverted to Spanish rule for a brief period from 1861 to 1865. Whereas these nations continued to debate issues of race well into the twentieth century (and in some cases through the present day), newer nations such as Panama (established in 1903 after independence from Colombia) dealt with these issues much later. Because Panama was founded as the result of US efforts to build and control an interoceanic canal, the evolution of racial attitudes in the nation were very much influenced by US policies. Combined with the long history of slavery and colonialism under the Spanish, the US-sponsored canal project employed foreign workers (most English-speaking West Indians) and attracted merchants and

entrepreneurs from China, the former Ottoman Empire, and Europe. The Panama Canal Zone and cities such as Colón and Panama City became some of the most racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse spaces in the Americas. However, in the Panama Canal Zone, the inhabitants of the Zone (Zonians) and the US military established their hegemony in the region. The racial discrimination experienced by West Indian workers at the hands of these two groups, combined with similar experiences by Panamanians and other Central Americans, created persistent conflicts over race and identity in the Canal Zone and its boundaries that threatened the stability of the region.

In Michael E. Donoghue's *Borderland on the Isthmus: Race, Culture, and the Struggle for the Canal Zone*, the author expands the study of borderlands in the Americas from one focused solely on the U.S.–Mexico border to include areas within Latin America in which the expansion of US empire and the creation of spheres of influence in nations such as Panama created cultural and racial borders that defied geographical limits. Donoghue demonstrates how conflicting groups within Panamanian society and their competing interests often worked to create a sense of collective identity in opposition to US hegemony. Through the use of oral histories and archival sources, Donoghue draws on the experiences of people from diverse walks of life from roughly 1940 through 1980. In this period US policy shifted from the interventionist policies of Theodore Roosevelt to the noninterventionist and noninterference policy of the Franklin Roosevelt administration. This shift also coincided with the spread of the Cold War to Latin America and domestic strife in the United States around issues of civil rights.

From segregation to interracial marriages, gender relations, and interethnic alliances, Donoghue presents a picture of Panama in which borders and identities are constantly being contested. However, despite this, the impact of the Canal Zone lies in its establishment as a model for future relations between US military installations and the nations which they occupy. Local women were viewed as objects of sexual pleasure for US servicemen through prostitution and occasionally marriage. Local workers were hired hands to be exploited for minimal pay. Foreign workers, particularly West Indians, reinforced the white/black racial binary that validated white supremacy and racism.

While Donoghue does much to complicate notions of borders in his study, the influence of such groups as the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the growing labor movement are relatively absent in the study. In the process of giving the testimonies of non-Zonians in the study to personalize the experiences and denote the human realities and consequences of US policy, it is easy to lose sight of how their stories connect to the larger themes identified in the work. However, the notion of borders and the ways in which all within the Canal Zone navigate these spaces moves this study beyond a mere diplomatic-military history of US occupations to a nuanced and groundbreaking study on the ways in which empire is contested in the everyday activities of ordinary people.

The works of Mayes, Godreau, Morrison, and Donoghue offer a much-needed reassessment of the ways in which race, sex, and gender intersect in the rise of empire and nationalism in modern Latin American history. Specifically, the inclusion of a gendered analysis and the ways in which everyday citizens negotiate their individual identities for collective gain moves beyond the relegation of racial groups to an inferior or subaltern status. Because relationships move across the artificial boundaries defined by the state, and citizens occupy every level of society (even if not always on an equal basis), who and what constitutes the “nation” is always changing. The analyses in these works and the wealth of evidence to support them reflect this.

Author Information

Glenn A. Chambers is associate professor of history and the director of the African American and African Studies Program at Michigan State University. His research focuses on the African diaspora with an emphasis on the modern Caribbean and Central America, specifically labor, nationalism, race relations, and immigration/migration. Chambers is the author of *Race, Nation, and West Indian Immigration to Honduras, 1890–1940* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010).

How to cite this article: Chambers, Glenn A. 2017. Color-Blind Nationalism, US Empire, and the Conundrum of Race in the Late Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Spanish Caribbean. *Latin American Research Review* 52(5), pp. 895–900. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.270>

Submitted: 24 October 2016

Accepted: 23 December 2016

Published: 12 December 2017

Copyright: © 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Latin American Research Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

OPEN ACCESS 