

Counternarratives of Nationalist Anti-Black Images: Normalizing and Extolling Blackness in Contemporary Art of the Hispanic Caribbean

Liza Girgis

University of Toronto

Department of Spanish and Portuguese

ABSTRACT

This article examines contemporary art of the Hispanic Caribbean as a counternarrative to the antiblack aesthetic ideals in the region. By exploring beauty standards on these islands through quotidian language and images that portray beauty, the proliferation of whiteness as the epitome of the aesthetic is exhibited in modern day Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Cuba. This article follows the work of scholars who have theorized and evidenced that the post-independence narrative has dominated the islands' perceived racial identities, marginalizing blackness and praising whiteness. We add that this discourse has also impacted its peoples' daily beauty rituals, as most of them facilitate the 'whitening' of one's appearance. Present-day art that extolls blackness and questions the exclusion of people of African descent on the islands thus serves as a powerful truth reveal; contrarily to the official history, negritude is not rebellion, rather it is the region's nature and beauty. In other words, this research seeks to explore how this art portrays negritude as the face of the Hispanic Caribbean, normalizing and celebrating the appearance of the majority of its people.



Keywords: *Hispanic Caribbean, blackness, beauty standards, anti-black nationalism, racial identities, counternarratives*

BIO

After graduation, I travelled to the Caribbean and South America. Then, I decided to return to the university to complete my MA. I am interested in the cultural production of the diaspora of the Hispanic Caribbean and how it maintains an ongoing dialogue with cultural production of the islands.

© 2021 Liza Girgis

Caribbean Studies Students' Union, Canada - <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/cquilt/>



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution- ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>

...jamás podrán cuantificar
 el aguacero eterno detrás del pecho
 detrás del alisado, del maquillaje
 ese aguacero que no para
 que deja todo sin rostro y sin artistas...
Anamú y Manigua, Mayra Santos Febres,
1991.

Contemporary artists from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Cuba have been portraying blackness in their work to reinclude the islands' African ancestry in the present-day imaginary of the nations. This art represents resistance to the official discourse of national identity, which is inherently antiblack. In reality, the latter has caused unquantifiable psychological and physical harms as these populations are mostly of African descent. The extract from Santos Febres' poem above may help us begin to imagine this pernicious effect on society, and it tells us that the Hispanic Caribbean is in need of a racial identity re-education program. To begin, although Santos Febres writes for Puerto Rico and the histories of the three islands are distinct, similar antiblack sentiments have emerged. But how did this originate? Firstly, colonialism has had an essential role in generating these ideas but understanding the influence of this past is not sufficient to grapple with racism's perdurance on the islands today. In reality, the independence movements from Spain, as well as the politics that followed are worth exploring. Hence, we must distinguish the three national imaginaries that have been materialized because they have reflected diverging versions of antiblackness. First, in the case of the Dominican Republic, this nation shares the same island as Haiti, which has provoked anti-haitianism, and

antiblackness until today. In fact, Haiti—as the first African descended ruled nation in the Americas—represented for many nascent Latin American countries the threat that a black republic could rule over the white elites. Thus, repressing blackness as modern identity became a necessary defense mechanism to protect white interests. Additionally, the competing Spanish and French empires on Hispaniola generated tensions; although most Dominicans are of African descent, the Spanish leaders had to form a narrative to oppose the French. In consequence, blackness became the enemy and the scapegoat: Dominicans were Catholic and Hispanic, as opposed to the black Haitians who practiced “barbaric” voodoo.¹ Hereinafter, as scholars have observed, this racism did not end with independence. Today, antiblackness persists in the Dominican Republic, and this is because these sentiments were crystalized during the two major dictatorships of Trujillo (1930-1961) and Balaguer (1966-1978).² Rodríguez writes that the result of these dictatorships—regimes which not only violently opposed blackness but invested resources to erase it from Dominican imaginary — is that a Europeanising discourse has ruled. Dominicans are “interpellated as ‘Hispanic-Taíno’, despite the fact that, culturally and ethnically, the vast majority would be more accurately described as possessing African and Hispanic origins.”² Today, “in a country where the dominant part of the population is composed of mulattos and Blacks, the vast majority does not think of themselves as such, but prefers to use the phantasmagoric category of the indio [literally ‘Indian’; a reference to the original

¹ Néstor E. Rodríguez, *Divergent Dictions: Contemporary Dominican Literature* (Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 2005), p. 43.

² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

indigenous population] to refer to their racial condition.”³Consequently, many Dominicans cannot identify with their African roots.

Meanwhile, in Puerto Rico, we have a similar “Christianised whiteness” that was used to define the nation.⁴An island perpetually colonized by two hegemonies—Spain and the United States—unable to free itself, resisted to the second colonizer by exalting its Hispanic heritage, marginalizing indigeneity and blackness even more.⁵Hence, this impossibility to become an independent state engendered an inner patriotism, a constant remembering of the idiosyncrasies of Puerto Rico. One of these was the islands white, indigenous and black racial makeup; extolled in a disproportionate manner. As Viala notes, in both Puerto Rican conversations on identity and in cultural production there is this “overrepresentation of the taíno.”⁶One significant example is the seal of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture which displays and represents:

...the myth of a harmonious miscegenation... – Spanish, Arawak and Black – are equally represented but with attributes that connote and denote, their different importance in the Puerto Rican imagination. The visual message of the seal is that Spain brought culture, language and civilisation; the indigenous Caribbean people encountered by the Spanish conquistadors are represented as possessing a religion, and therefore a soul... But

*the black slaves are remembered only as a working labour force for the plantation.*⁷

Although this myth of trigueño Puerto Rico has “included” all racial components, it has dehumanized the African presence as a labor force. Additionally, one could argue that the indigenous and the black characters on the seal are equally marginalized since both are shirtless. However, Viala argues that the Taíno man is holding a cemí—a religious artefact—while the African man carries a machete, thus indigenous people are given this power to educate and tell the story, while the black people are workers in Puerto Rican imaginary. In other words, these characters are literally holding what modern day Puerto Ricans pass down to the subsequent generations as racial identities. Consequently, although Puerto Ricans claim their African heritage, many do not claim their blackness. López writes that this paradox also stems from the fact that the nation was built on “colorblindness.”⁸“As Lloréns states, the process of blanqueamiento and mestizaje...has allowed Puerto Rico to view itself a...post-racial paradise. Thus, affirming a Black identity in Puerto Rico is seen as challenging the racist narratives that protect this ‘post-racial paradise’ ...Black Puerto Ricans are expected to negotiate and conceal their Blackness for the “good” of the nation.”⁹ Therefore, this pride of being a mixed nation leaves no room to affirm blackness in Puerto Rico because if the island’s

³ Ibid., p. 6-7.

⁴ Amaryllis López, “Se dice pelo bueno: Black Affirmations in Contemporary Puerto Rican Literature,” (Bridgewater State University, 2020), p.4.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Fabienne Viala, “Daniel Lind Ramos and the Visual Politics of Race in Puerto Rican Art”. *Aica Caraïbe du Sud*, no. 4 (2015): p.4, <https://aicasc.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/viala-en.pdf>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ López, “Se dice pelo bueno: Black Affirmations in Contemporary Puerto Rican Literature,”p. 4.

⁹ Ibid., p.5.

particularity is its racial mixture, negritude alone is un-Puerto Rican. As Lloréns observes, “Puerto Rican society tends to accept only ‘folkloric’ depictions of Blackness.”¹⁰

On the other hand, Puerto Rico’s neighbor, Cuba, seems to put African descended cultures at the foreground of the national stage, as images of Afro-Cuban culture are prolific. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that blackness is invited in Cuban discussions of national identity. Cuba possesses a similar racial imaginary to Puerto Rico; that of a racially heterogeneous island.

Like Puerto Ricans, Cubans racially see themselves as a white, indigenous, and black nation, however there is a grand difference: Cubans do not focus on mestizaje as a national identity like Puerto Ricans. José Martí—the father of Cuban independence— “[professed] that [being] Cuban means [being] more than white, more than mulatto, more than black.”¹¹ In other words, Cuba was built on Martí’s rhetoric, which “privileged national unity over racial grievances.”¹² The story has thus told Cubans that to achieve freedom, they must unite into one body, and consequently, discussing race means compromising liberty. Additionally, like the Dominican dictatorships, the Cuban revolution has had an important role in crystalizing the independence narrative. In fact, scholars have compared Martí’s writing with Castro’s speeches, because

the revolution sought to liberate Cubans, ending racial inequalities:

*There were two types of racial discrimination, Castro explained. One was that which took place in recreational and cultural establishments; the other...affected a man's right to earn a living...discrimination in work centers. Discrimination in both areas had to be brought to an end, and in the future the public educational system would be used to ensure that blacks and whites were educated together in a spirit of brotherhood...In these two speeches in the early months of 1959 Fidel Castro not only identified the aspirations of his movement in relation to domestic racial discrimination but also established the limits beyond which it could not go. Henceforth he referred to the color problem in his speeches only in passing and implying that, with the campaign to end discrimination in workplaces and social centers completed, there was little if anything that remained to be done.*¹³

Booth demonstrates the eloquence of Castro’s discourse in this epoch; by stating the projects of the revolution would end racial inequality, he echoed Martí and established a fixed imaginary of racism and of racial equality in Cuba. In other words, by declaring the end of racism, the revolution guaranteed that Afro-Cubans would be incapable to voice the different perduring types of discrimination they faced. In fact, detecting black marginalization after the revolution remains extremely

¹⁰ Ibid., p.7.

¹¹ Helg, Aline. “Race in Argentina and Cuba, 1880-1930: Theory, Policies, and Popular Reaction,” in *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940*, Edited by Richard Graham (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1990), page # 47.

¹² David Luis-Brown, “‘The Coming Unities’ in ‘Our America’: Decolonization and Anticolonial Messianism in Martí, Du Bois, and the Santa de Cabora.” In *Waves of Decolonization: Discourses of Race and Hemispheric Citizenship in Cuba, Mexico, and the United States*, Edited by Donald E. Pease (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 69.

¹³ David Booth, “Cuba, Color and the Revolution,” *Science & Society* 40, no. 2, (1976): p. 155-157, JSTOR.

convoluted in Cuba, because of the revolution's exaltation of Afro-Cuban cultures.

Rejecting blackness has thus become unmal necesario, a necessary sacrifice for most Dominicans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans to be accepted by their compatriots as nationals. Meanwhile, those who do exalt their blackness—whether in conversation or physically—are often considered foreign or rebellious.

This nuance between resistance and rebellion has made antiblackness loyalty and law, while blackness is misbehavior and chaos. Amidst the power of this discourse, cultural production from these islands has questioned the racism in the official narrative and its fallacies. In fact, one of the ways artists are rewriting their national identities is by foregrounding their blackness.

The visual aspect of art is impactful in this context because one of the main ways negritude has been erased from these identities is by bombarding its nationals with images of white people and their Spanish heritage as the ideal. Indeed, by marrying the national with their African ancestry, these artists are not only reinserting negritude in the narrative, but they are inviting their people to see the beauty of their blackness. For once, the latter is portrayed as positive, thus normalizing and exalting nature. Now, before grasping the positive impact of this art, we must first understand how the antiblack rhetoric rules images and consequently beauty ideals in contemporary societies of the Hispanic Caribbean.

What and who is considered “beautiful” in the Hispanic Caribbean?

By analyzing quotidian conversations in the Hispanic Caribbean, we may answer this question. First, when discussing a person's aesthetic, skin is one of the primary determiners of beauty. For instance, when comparing and deciding who is more attractive between two people, the one with the lighter complexion has the tendency to be portrayed as more beautiful. In fact, soft words to refer to lighter Caribbean peoples' skin such as *crema* are used as well as the adjective *blanquito/a*. Indeed, the use of the diminutive *ito/a* is affectionate, exalting whiteness. In the Hispanic Caribbean, white people are depicted as possessing a flawless, angelical beauty; this veneration for this “rare” type of aesthetic is both harmful and convincing, because most of the population of the region is of African descent. The diminutive *ito* is also used in *negro/a* and *moreno/a* as an affectionate term, but we cannot ignore that black skin is often portrayed as a deficiency, as excess: *él/ella es demasiado prieto/a* (he/she is too dark) tends to be the reasoning behind why one considers a darker skinned person less attractive. Consequently, to evade this negative connotation, many African descended people of the Hispanic Caribbean refer to their skin and racial identity with black euphemisms such as *caramel*, *canela*, or they prefer to identify themselves as mixed by describing themselves as *mulato/a*, or *trigueño/a*. Often, many steer with either their nationality *dominicano/a*, *puertorriqueño/a*, *cubano/a*, the *taíno* counterparts *taíno/a*, *quisqueyano/a*, *boricua*, or their Hispanic heritage, referring to themselves as Spanish or Hispanic. Now, black (*negro/a*

and *moreno/a*) exists in this vocabulary, but in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, it is mainly used when describing African Americans and Haitians. Furthermore, the adjective *moreno/a* is significant because it has a double meaning: it can describe either one who is brunette with brown skin or one who is black. The latter definition is used as a black euphemism in other parts of Latin America. For instance, in countries like Mexico, *moreno/a* is used to describe people of African descent, because it is considered “rude” to refer to black people as black. In other words, even if *moreno/a* is a euphemism for black and even if *moreno/a* can also refer to someone who has brown or caramel skin, some people of the Hispanic Caribbean use the adjective to distinguish the African diaspora from themselves.

The necessity to steer clear from blackness is subconscious and it does not come from nowhere. It is a reflection of the nationalist expectations imposed on the nationals of the islands. But how can these countries maintain such an influential antiblack discourse, if the majority is of African descent? In order to preserve this white ideal, antiblack discourse has colonized the African descended people through images and language, impacting their daily routines. People of the Hispanic Caribbean are bombarded by images of whiteness, and in consequence whitening one’s appearance is a necessary step to look presentable. While this psychological and physical harm seems clear, it is so playfully embedded in quotidian life and language that it goes unnoticed. For instance, African descended women who keep their natural hair are often told—in both a joking and serious manner— so,

you didn’t brush your hair today? Hence, Afro-textured hair is perceived as uncivilized and unkempt, and this sets the expectation that hair straightening is considered basic grooming, like showering. Moreover, Afro-textured hair is synonymous with bad hair: *pelo malo*, and *encaracolado* are interchangeable expressions that characterize blackness as evil and unkempt. Other nicknames to refer to the Afro connotate unbrushed hair: *pasa*(Cuba) and *pajón* (Dominican Republic). From a young age, African descended girls from these islands get their hair straightened by their family members. To put it another way, without teaching them the vocabulary, this ritual sends the youth a message: their *pelo* is *malo*.

I wanted to evaluate the strength of this linguistic repudiation towards blackness by seeing if the younger generations in the diaspora had these same beliefs. Indeed, there is a large population of Dominicans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans in the United States, so it could not be ignored. I interviewed Cuban American kindergarten teacher Katelyn Alfonso in the Bronx, NY, as the majority of her students are four-year-old Dominicans and Puerto Ricans of African descent. When we met, I asked if she witnesses any of this discourse in the children and she stated that many of her female students wear wigs and have their hair straightened every day for school. When one student complained her wig was itchy, Alfonso advised her she didn’t need to wear it, but the young girl replied, “I can’t, mami says I have to look clean for school”. Naturally, this antiblack rhetoric has affected her male students also, she observed, as they did a self-portrait activity and none of the African-descended young boys used

darker colors to draw themselves. For example, one boy portrayed himself with straight hair, and Miss Alfonso told him to draw his curly hair. He looked at her, puzzled, then laughed. Alfonso reassured him: “draw yourself—even if mami will be mad— this is you.” These examples are a representation of this antiblack rhetoric that is impacting young Hispanic Caribbean children across the borders today.

Looking from an outside perspective, I also analyzed trends in international beauty pageant winners. I found that it is an insightful way to explore the beauty ideals of a nation; this being a world competition—like the world cup or the Olympics—the country wants to send its “best” contestants; in this case, whom they deem is the most beautiful. Moreover, these contests demonstrate how a nation wishes to be imagined by the gaze of the world. In terms of race, we see that most winners of Miss Universe have been white with light features; even in countries where most of the population is of African descent. In fact, in the case of the Hispanic Caribbean, it is curious to see that amidst the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Cuba’s pride of being racially mixed, the winners have mostly been of European descent. First, in the case of the Dominican Republic, only about six women of visible African features have won since the first competition in 1927. Meanwhile, in Puerto Rico, Miss Puerto Rico 2018—Kiara Ortega—was only “the third woman with noticeably mixed (African and Indigenous) features to win Miss Universe

Puerto Rico after Alba Reyes in 2004 and Zuleyka Rivera in 2006.¹⁴ In fact, this means that no woman of visibly African descent has won in Puerto Rico, and therefore we have evidence that whiteness is considered the epitome of beauty on the island. This is indicative of beauty standards in Borinquen since consuming Miss Puerto Rico and Miss Universe is extremely important to Puerto Ricans; because the island is 4th in the world—after The Philippines, the United States, and Venezuela— for the most Miss Universe titles, winning the pageant is paramount.

Indeed, the outrage exclaimed by multiple Puerto Ricans on social media when their own blonde and green-eyed Madison Anderson Berríos was the first runner up in Miss Universe in 2019 reflects this passion. It also reveals antiblack sentiments, as the winner Zozibini Tunzi, of South Africa was crowned: “Messages like ‘I can’t believe that the black woman won,’ ‘So many women with beautiful hair and the bad hair won,’ ‘Shaka Zulu’s cousin answers well’, and ‘She looks like a monkey’ crammed social media outlets.”¹⁵ Marcial writes that this reference to Shaka Zulu— “a 19th century military leader”— was from a representative of the Puerto Rico Department of Education.¹⁶

Finally, in the case of Cuba, it is more difficult to quantify the trends in the pageant winners due to the island’s political and economic situation. However, in the years that Miss Cuba was prominent (1952 to 1967) no Afro-Cuban woman has

¹⁴ Abigail Henry. “Former Miss Universe Puerto Rico Kiara Liz Ortega wins reality show *Mira Quién Baila*,” Angelopedia, Accessed April 29th 2021, <https://www.angelopedia.com/news/Miss-Universe-Puerto-Rico-2018-Kiara-Liz-Ortega-Delgado-Mira-Quien-Baila-Winner/50661>.

¹⁵ Jennifer Marcial Ocasio, “Is Puerto Rico ‘racist’? Online comments about new Miss Universe spark discussions.” Orlando Sentinel, December 10th, 2019. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/nationworld/os-puerto-rico-miss-universe-20191210-qsdvlsvu2ffbbvu4sxfm6jpmj-story.html> (Accessed April 29th 2021).

¹⁶ Marcial, “Is Puerto Rico ‘racist’?”.

won the contest. Moreover, although not a contestant at this year's Miss Universe, Cuba made an appearance. Held in Hollywood Florida, Cuban performers danced to Celia Cruz's *Bemba colorá*. An Afro-Cuban artist and Cuba's pride, Cruz was one of Cuba's most significant musicians. She was known to exalt the sweetness of her blackness through her catch phrase ¡azúcar! Does this mean that the island was and is proud to be black on the international stage? This question does not have a short answer. Celia Cruz's success is undeniable, but the Afro-Cuban performer's beginnings were rough as she was told time and time again that she was too black to perform. In an interview, a journalist asked her what she thought about her day's beauty standards and Cruz,—referring to her refusal to go under the knife— stated that *toda la vida he sido fea, desde que nací y el público me ha aceptado así*; amidst her “ugliness” she succeeded in her career and the audience has accepted her the way she looks.¹⁷ In this context *la guarachera de Cuba* was not referring to her blackness but it is interesting to see her refusal to conform to her day's beauty ideals, which were and remain white focused. I argue that Celia Cruz's success does not signify the end of racism on the island. In fact, Booth has written that exceptional talent has been one of the ways Afro-Cubans have managed to be accepted as the representatives of Cuba since the early days of the island's independence.¹⁸ Fast forward to 2021, intentional or not, the choice of song is meaningful to explore the question of

antiblackness in Cuba today. First, *bemba* is a pejorative word used to refer to big lips, specifically those of people of African descent. The song's chorus is *Pa' mi, tú no eres na' /Tú tienes la bemba colorá* (You mean nothing to me/ You have big colored lips). It seems Cruz was imitating the antiblack discourse in her country. Second, in the verse she sings: *Baila tu rumba/Canta tu son/Tu guarachita y tu danzón... /Dance your rumba/Sing your son/your guaracha and your danzón*. This verse can be interpreted as a voice of encouragement from another Afro-Cuban telling their black counterpart to exalt their blackness amidst the racism. Yet, with the use of the imperative, we can also interpret it as a white voice ordering an Afro-Cuban to perform their musical genres.

Regardless of Cruz's intention, we can observe that Afro-Cubans have only been accepted to represent their nation as performers but never as the island's face. Amidst the seriousness of this topic— like most of Celia Cruz's performances— *Bemba colorá* takes on a playful tone; a mirror of both the casual pejorative language to refer to the appearance of people of African descent in the Hispanic Caribbean and the lack of seriousness and commitment in terms of discussing race in Cuba. Perhaps it is precisely this playful discourse that has made space for cultural producers like Celia Cruz to exalt their blackness and remain in Cuban imaginary.

¹⁷ Ernesto McCausland, “Celia Cruz reflexiona sobre la vida,” YouTube, 9.21 minutes, September 7th, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAI-ZxvR6-Y>

¹⁸ David Booth, “Cuba, Color and the Revolution,” *Science & Society* 40, no. 2, (1976): p. 144, JSTOR.

As we can see, not all people from the Hispanic Caribbean have followed the antiblack rhetoric. Beyond the musicians and intellectuals who have advocated for normalizing blackness through their words, some prominent figures of the region are affirming their negritude through their physical appearance. The natural hair movement—initiated by African American women during the civil rights movements—has revibrated in the Caribbean. Since images of white people have been the only ones to describe professionalism and beauty, just the simple act of wearing natural hair has been a form of resistance in the region. For instance, after years of getting Dominican blow outs to appear on television, Afro-Dominican journalists Marivell Contreras and Edith Febles began to wear their natural hair on television; a defiance statement but also a positive message to their viewers, normalizing negritude. Additionally, in 2014, Dominican-American Carolina “Miss Rizos” Contreras opened the first natural hair salon in Santo Domingo. In addition, natural hair salons and black hair products are becoming available in Puerto Rico and Cuba. It is clear that if images of black people and beauty services are accessible, it is becoming more difficult to believe the fallacy that blackness is unnatural and ugly. These counternarratives we see in the media and in contemporary life of the Hispanic Caribbean are a form of a re-education campaign, providing African descended people of these islands with the tools to affirm their blackness and to unlearn that their negritude must be erased for them to be beautiful.

Now, we have seen how images and language have been powerful tools to exalt whiteness and taboo blackness. Fortunately, contemporary artists of the region are joining this project, changing the visual and linguistic narratives available for their compatriots in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Cuba. I argue that since visual arts are both a reflection of the national and synonymous with the aesthetic, they have had a grand role in questioning the absurdity of antiblackness and promoting pro black beauty ideals in the Hispanic Caribbean. These cultural producers are seeking to include the black subject in both the official narrative and in daily life by portraying their negritude as both nationalistic and beautiful.

The Dominican Republic

Jorge Pineda is one of the leading Dominican visual artists today. A world renown queer creator from Barahona, the Dominican body and its negotiation with blackness is central to his work:

Pineda understands reality as [a] permanent interpretation...as a mask behind which there is no definitive face but rather a game of successive maskings. What Jorge Pineda does is open up the possibility of mining the control exercised over us... through the path of an over-identification with it...In a certain measure he projects... the constitutional lacking of the subject which is simultaneously an excessive presence of the ‘impossible’... It’s not the moment of the disappearance of the veils or of the lifting of the theatre curtain, but rather that of the acceptance of the screen.¹⁹

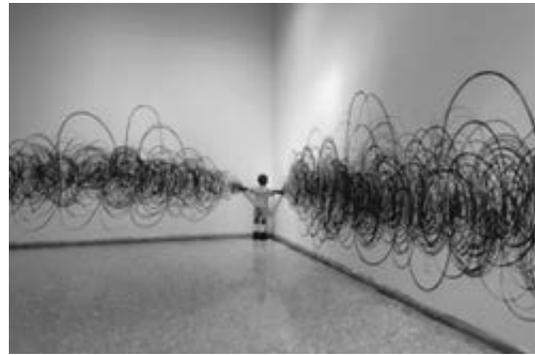
¹⁹“Jorge Pineda: Recent Works,” Africanah (blog), October 19th,2016, [https://africanah.org/jorge-pineda-recent-works/#:~:text=Jorge%20Pineda%2C%20\(b.,%2C%20Spain%2C%20in%20February%202013.](https://africanah.org/jorge-pineda-recent-works/#:~:text=Jorge%20Pineda%2C%20(b.,%2C%20Spain%2C%20in%20February%202013.)

In other words, Pineda sees identity as an excessively dramatic performance which attempts to cover the truth. We can observe this question of overconsumption or over-identification with the mask in the multiple layers of clothing that worn by the characters in *Mama* (2016).



20

In this image we cannot see the characters' skin colors, nor do we have any indication of their physical appearance. We simply observe the distinct colors and materials worn by the mother and her child. The layered clothing demonstrates the intricacies and the multiple masks that are utilized to hide this racial identity. It also appears the parent is connecting her thoughts with her child's in order to proliferate some message. Regardless of what the latter may be, what is certain is that the *Mama* in Pineda's piece is attempting to pass down her mask to her progeny. In fact, Pineda's characters tend to be young subjects in a constant process of negotiating their negritude. *Me voy* (2005) is another example of this.



21

A child of African descent is standing in the corner; as we know, in childhood this space is that of punishments. I could not help but think of the children in Miss Alfonso's class, who are taught that exalting blackness is misbehavior. Indeed, the purpose of the punishment in the corner is for children to reflect on their mistakes, and in this process we see black scribbles leaking from the hands of the boy. The character is also portrayed in 3 dimensions whereas the black scribbles are painted on the wall, meaning that they no longer form a part of him. In this case, the title, *Me voy* ("I'm leaving") could signify that he is walking away from the reality of his blackness. Thus, the use of young characters in Pineda's work suggests that this disconnect with negritude is not inherent but is learned over time. Once more, Pineda evokes characters who work to intricately hide their blackness. Let us see other artists who reflect on the outcome when this veil is removed.

²⁰ Fig. #1, Pineda, Jorge. *Mama*, Painting, 2016, (Lucy García Arte Contemporáneo, Santo Domingo), [https://africanah.org/jorge-pineda-recent-works/#:~:text=Jorge%20Pineda%2C%20\(b.,%2C%20Spain%2C%20in%20](https://africanah.org/jorge-pineda-recent-works/#:~:text=Jorge%20Pineda%2C%20(b.,%2C%20Spain%2C%20in%20)

²¹ Fig. #2, Pineda, Jorge. *Me voy*, Installation, 2005, (Hunter East Harlem Gallery), <https://wmuprintmaking.wordpress.com/2014/09/11/jorge-pineda-visiting-printmedia-artist/>.

Kilia Llano is one of the most prominent Dominican visual artists today. A muralist from Santo Domingo, Llano is interested in depicting the Dominican body through urban art. She affirms Dominican negritude by painting African descended subjects as part of and in harmony with the Dominican landscape. By drawing her people as black in the landscape, she not only resists the dominant Taíno-Spanish racial identity, but the artist affirms that blackness is natural rather than something that should be hidden. For instance, in the untitled piece below (2018) we see a Dominican woman who is in the forefront and the centre of the island.



She is happy to be entrenched in what appears to be honey, and thus blackness is depicted as sweet, positive, and as the nature and the essence of Dominicaness. The colours and her smile depict that negritude is beautiful, rather than something that leads to rejection from the nation and the rest of the world. In fact, this mural was commissioned by a new hotel in Las Terrenas Coco, Honey and Hill, which means that the gaze of foreigners will fall on this image, and Dominican identity appears to be reshaped on the international stage.

²² Fig. #3, Llano, Kilia. Untitled, Mural, 2018, (Hotel in Las Terrenas Coco, Honey and Hill), <https://www.facebook.com/1045059695552454/posts/finalizado-el-mural-comisionado-por-el-nuevo-hotel-en-las-terrenas-coco-honey-an/2277746068950471/>

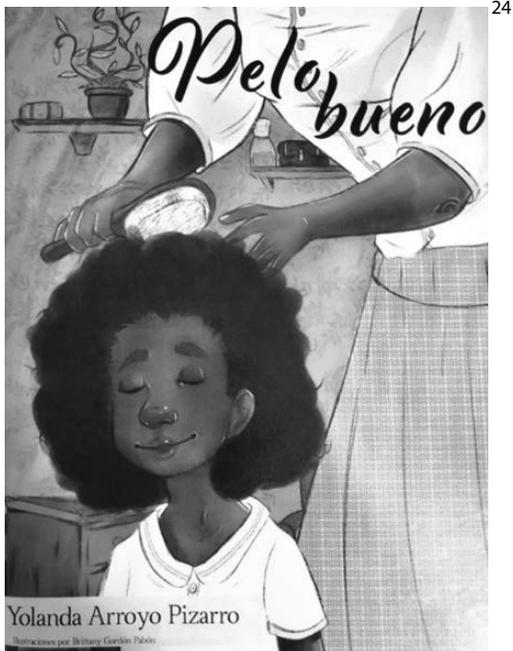
²³ Fig. #4, Llano, Kilia. Murales de mi patria (series), Mural 2016, (Megacentro RD, Santo Domingo), <https://dominicancult.blogspot.com/2016/02/mural-by-kilia-llano.html>.

Meanwhile, the second image below (2016, also untitled) is a part of the Murales de mi patria collection. The work can be found at Megacentro, a large shopping mall in Santo Domingo. This mural audience is regular people—especially families—and this quotidian experience is a way to normalize blackness in Dominican life. Indeed, in the painting we have a young Afro-Dominican girl who has the island’s flag painted on her face. This affirms that first, blackness is a part of Dominican identity, providing the nationals with a sense of pride for their negritude as part of nationalism. Second, by depicting a child, the youth who see this image can identify themselves and begin to portray themselves as black. Moreover, it is essential to observe that Llano draws these characters with their natural hair, —whether curly hair, Afro-textured hair or styled in braids—normalizing Afro-textured hair as a hairstyle rather than a supposed lack of maintenance.



Puerto Rico

Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro is an Afro-Puerto Rican author who seeks to show the youth of her island that they must not disguise their blackness to be beautiful. Her children's book *Pelo bueno* (2018) provides a significant number of counter-narrative images, as the pages are replete with colorful depictions of two black females happy with their natural hair.



Specifically, by juxtaposing *pelo bueno* with an image of a happy girl with an Afro, Arroyo literally turns *pelo malo* on its head. In the story, as the abuela is styling her granddaughter's hair, the latter tells the former that children at school have called her hair texture *malo*. The abuela then tells her that her *pelo* is not *malo*, because it has never done any harm to anyone.²⁵ This simple reflection of the adjective *malo* demonstrates that this process of unlearning that blackness is ugly begins with questioning the everyday

Simply put, the Afro-Puerto Rican author reminds the youth that—amidst the fact that their *pelo* is not *malo*—they may hear their appearance is bad or unkempt, but they must remember this is a fallacy. Additionally, by writing a children's book Arroyo reminds us that it is important to re-educate young African descended people in the region with positive images of blackness before hating their natural hair becomes unquestionable.

López argues that storytelling also permits this unlearning process:

*The grandmother goes on to style her grandchild's hair into a crown, saying that she now is "a queen like the queens from our African ancestors" ... By mentioning Juana Agripina, an enslaved woman who legally defended and fought for her freedom in nineteenth-century Puerto Rico, the grandmother honors the beauty and history of resistance of Afro-Puerto Ricans. These new styles allow the grandchild not only to see her natural hair in a new light, but also to be introduced to a more varied representation of history that includes images of the strength and beauty of African queens and women warriors.*²⁶

As López states, Arroyo advocates for the essential role of storytelling of black heroes to children in order to reinsert blackness in contemporary Puerto Rican imaginary. In other words, in remembering black Puerto Ricans as individuals, rather than recalling them as slaves, there is the possibility of young Afro-Puerto Ricans to see themselves as black rather than just having black ancestors. As we have seen

²⁴ Fig.#5, Arroyo Pizarro, Yolanda. Illustrations by: Brittany Gordón Pabón. *Pelo bueno*, Book, 2018, (EDP University Press, Puerto Rico), <https://latinosinkidlit.com/2020/10/26/book-review-pelo-bueno-good-hair-by-yolanda-arroyo-pizarro-illustrated-by-brittany-gordon-pabon/>

²⁵ Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro, *Pelo bueno*. (Puerto Rico: EDP University Press, 2018), p. 10.

with Miss Alfonso's students in the Bronx, the antiblack discourse begins at an early age with families from the Hispanic Caribbean, hence Arroyo's work is fundamental for the next generation of Puerto Ricans of African descent.

Daniel Lind Ramos is another Afro-Puerto Rican cultural producer who questions the underrepresentation of the island's African heritage. A painter and sculptor from Loíza, —the region of the island with the largest concentration of Afro-Puerto Ricans— Lind Ramos places African elements in the foreground of his art, arguing that blackness is inherently Puerto Rican. The artist builds his installations from everyday materials such as “graters, casseroles, coconuts, machetes, palm tree trunks and branches...as well as found materials such as [stereo speakers], trombone parts, rebar, brooms, brushes...-bongos, cymbals, a music stand...basketballs, and even...shoes... [His installations are] filled with percussive rhythms and harmonies seen and nearly heard.”²⁷ (Canning 2020, para.5) Indeed, by combining both everyday objects and African instruments, the sculptor is “merging the political, the mythical and the everyday life in the manner of chronicle of the unsaid, [unmasking] the multiple components of Caribbean identities hidden behind the national delusions of his island...”²⁸ (Viala 2015, 6) Simply put, he resists the idea that his island's African legacy is of the past. For instance, in his piece *Con-junto* (2015) below, Lind

Ramos not only remembers the legacy of the African presence in Puerto Rico but heseeks to normalize blackness as a large part of modern Puerto Rican identity.



The title of this artwork delivers this message. First, the word *conjunto* in Spanish signifies something that is joint or combined, but Ramos has divided it. This tells us about the paradox that the harmonious mix of *mestizaje* has created a divide and has subsequently excluded blackness. It also shows us that Puerto Rico has space to include its African legacy. Through the words *con* (with) and *junto* (together) Lind-Ramos suggests a potential of unity within this divide. All in all, *Con-junto* tells the audience that *negritude* is so prominent on the island that it cannot be forgotten in Puerto Rico's imaginary of *mestizaje*.

²⁶ Amaryllis López, "Se dice pelo bueno: Black Affirmations in Contemporary Puerto Rican Literature," (Bridgewater State University, 2020), p.22.

²⁷ Susan Canning, "Daniel Lind-Ramos." *Sculpture Magazine*, September 9th, 2020. <https://sculpturemagazine.art/daniel-lind-ramos/> (Accessed April 30th 2021).

²⁸ Fabienne Viala, "Daniel Lind Ramos and the Visual Politics of Race in Puerto Rican Art". *Aica Caraïbe du Sud*, no. 4 (2015): p.6, <https://aicasc.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/viala-en.pdf>.

²⁹ Fig. #6, Lind-Ramos, Daniel. *Con-junto*, Installation, 2015, (Marlborough Gallery), <https://sculpturemagazine.art/daniel-lind-ramos/>.

Cuba

Juan Roberto Diago Durruthy is an Afro-Cuban painter and sculptor who uses photographs, metal-welding, and paint to portray the black legacy and the perduring racism on his island. Unlike the bright colors we see in the works of the Dominican and Puerto Rican artists mentioned, Diago prefers to use light blue, grey, black, and white tones to reflect the otherness of the black body and the exclusion of the Afro-Cuban experience. Additionally, like Pineda's subjects, the black characters are blurred, as faces without faces are recurring figures in Diago's work. Namely, the artist mirrors the absence of their voice in nationhood by painting them without a mouth, ears, or a nose. In fact, although they possess eyes, they do not have eyeballs, hence the Afro-Cuban subject is presented as a body without a vision or a soul. For instance, one of Diago's most famous works is *Rostro sin nombre* (2018) or "nameless face". Hence, the title of this piece brings attention to this erasure of the black subject in modern Cuba. The face is both the center of the image and invisible, drawing on this paradox of inclusion-exclusion of Afro-Cubans in the official identity of the island.



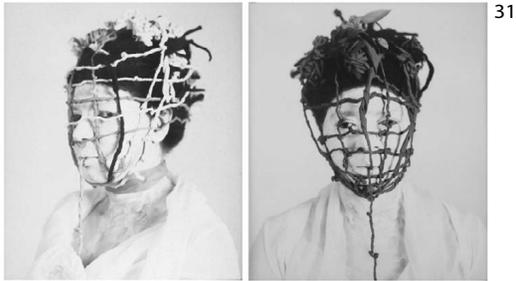
³⁰ Fig. #7, Diago Durruthy, Juan Roberto. *Rostro sin nombre*, Painting, 2018, (Cernuda Art Gallery, Chicago), <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/juan-roberto-diago-afro-cuban-paintings-1202674786/>.

Overall, by presenting black people with blurred features, Diago demonstrates how the official discourse has omitted the recounting of individuals who built Cuba. Moreover, the tiles indicate that the Afro-Cuban is the foundation and a large part of the racial mosaic, but this subject is relegated to the bottom of the landscape; a place where the Cubans walk over every day. This work is thus criticizing the official discourse which appears to include the African legacy of Cuba but has relegated blackness to the past, like in a museum. Finally, the abstract nature of Diago's art presents a subject who is melancholic because he is an invisible protagonist. In other words, Diago argues that the Afro-Cuban is in centre stage in the performance of *cubanía* yet this subject is not given the chance to speak.

Born in Matanzas in 1959, María Magdalena Campos Pons is a world renown artist based in the United States. Like the cultural producers we have seen, the Afro-Cuban artist is interested in portraying blackness in photography, sculpting and audiovisuals. Similar to Diago's art, Campos' pieces are abstract, yet the latter's signature is using her body as her canvas. We see this method in *Freedom Trap* (2013) where she portrays with her face the paradox of Cuba's revolution; an ideal of freedom which turned into a prison.

As we have seen, the freedom theories of both the independence movement and the revolution go hand in hand with the Cuban dream of racial equality. In fact, Campos presents the disillusion of the latter; painted white, with her face caught in a net, the artist showcases that the imagined

racial paradise of Cuba libre washed blackness away from the national mosaic, closing the doors for Afro-Cuban liberation.



Here, we have a double trap; the net—perhaps referring to the lack of agency of Afro-Cubans in official discourse—and the position of her face mimicking that of a mug shot—reflecting the myth of criminality imposed on people of African descent—a symbol of the perduring racism on the island.

All in all, Campos portrays the prison in which the official *cubanía* has trapped Afro-Cubans. It is a life sentence because it is a marginalization portrayed as freedom.

To conclude, it is evident that cultural production has served as a tool to rewrite the antiblack narratives in the Hispanic Caribbean. These artists from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Cuba are proliferating new images of national beauty ideals available to their audiences and are showcasing the damages of the racist fallacies propagated in official discourse. After centuries of trauma caused by whiteness being proliferated as the epitome of the aesthetic, blackness is finally being recognized as beautiful to the youth, an essential target audience for the future of the islands. These artists are

providing children with images in which they can identify themselves, and proudly imagine themselves as black. As we have seen, masking this reality has suffocated nature, provoking self-harm in daily life in this region. Further, these cultural producers are redefining what the nationalist discourse named rebellion by calling it nature. In other words, the pro-black images we have seen are counternarratives, but it is not enough to name them resistance pieces. Beyond dropping the antiblack veil, the primary intensions of these contemporary artists from the Hispanic Caribbean are to normalize nature in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Cuba and in the rest of the world.

³¹ Fig. #8, Campos Pons, María Magdalena. Freedom Trap, Photograph, 2013, (Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco), <https://www.facebook.com/gallerywendinorris/posts/10156870626070378/>.

Works Cited

- Alfonso, Katelyn Alexandra. Personal interview. April 1st, 2021.
- Arroyo Pizarro, Yolanda. *Pelo bueno*. Puerto Rico: EDP University Press, 2018.
- Booth, David. "Cuba, Color and the Revolution." *Science & Society* 40, no. 2, (1976):129–72.
- Canning, Susan. "Daniel Lind-Ramos." *Sculpture Magazine*, September 9th, 2020. <https://sculpturemagazine.art/daniel-lind-ramos/>
- Fig. #1, Pineda, Jorge. *Mama*, Painting, 2016, (Lucy García Arte Contemporáneo, Santo Domingo), [https://africanah.org/jorge-pineda-recent-works/#:~:text=Jorge%20Pineda%2C%20\(b.,%2C%20Spain%2C%20in%20February%202013.](https://africanah.org/jorge-pineda-recent-works/#:~:text=Jorge%20Pineda%2C%20(b.,%2C%20Spain%2C%20in%20February%202013.)
- Fig. #2, Pineda, Jorge. *Me voy*, Installation, 2005, (Hunter East Harlem Gallery), <https://wmuprintmaking.wordpress.com/2014/09/11/jorge-pineda-visiting-printmedia-artist/>.
- Fig. #3, Llano, Kilia. *Untitled*, Mural, 2018, (Hotel in Las Terrenas Coco, Honey and Hill), <https://www.facebook.com/104505969552454/posts/finalizado-el-mural-comisionado-por-el-nuevo-hotel-en-las-terrenas-coco-honey-an/2277746068950471/>.
- Fig. #4, Llano, Kilia. *Murales de mi patria* (series), Mural 2016, (Megacentro RD, Santo Domingo), <https://dominicancult.blogspot.com/2016/02/mural-by-kilia-llano.html>.
- Fig.#5, Arroyo Pizarro, Yolanda. Illustrations by: Brittany Gordón Pabón. *Pelo bueno*, Book, 2018, (EDP University Press, Puerto Rico), <https://latinosinkidlit.com/2020/10/26/book-review-pelo-bueno-good-hair-by-yolanda-arroyo-pizarro-illustrated-by-brittany-gordon-pabon/>
- Fig. #6, Lind-Ramos, Daniel. *Con-junto*, Installation, 2015, (Marlborough Gallery), <https://sculpturemagazine.art/daniel-lind-ramos/>.
- Fig. #7, Diago Durruthy, Juan Roberto. *Rostro sin nombre*, Painting, 2018, (Cernuda Art Gallery, Chicago), <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/juan-roberto-diago-afro-cuban-paintings-1202674786/>.
- Fig. #8, Campos Pons, María Magdalena. *Freedom Trap*, Photograph, 2013, (Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco), <https://www.facebook.com/gallerywendinorris/posts/10156870626070378/>.
- McCausland, Ernesto. "Celia Cruz reflexiona sobre la vida." Fundación Ernesto McCausland, September 7th, 2012. YouTube video, 9:21. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAi-ZxvR6-Y>.
- Helg, Aline. "Race in Argentina and Cuba, 1880-1930: Theory, Policies, and Popular Reaction." *In The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940*, Edited by Richard Graham, 37-70. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1990.
- Henry, Abigail. "Former Miss Universe Puerto Rico Kiara Liz Ortega wins reality show Mira Quién Baila." *Angelopedia* (blog), February 25th, 2021, <https://www.angelopedia.com/news/Miss-Universe-Puerto-Rico-2018-Kiara-Liz-Ortega-Delgado-Mira-Quien-Baila-Winner/50661>.

- “Jorge Pineda: Recent Works.” *AfricanaH* (blog), October 19th, 2016,
[https://africanah.org/jorge-pineda-recent-works/#:~:text=Jorge%20Pineda%2C%20\(b.,%2C%20Spain%2C%20in%20February%202013.](https://africanah.org/jorge-pineda-recent-works/#:~:text=Jorge%20Pineda%2C%20(b.,%2C%20Spain%2C%20in%20February%202013.)
- López, Amaryllis. “Se dice pelo bueno: Black Affirmations in Contemporary Puerto Rican Literature.” *BSU Honors Program Theses and Projects, Item 310*. Bridgewater State University, 2020.
- Luis-Brown, David. “‘The Coming Unities’ in ‘Our America’: Decolonization and Anticolonial Messianism in Martí, Du Bois, and the Santa de Cabora.” In *Waves of Decolonization: Discourses of Race and Hemispheric Citizenship in Cuba, Mexico, and the United States*, Edited by Donald E. Pease, 202-240. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Marcial Ocasio, Jennifer. “Is Puerto Rico ‘racist’? Online comments about new Miss Universe spark discussions.” *Orlando Sentinel* (Orlando, FL), December 10th, 2019.
<https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/nationworld/os-puerto-rico-miss-universe-20191210-qsdvlsvu2ffbbvu4sxfm6jpmmy-story.html>.
- Rodríguez, Néstor E. *Divergent Dictions: Contemporary Dominican Literature*. Translation by Kerstin Oloff. Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 2005.
- Santos Febres, Mayra. *Anamú y manigua*. San Juan, Puerto Rico: Iguana Dorada, 1991.
- Viala, Fabienne. “Daniel Lind Ramos and the Visual Politics of Race in Puerto Rican Art”. *Aica Caraïbe du Sud*, no. 4 (2015) : 1-13.