



IJIDI: Book Review

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“How are they categorizing Latino?” I asked this question when chatting with someone about the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Latino. The friend and colleague with whom I was speaking understood what I had left unsaid—will Haiti be included when this new Smithsonian Museum tells Latinx stories? *Racialized Visions Haiti and the Hispanic Caribbean*, a compilation of eleven essays, makes the argument that in terms of history and cultural production, Haiti is a key player in the Hispanic Caribbean and should be included in conversations about the region and its people. The book, as the editor Vanessa K. Valdés explains, “explores the cultural impact that Haiti and its writers and artists have had on their counterparts in the surrounding Spanish-speaking nations of Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico” (p. 2). Valdés and the other contributors challenge the idea that people of the Caribbean are separated because of differences in language and nationality. Rather, they focus on emphasizing the cultural, historical, and other exchanges that have been happening among the nations and territories in the Caribbean since the days of the Haitian Revolution.

The volume also grapples with the question of how our understanding of the Caribbean would change if Haiti was placed as part of the center in our studies, instead of following the usual trend of placing it on the periphery. What if, instead of viewing it as an outlier and, invariably, as a disaster, scholars focused on Haiti’s impact in the Caribbean and in the Americas? The contributors further question how Haiti’s historical role as the first free Black republic in the Western Hemisphere influences how scholars who study African-descended people in Latin America and the Hispanic Caribbean approach and understand their subjects. Heretofore Haiti, Haitians, and their contributions to the cultural and historical developments in the Hispanic Caribbean have been, as Valdés puts it, overlooked, ignored or “used to signify a nightmare” (p. 16). The latter is particularly true when discussing the Haitian Revolution in its immediate aftermath. She and her contributors join other scholars in attributing the evident and continuing marginalization of Haiti and Haitians to “the rampant anti-Blackness of the region...” (p. 3).

Racialized Visions is part of the scholarly discussions that show, as Myriam J.A. Chancy’s Foreword states, why “Haiti, past and present, matters in the Caribbean basin” (p. XV). Chancy also argues that by talking about Haiti, particularly its exclusion from Caribbean conversations,

attention is brought to “issues of nationalism, colorism, ethnocentrism...” and whitening efforts in the Hispanic Caribbean (p. XV). These are important discussions that move the field of study forward and, indeed, expand it. *Racialized Visions* joins several other works where these conversations have begun. This literature includes Myriam J.A. Chancy’s *From Sugar to Revolution: Women’s Visions of Haiti, Cuba and the Dominican Republic* (2012). Chancy’s book, which many of the contributors cite, is credited with starting to broach the argument of why Haiti should be considered when the Hispanic Caribbean is studied. *Racialized Visions* expands on Chancy’s book and the other literature by including voices from Puerto Rico. Having Puerto Rican writers and thinkers in conversation with their Haitian, Dominican, and Cuban peers may be a first, according to Valdés. Another important work that guides the discourse in *Racialized Visions* is Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995), which addresses silences and erasures and how these enter the historical narrative. Trouillot’s influence is clear in most of the essays. Similarly, several of the authors cite Sybille Fischer’s *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (2004). Fischer’s book is an early work that focuses on Haiti’s influence on cultural production in the Hispanic Caribbean, specifically Cuba and the Dominican Republic. Other scholars whose work looks at the representation of Haiti by its Spanish neighbors include Pedro L. San Miguel, Lucía M. Suárez, Emilio Jorge Rodríguez, and Maria C. Fumagalli. More generally, *Racialized Vision* is part of the scholarly dialogue centered on the Black Atlantic, which includes Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1993), which was one of the first to argue for a Black Atlantic analytical framework. Within this corpus, one finds many scholars such as Julius S. Scott, Sara Johnson, Philip Kaisary, Marlene L. Daut, and Grégory Pierrot.

Racialized Visions is focused on cultural production and thus, as expected, several contributions highlight literary works such as short stories, novels, and poetry. Reflections on film, oratory, and histories are also included. A somewhat unexpected but welcome addition was an essay by Cécile Accilien entitled “Haiti and the Dominican Republic Teaching about the Un/Friendly Neighbors of Hispaniola,” which presented teaching and course design as a form of cultural production. Accilien outlined her approach to teaching a class on the relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic to a group of upper-level undergraduate students from different disciplines. The aim of the class was to foster critical thinking and understanding among the students by bringing in diverse guest speakers and having the class read, discuss, and analyze material written from different perspectives.

The essays in *Racialized Visions* also fall into geographical categories, two focus on Puerto Rico, three on Cuba, and six on the Dominican Republic. They address liberation, violence, and brutality, as well as the negative perceptions of Haiti. Collectively, the scholars answer the challenge of fashioning more current narratives for Haiti by creating spaces and opportunities for new ways of thinking about Haiti. The Puerto Rico pieces by Vanessa K. Valdés and Mariana Past point to the commonalities between Haiti and Puerto Rico. This is significant since Valdés indicates that “in the curricula of Puerto Rico,” Haiti is typically erased (p. 3). Past, for her part, concludes her analysis of Ana Lydia Vega’s short story, “Encancaranublado,” which features a Haitian, a Dominican, a Cuban, a Puerto Rican, and a racist white character, by stating that it is a call for “Caribbean racial solidarity” (p. 168). Two of the three Cuban contributions study works that center the Haitian Revolution and its influence on Cuba in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and on the 1959 Cuban Revolution. For example, in her analysis of Alejo Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of this World*, Natalie Marie Léger states that both the Haitian Revolution and the 1959 Cuban Revolution happened under circumstances and conditions that made them unlikely. The third Cuba contribution by Erika V. Serrato analyzes how the poetry of Haitian intellectual Jacques Roumain influenced Cuban poet Jesús Cos Cause’s work.

Most of the essays in *Racialized Visions* focus on the relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. This is not surprising since they share the island of Hispaniola. All the Dominican pieces discuss the border between the two nations and present it as a zone of contrasts. Along the border, one finds robust trading enterprises where the residents intermingle, socialize, and cooperate with each other. As Claudy Delné's essay shows, regular Dominicans and Haitians living on the border are more alike than different, and both equally fall victim to corrupt governments and greed. The conflict, violence, and mistrust that is also prevalent on the border is typically presented as fomented by unscrupulous politicians and their supporters. The Dominican dictator, Rafael Trujillo (ruled 1930-1961), and the 1937 massacre of Haitians in Dominican border towns loom large in these pieces, as does discussing anti-Haitian sentiment. Carrie Gibson's analysis of the work of pro-Trujillo historian, Emilio Rodríguez Demorizi, shows how Trujillo encouraged the resentment towards Haitians and how he used a hierarchy of skin color to do it. Darker skin, which is associated with Haitians was/is viewed as bad. Trujillo's legacy is evident in the 2013 Dominican Constitutional Tribunal decision that stripped citizenship rights from Dominicans born of Haitian parents living and working in the Dominican Republic without immigration papers. The controversial 2013 decision is mentioned in almost all the Dominican compositions.

Taken together, the essays make a clear case as to why Haiti should be included in conversations and scholarship about the Hispanic Caribbean. They also detail the reasons why, to date, this inclusion has not often happened. *Racialized Visions* successfully counters the tradition and belief that Haiti and the Hispanic Caribbean are not necessarily connected and that they are different. Even those addressing anti-Haitian sentiment and prejudice underscore the commonalities between Haiti and the Hispanic Caribbean. The authors also illustrate that when it comes to dealing with the hemisphere's superpower, the U.S., it is in the Caribbean nations' best interest to work together rather than against each other.

In a work such as this one, it is unavoidable that some chapters are stronger than others. One of the strongest in this book is Philip Kaisary's "The Haitian Revolution and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *La última cena* (*The Last Supper*, 1976)." Here the focus is on Cuban cinema and Kaisary's analysis shows the connections between Cuba and the Haitian Revolution bringing attention "to a transnational, pan-Caribbean history of resistance..." (p. 115). A minor negative in some, not all, of the chapters were instances when entire non-English passages were cited without translation. To be fair, translations were provided in the endnotes but it was an interruption to go to the endnotes to see the text in English. While I understand and commend the motivation to avoid silencing the original author's voice, providing a translation in line with the text would benefit the non-Spanish/French/Kreyòl reader. The latter does not detract from this book's importance to the field. Since a broad definition of cultural production appears to have been used in the essay selection process, genres that may not always be considered "cultural products" were included, making for a more interesting and inclusive book. The diversity of voices is also a strong point. The contributors represent different disciplines and areas of research, and their essays bring forth the perspectives of people of varied ethnicities, nationalities, and socio-economic positions. I recommend this book as it makes a strong, persuasive, and well-supported argument for including Haiti in conversations about the Hispanic Caribbean. As to the question with which I began this review, to the best of my knowledge, the answer has yet to be determined.

Endnotes

It is likely that Myriam J.A. Chancy and I are related, though I cannot say for sure, a situation that is not unusual among Haitian families. Other than a brief meeting at a conference several years ago, Dr. Chancy and I do not know each other.

M. Stephanie Chancy (chancyms01@gmail.com) holds a Ph.D. in history from Florida International University (FIU) (USA). Her research focuses on eighteenth and nineteenth-century Black Atlantic material culture and incorporates elements of Caribbean, U.S., and European history as well as material pieces such as paintings, sculptures, and photographs. She is currently a post-doctoral associate in the History Department at FIU. While completing her dissertation, Dr. Chancy served as the Green Family Foundation Fellow at the Digital Library of the Caribbean. She has curated several exhibitions that highlight Haitian art and history and how Haitian and European art and cultural traditions intersect.

