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Dawn Stinchcomb’s The Development of Literary Blackness in the Dominican Republic is an insightful and necessary addition to understanding any construction of a national Dominican literature. Drawing heavily from Dominican history, Stinchcomb’s point is to “show the … marked development of literary blackness in the Dominican Republic despite the prevailing rhetoric that denies the existence of blacks” (p. 15). Ranging from multiple colonial conquests to intra-island wars with Haiti to modern constructions of the Dominican Republic following Trujillo’s dictatorship, the history of the Dominican Republic has created a cultural atmosphere in which “Dominican blackness” is considered an oxymoron (p. 11). As a result, scholars and the general public both inside and outside the Dominican Republic have not been exposed to, and perhaps more strongly, have actively ignored an entire set of texts that expresses the thoughts and experiences of a real but ideologically denied identity. Stinchcomb’s work is one that restores those works and racial politics to a particular literary history and asks that any notion of a national
literature in the Dominican Republic be revised to include Afro-Dominicans.

Stinchcomb’s introduction, “Blackness, Dominicanness, and National Identity Politics,” provides a thorough historical and political explanation as to why Afro-Hispanic writers have been denied existence. From its early history, racist rhetoric has sculpted Dominican national identity and embraced “whitenening” as a strategy for “improving” the population (p. 2). From the Spanish conquest in the first half of the sixteenth century to President Grant’s United States desire to annex the Dominican Republic as part of the United States in 1869-70 to the atrocities under Trujillo, Stinchcomb rehearses a history that is familiar to those who have read Silvio Torres-Saillant’s and Frank Moya Pons’ work. Significantly, what she interjects into this history is how Dominican poetry, specifically the work of Meso Mónica, provides the earliest instance of resistance to this colonial legacy and the formation of a Dominican national identity. In the final section of her introduction, “The Modern Construction of Dominican Identity,” Stinchcomb highlights how Trujillo’s totalitarian rule (and Balaguer’s continuation of it) committed anti-Haitian, anti-African, and therefore anti-black atrocities to solidify a racist national discourse and how an Afro-Hispanic literature existed alongside it, albeit mostly underground, expressing how “Africans and peoples of African descent have played very important roles in the creation of the Dominican nation” (p. 14).

The book’s first chapter, “Corroborating the Rhetoric: The Issues of Race, Color, and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Dominican Literature,” examines the connections between race rhetoric, nation building, and the poesía negroida literary movement through the poetry by Francisco Muñoz del Monte and José Antonio Alix and Manuel de Jesús Galván’s historical novel Enriquillo. Her close, yet brief readings of these selected social protest texts prove her point that nineteenth-century published “white” Dominican writers—who did not and could not experience what it was like to live as a person of African ancestry—did little more than uphold
the racist rhetoric that constructed an exclusionary national ideology. In Chapter 2, “The Black-as-Object in Dominican Literature of the Early Twentieth Century,” Stinchcomb continues tracing the genealogy of a European-influenced black-as-object literature that “began as an imitative literary form that attempted to re-create ‘black talk,’ identified by rhythmic meter and African-sounding words as well as a number of antiquated notions about Africanness was” (p. 59). Through a varied form of poesía negroide (represented in this chapter through the work of Manuel del Cabral, Rubén Suro, Tomás Hernández Franco) and an emerging Negrista literature (by Pedro Mir and Ramón Marrero Aristy), Stinchcomb suggests that any notion of Afro-Dominican blackness was supplanted by appropriation and caricature at the turn of the century.

Chapter 3, “Haitians, Cocolos, and African Americans: The First Authors of Afro-Dominican Literature,” examines a marked shift in the development of literary blackness in the Dominican Republic. In turning to the work of black immigrants, poets Juan Sánchez Lamouth (West Indian) and Antonio Viau Renaud (Haitian), lawyer Antonio Lockward Artiles (cocolo), historian Mateo Morrison (cocolo), and Norberto James Rawlings (African American and West Indian), Stinchcomb introduces a set of Afro-Dominicans who voiced their own social protests through their literary work. However, she also informs the reader (though this need substantiation) that this literature “was probably not given much attention then, because the authors were considered “foreign” and therefore a threat to the more desired and European-influenced literature of the turn of the twentieth and early twentieth century (p. 66). In Chapter 4, “The Afro-Dominican Author since 1961: Aida Cartagena Portalatín, Blas Jiménez, and the Afro-Dominican Identity,” Stinchcomb turns her attention to more contemporary and overtly political literature. Importantly, these authors and their works emerged in a “year in which trujillato came to an end… and… with the civil rights movement in the United States” (p. 87). As such, she argues Portalatín and Jiménez
introduced feminist and Afro-Caribbean racial politics into the literature and the society at large.

Stinchcomb’s work is most useful for those scholars thinking through how Dominican histories, which are based in racist national ideologies, have excluded voices of the African Diaspora. In linking key moments in its history to specific texts, she provides a departure point for others to do in-depth literary analyses of any one of the time periods she introduces. As with any approach that seeks breadth, the cost is depth. Her brief, close textual readings provide key places where she could integrate the significance of literary representation and its connection to power. One particular example of this is in her deployment of Aida Cartagena Portalatín in chapter four. First, it is not at all clear how her work is “feminist” outside of being political. Second, in drawing upon one woman’s career to inscribe the Afro-Dominican “woman’s” experience, Stinchcomb finds herself on dangerous intellectual and political ground. Caribbean and postcolonial feminist scholars have been working on these issues for some time and it would be useful to turn to their expertise in this chapter to flesh out the complexity of gender and representation.

Both Spanish and English-speaking readers, as well as those who are interested in issues of translation will appreciate that Stinchcomb provides both the original Spanish and translated English texts. Her text joins a growing group of other important work that seeks to retain the language of the culture of origin for sound political and intellectual reasons. Also admirably, Stinchcomb draws upon interdisciplinary methods, particularly the conjoining of history and literature, for understanding her subject. She clearly makes the point that dominant histories produce a certain type of exclusionary literary practices. The next step, then, is to question what this means in terms of national canon formation. And, conversely, to consider if and how literature, and specifically literary blackness, might rewrite dominant histories of the Dominican Republic?

Overall, Dawn Stinchcomb’s The Development of Literary
Blackness in the Dominican Republic is a necessary and important piece of scholarship that fills in a painfully neglected gap in the history and literary history of the Dominican Republic. Historians and literary practitioners alike who are interested in unraveling the racial politics of a densely complicated history will appreciate its overview and particularly her argument that the dominant national history created a particular set of national literary texts that excludes black voices. Other scholars will undoubtedly find that this text an essential starting point as they continue to consider the implications and cultural meanings for the development of literary blackness in the Dominican Republic and other Spanish-speaking Caribbean locations. Afro-Hispanic criticism may indeed be relatively new to Caribbean Studies and Dawn Stinchcomb’s The Development of Literary blackness in the Dominican Republic secures its importance in a growing field.

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Recuerdo la primera vez que leí un libro completo de la antropóloga y escritora cubana Lydia Cabrera. Se trataba de La laguna sagrada de San Joaquín (1973), la crónica detallada de una ceremonia religiosa afrocubana celebrada en la provincia de Matanzas en 1956. En aquel momento pensé que el relato de Cabrera era excesivamente descriptivo y poco analítico, aunque lleno de posibilidades interpretativas. Por eso, en 1982, publiqué mi primer artículo académico, dedicado a explorar el significado del ritual como un sistema de comunicación simbólica...