

The first challenge of blackness is the challenge of defining it.
—Lerone Bennett

Chapter 1

Introduction¹

In 2011, Harvard University professor and scholar of African American studies Henry Louis Gates debuted a multi-episode television series titled *Black in Latin America*.² An excerpt from the episode “Haiti & Dominican Republic: An Island Divided” features Gates and Juan Rodríguez, an anthropologist and official from the Dominican Ministry of Culture, walking down *El Conde*—a popular pedestrian walkway in Santo Domingo’s Colonial Zone. As Gates and Rodríguez walk, they speak in English about Dominican racial identity, and Gates asks Rodríguez, “How would people describe you, uh, given your beautiful mahogany color?” Rodríguez responds, “Well, here, I am as *indio*.” “Indio,” Gates repeats with Anglicized pronunciation. Rodríguez continues, “I’m supposed to be *indio* here.” Positioning himself as a cultural and linguistic outsider, Gates asks Rodríguez, “Help me to understand. As an American, I never heard of this phrase ‘indio’. Where does it come from?” Rodríguez explains that *indio* is a term used to negate African ancestry and become something else. He then continues, “If you look around, I mean, look at me. I am black.” “You are black,” Gates confirms. “Did you always feel this way, Juan, when you were growing up? Or did you, did you have to learn that you were black?” Rodríguez pauses, “Actually, and I am sad to say, I had to learn to be black.” “How did you learn?” Gates

¹ Portions of this chapter previously published as Wheeler, E. M. (2015). Race, Legacy, and Lineage in the Dominican Republic. *The Black Scholar* 45(2), 34-44.

² Source: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/black-in-latin-america/featured/haiti-the-dominican-republic-an-island-divided-watch-full-episode/165/>

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inquires. Rodríguez explains that he went to New York, to which Gates responds with a chuckle, “That’ll do it.” Rodríguez goes on to explain that this experience in New York led him to feel that his roots were in Africa and not in Spain. “So who is black in Dominican society?” asks Gates. He continues, juxtaposing the Dominican racial system to the U.S. racial system, “In America, all these people would be black. But here, who’s black?” “Well,” Rodríguez begins. Gates interjects, reframing his inquiry by invoking the Spanish cognate term *negro*, “*Negro*, who’s *negro*?” Rodríguez responds, “I think nobody’s *negro* here. We are told, ‘You are black.’ ‘Oh no, I am not black. I am something else.’ Dominicans are in complete denial of who they are.”

“Dominicans are in complete denial of who they are.” This indictment is set against the backdrop of the 2007 Miami Herald article about the Dominican Republic titled “Black Denial,” the Howard (2001) book that states that Dominican usage of the term *indio* is a myth and a lived falsehood, and the countless scholarly works framing the Dominican racial setting as exceptionally negrophobic and framing Dominicans as backwards, self-loathing, and confused. This conversation between Henry Louis Gates and Juan Rodríguez is representative of an ongoing debate in academic and social spheres, and it encapsulates the tenets of the broader academic and social narratives regarding Dominican racial identity:

- (1) Dominicans are black.
- (2) Dominicans are not indigenous.
- (3) Because Dominicans frequently use *indio*, and only sparingly use *negro*, Dominicans do not know who they are.

Crucially, this conversation occurs in a cross-cultural exchange between a Dominican

government official and a U.S. academic. Moreover, the conversation is also a cross-linguistic analysis. The tenets of the conversation are built upon several unstated assumptions:

- (1) Dominicans have African ancestry.
- (2) African ancestry is equivalent to blackness and must correspond to black identity.
- (3) The term black in the U.S. is equivalent to the term *negro* in the Dominican Republic.
- (4) *Indio* denotes, and may only denote, indigenous heritage.
- (5) Race is an objective thing that is constant across languages and cultures.
- (6) No distinction need be made between race and skin color.

Gates and Rodríguez allude to an equivalency between African ancestry and blackness as they use the terms interchangeably over the course of the conversation. Gates and Rodríguez additionally use the terms *black* and *negro* without distinction, as when Gates asks who would be described as black in the Dominican Republic and then code switches to ask who would be *negro*. Rodríguez positions *indio* as a paradox, given that the country does not have a contemporary indigenous population. Finally, both men talk about blackness as something that can be discovered in one culture (as when Rodríguez goes to New York) and then superimposed onto another culture (as when Rodríguez returns to the Dominican Republic).

Because the assumptions are unstated—in this conversation and in broader narratives, they are also, largely, unexamined and unchallenged. In the present study, I problematize U.S.-deferent, cross-cultural, cross-linguistic analyses by examining the Dominican system of racial categorization through a linguistic lens. A linguistic lens facilitates the analysis of

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racial terms for culturally-specific physical and social meaning, does not assume equivalence between cognate forms in different languages, and presents an analysis that does not rely on these traditionally unstated assumptions. While the irony of one cross-cultural, cross-linguistic analysis critiquing others does not escape me, this dissertation employs *in situ* phenomenological, interview, and survey methods designed to present an analysis of the Dominican system of racial categorization that does not rely on external defaults.

A. Statement of the Problem and Rationale of the Study

The U.S. academy has a complicated relationship with the Dominican racial setting. Although scholars from diverse disciplines have examined race in the Dominican Republic for decades, the prevailing frame for analysis has been rooted in perceptions of exceptional negrophobia, exceptional xenophobia, exceptional confusion, and essential denial of “true” racial identity. Even as new studies position race in the Dominican Republic in a more complex social and historical context (e.g., Candelario, 2007; Mayes, 2014; Simmons, 2009; Wheeler, 2015), narratives of Dominican exceptionalism and essentialism persist in academic and popular discourse. The narratives criticize Dominican reticence to identify as *negro* and audacity to claim to be *indio*. Some have argued that the country is *mulato*, certainly not *blanco*, and only marginally *mestizo*. Despite the centrality of racial terms to this conversation, few studies have analyzed these terms as a critical intersection of language and race in the Dominican Republic.

Racial terms in the Dominican Republic are prevalent in a variety of settings, from product brand names, to nicknames and forms of address, to the *cédula de identidad y electoral* (the Dominican national identity document that includes a description of the

bearer's skin color). Thus, these racial terms represent a rich environment for the study of the intersection of language and race. Guzmán (1974) is the first semantic analysis of racial terms in the Dominican Republic, and scholars continue to cite the study to demonstrate the complexity of Dominican racial identity. Scholars have not, however, in the more than four decades since Guzmán's seminal study, specifically re-examined Dominican racial categories using a semantic frame. By positioning language as a primary analytic concern, the present analysis reframes the inquiry into Dominican racial identity and offers a new theoretical perspective and new methodologies for exploring this question.

As the study focuses on the meaning embedded in Dominican racial categories, it is not without awareness of the admonition stated by Gunaratnam (2003) regarding the “fundamental political and methodological danger of an unproblematized reliance upon categorical approaches to ‘race’...” (p.19). For Gunaratnam, the danger lies in the potential of such analyses to reify race as an essential, intrinsic, biological, and inescapable fact. In contrast to the situation described by Gunaratnam, the present study positions racial categories as legally- and socially-derived ways of describing different types of human bodies, rather than as biological inevitabilities.

B. Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The present study employs language as a lens through which to understand the complex system of knowledge embedded in race and racialized skin color categories in the Dominican Republic. A linguistic perspective brings unique analytical benefits to the interdisciplinary conversation on the meaning of race in the Dominican Republic, and the present study builds on previous linguistic elicitation and ethnographic research.

Scholars have asserted that the relationship between language and race is clear in at least

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three ways: (1) in the use of racial terms, (2) in racial discourse, and (3) in the linguistic performance of race (Bucholtz, 2011). Racial terms—the focus of the present study—are the labels that hold physical, social, and even legal meaning in a given society. For purposes of this study, when no distinction is made, ‘racial terms’ is intended to encompass both terms that index racial categories and those that index racialized skin color categories. An examination of racial terms directly implicates the fields of semantics—requiring the consideration of meaning; pragmatics—analyzing how individuals interpret these terms in context; and sociocultural linguistics—examining how social identities emerge from, and are expressed through, these racial terms.

The study is timely, as scholars in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and history are exploring the complexities of race and racial categories in Latin America; linguists are developing new methodologies for analyzing the relationship between language and race; and Dominican racial identity remains a contentious topic in academic and social spheres. Moreover, the current study, with its semantic orientation, is particularly timely given that a semantic perspective on the meaning of Dominican racial categories has not been revisited in more than four decades (Guzmán, 1974). Based on the terms examined by Guzmán, and with an understanding of the contemporary Dominican racial setting, the present study focuses on a diverse group of racial terms: *rubio*, *blanco*, *pelirrojo*, *colorao*, *jabao*, *trigueño*, *indio*, *mulato*, *moreno*, *negro*, and *prieto*. Through the lens of these focal terms, the study poses fundamental questions about the way that Dominicans understand race and racial categories:

- (1) Research Question 1: *What physical information is embedded in racial terms in the Dominican Republic?*

- (2) *Research Question 2: What social information is embedded in racial terms in the Dominican Republic?*
- (3) *Research Question 3: How has the meaning of racial terms changed over time in the Dominican Republic?*
- (4) *Research Question 4: What does the meaning of racial terms reveal about the notion of raza in the Dominican Republic?*
- (5) *Research Question 5: How do racial terms interact with notions of typicality in the Dominican Republic?*

C. Overview of the Dissertation

To answer the posed research questions in the most comprehensive way, the present study employs a mixed methodology. Creswell (2014) describes the value of this approach in the following way, “The core assumption of this form of inquiry is that the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches provides a more complete understanding of a research problem than either approach alone” (p.4). Quantitative methods are generally rare in studies of race, as scholars are cautious to avoid the pitfalls of early positivistic research on race. Although this dissertation approaches this prior problematic research with a similar degree of caution, it embraces quantitative methods as a powerful analytical tool that need not revert the analysis to the harrowing early days of race science. The inclusion of both qualitative and quantitative research methods enriches the analysis of race and racial categories in this setting.

The dissertation is organized into eight chapters. Chapter 1 addresses the rationale for

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this study: academic and social debates regarding Dominican racial identity, dearth of research specifically examining the meaning of racial terms in this setting, and the untapped utility of using semantic frames to unpack the meaning embedded in Dominican racial terms. In light of this problem, I formulated the research questions to better understand what specific racial terms reveal about race and racialized color classification in the Dominican Republic.

Chapter 2 presents a conceptual framework for the study and is divided into three sections: the first addresses the notion of race and its theoretical underpinnings; defines the concepts of race, ethnicity, and color for the purposes of the study; summarizes existing literature on how race is understood in the U.S. and Latin America; and positions the Dominican Republic with respect to this literature. The second section of Chapter 2 addresses the literature on critical intersections of race and language, reasserting the need for linguistic perspectives on racial and ethnic studies; and the third section presents lexical semantics as an overarching conceptual frame and discusses how existing linguistic approaches to investigating meaning, prototyping, and (non-racialized) color can be used to frame a new approach to the investigation of race and racialized color classification in the Dominican Republic.

Chapter 3 frames the diachronic dimension of the study, engaging historical data regarding the use of racial terms in the Dominican Republic from the arrival of the Spanish colonizers to the island of Hispaniola in the 15th century through the end of the 20th century. The chapter is divided into three sections: the first presents the history and historical racial setting of the Dominican Republic; the second analyzes the historical use of racial terms using corpus data; and the third analyzes the historical use of racial terms using

specific historical documents.

Chapter 4 presents the research methods for the contemporary portion of the study. The chapter consists of five parts: research sites, participants, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, and potential limitations of the study.

Chapter 5 analyzes qualitative data from participant interviews to the extract the physical and social meaning embedded in Dominican racial terms. The chapter comprises four sections. The first section analyzes how participants racialize self using categories from the Dominican racial system. The second explores how participants characterize the Dominican racial setting. The third section discusses how participants navigate the physical and social meaning embedded in Dominican racial terms; and the fourth section discusses the relationship between racial terms and region.

Chapter 6 analyzes quantitative data from participant surveys and is divided into four sections. The first section analyzes contemporary Dominican racial categories and proposes to group categories into 10 paradigms based on underlying ideologies. The second section examines contemporary skin color categories, contrasting participant self description of skin color with the official description given by the *cédula* (national identity document). The third section analyzes the physical parameters of contemporary racial terms, using the results of photo description surveys. The fourth section examines the relationship between racial categories and social perceptions using data from photo description surveys.

Chapter 7 discusses how racial categories engage notions of typicality in the Dominican Republic. The first section discusses how interview participants describe the notion of the ‘typical Dominican.’ The second section analyzes quantitative data concerning physical description and Dominicanness. The third section of the chapter analyzes quantitative data

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regarding physical description and typicality.

Chapter 8 summarizes the conclusions and implications of the study. The first section gives an overview and final discussion of the findings for each research question. The second section discusses the implications of the study for the fields of semantics, sociocultural linguistics, and racial studies. The third section discusses directions for further research; and the final section delivers concluding remarks.