

Shades of Whiteness, Perception of Otherness: Locating the Ethnic Japanese in the Dominican Pigmentocracy

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1. INTRODUCTION

From 1956 until 1959, hundreds of Japanese families arrived on the shores of the Caribbean nation of the Dominican Republic (DR) as permanent settlers. Their arrival had been planned by both governments of Japan and the DR with contrasting motivations. Right after the United States occupation of postwar Japan (1945-1952), the Japanese government sought to form migration agreements with Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries due to the risk of overpopulation. Whereas the DR had been enduring a dictatorship that was seeking to address geopolitical resentments in the borderlands with Haiti. The Japanese migrant families were unaware that their welcoming into the so-called “Caribbean Paradise” was part of larger discussions surrounding Dominican nationalization and modernization projects. At the time, the Dominican government sought to demarcate itself against the neighboring nation of the Republic of Haiti within geographical spaces as well as racially and culturally. The urgency of the Dominican elite to separate its national identity from Haiti reveals a larger regional history that continues to negate certain ethno-racial and skin color groups into national identity constructions.

Beginning with the European invasion of the Americas, the region of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has experienced several centuries of intermixing mostly involving Indigenous groups, Africans, Europeans, and Asians. This intermixing began as the product of forced concubinage, and sexual violence inflicted by the colonizers unto the original inhabitants and enslaved populations. After centuries of miscegenation, the *mestizo* or ethno-racially mixed populations became the majority which eventually influenced national identity narratives once Latin American and Caribbean countries

achieved independence from European powers. However, white European ancestry continued to be exalted whereas African and Indigenous heritage was disregarded due to ideals of a “modern” nation which categorized non-whiteness as “backwards” (Hernández 2013; Wade 2010).

As a legacy of the large-scale historical miscegenation, the term ‘race’ is not widely used in the region today and instead ‘color’ and other physical traits such as hair and nose shape have become some of the main indicators of a person’s ethno-racial ancestry. The importance of physical traits as a tool to distinguish one group from another within a mostly mixed society has resulted in the propagation of societies based on ethno-racial and skin color hierarchies also known as pigmentocracies. This term was first conceived by Chilean anthropologist Alejandro Lipschutz in 1944 and it was further developed in recent years by sociologist Edward Telles alongside the Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America (PERLA). While studying several countries in LAC, Telles and PERLA found that “skin color was a more reliable predictor of racial inequality” (2014, 226). Their research highlighted social inequalities tied to educational attainment, occupation, and everyday experiences of discrimination which were more accurately connected to skin color compared to ethno-racial self-identification. Their research confirmed that darker skin individuals were “consistently located in lower socioeconomic statuses than their light-skinned counterparts” (Telles and PERLA 2014, 227). However, public discourse continues to use high rates of racial mixture as the pretext to deny the existence of discrimination based on race and skin color.

Within the studies of Latin American and Caribbean pigmentocracies, there is an apparent gap to understand the placement of ethnic or racial groups that do not fit within the mixed trifecta of Afro-descendants, Indigenous groups, and white European ancestry. Migrant communities such as Asians are often glossed over from the region’s national identity even though their presence can be traced back to the 16th century. From 1565 until 1815, the Manila-Acapulco Galleon Trade connected the Philippines with Mexico and brought the exchange of goods between the two regions as well as the arrival of thousands of Asian settlers (Hu-DeHart 2021; Hu-DeHart and López 2008; Slack 2010). These Asian migrants eventually became assimilated into Mexican society and almost disappeared from historical records (Slack 2010; López 2013). In the 19th century, new arrivals from Asia rapidly increased as hundreds of thousands of Chinese

and Indian indentured workers were sent to the British Caribbean colonies as replacement labor after the abolition of slavery (Look Lai 1993). Ebbs and flows of Asian migration continued in the next century as most of LAC became independent from European colonies. As these new nations sought to construct their own identities, LAC governments sought to introduce European and Asian labor migrants to boost their economies and “whiten” their mostly mixed-race populations. Not long after, Asians as well as other migrant communities became targets of violence as “foreigners,” particularly ethnic Chinese, became the scapegoat of economic hardships and a supposed threat to national identity (Peloso 2005; Rénique 2001; Chang 2019; DeHart 2021).

These historical shifts that Asian groups experienced and continues to experience today speak of the larger role migrants played in Latin American and Caribbean nation-building as both desirable and undesirable. Therefore, to understand the placement of Asians within the pigmentocracy, a more complex approach is necessary. Political scientists Affigne and Lien provide a possible research framework when studying Asians in the Americas that go beyond “black-white social matrix,”

We should think in terms of **parallel hierarchies, or concentric inequalities**, in which Asian-descent and other non-European peoples stand in separately subordinate relationships to European, Euro-descent, and Euro-creole elites, but in more diverse, contextually-specific relationships to one another. Such a framework would model the intraracial dynamics among the several ethnic groups in question, without abandoning a fundamental acknowledgement that White elites in the region have universally defined social and political relations in racial terms. (2002, 18)

In the Dominican pigmentocracy, darker skin is associated with ethnic Haitians and the bottom of the hierarchy. Whereas white Dominicans or those associated with whiteness and modernity such as European migrants, tend to be placed at the top. The objective of this article is to analyze the positionality of the Japanese migrants and their descendants within the Dominican pigmentocracy concerning other minority groups given their introduction as foreign agents of modernization. To formulate an answer, the historical context that led to the arrival of the Japanese migrants in the Dominican Republic will

be explained first while emphasizing the connection between foreign migrants and “whitening” modernization projects. Next, the main analysis will utilize data gathered from interviews¹ of Japanese Dominicans, and Dominicans with Japanese spouses to provide perspectives on their relationship with two other ethno-racial groups, Haitians and Chinese. As Haitians are prominently the most visible and most marginalized migrant group in the DR, their relationship with Japanese Dominicans is indicative of their perceptions of socio-racial positionality.

On the other hand, analyzing ethnic Chinese through Japanese Dominican perspectives provides a much more nuanced shared experience as nonblack migrants navigating majority mixed societies with pan-ethnic implications that label Asians as “foreigners.” Here, Affigne and Lien’s (2002) “parallel hierarchies, or concentric inequalities” may serve to address the interethnic relationship between the Chinese and Japanese in the pigmentocracy. This research concludes that Japanese perceptions of other ethnic minorities speak of their self-placement near the top of the pigmentocracy by complying with majority ideologies such as denial of racially motivated anti-Haitian sentiment, and the use of “othering” strategies like hygiene and cultural behavior to deny whiteness for ethnic Chinese. Furthermore, this has created challenges in creating pan-ethnic and ethnic minority alliances which becomes a risk for ethnic Japanese (and Asians in general) given their “foreign” and unstable social placement throughout LAC’s history.

2. THE DOMINICAN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Dominican Republic (DR) and the Republic of Haiti share the Caribbean island of *Hispaniola* with the DR encompassing the eastern side and Haiti the western side. Although European colonization and a large Afro-descendant population are commonalities between the two nations, their historical narratives of racial identity greatly differ. During colonization, European invaders quickly exterminated the original inhabitants of *Hispaniola* known as Taínos. This led to the island being mostly composed of mulattos or racial

1 The interviews were conducted in the Dominican capital city of Santo Domingo between February and March of 2022 and were translated from Spanish to English by the author. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of the participants.

mixtures between Africans and Europeans. However, Dominican history and popular discourse continue to uphold a biracial and bicultural Taíno-European ancestry while diminishing its extensive African influence. Two main historical factors have led to the omission of blackness in Dominican national identity beginning with its Independence.

Unlike most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), the Dominican Republic celebrates its independence from the Republic of Haiti and not a colonial ruler. This comes in sharp contrast with the neighboring nation of Haiti as the first Caribbean territory to become independent from a European power. During the late 1700s, Saint-Domingue (modern-day Haiti) became one of France's richest colonies with a booming agricultural production of sugar, coffee, and other goods (Dubois 2011; Heuman 2019). This led to massive arrivals of enslaved African populations to work the plentiful fields. As the numbers of enslaved populations vastly outnumbered the white masters, the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) was successful in abolishing slavery and achieving Saint-Domingue's independence from France in 1804.

On the other hand, the eastern side of the island experienced a repeated transfer of rulership between the Spanish and the French. As Spain was experiencing turmoil due to the Peninsular War (1807-1814), Spanish authorities treated their Caribbean colony with indifference which led to the period known in Dominican history as *España Boba* (Meek Spain). This ultimately led to the colony's brief independence as the Republic of Spanish Haiti in 1821. However, this new nation was under economic pressure as the period of *España Boba* had left them in financial disarray.

The prospect of unifying the island gathered the support of many on the eastern side as slave liberation was of popular appeal which led to the annexation of Spanish Haiti in 1822. Jean-Pierre Boyer, the president of Haiti at the time, abolished slavery in its entirety on the eastern side and began agrarian reforms to redistribute lands which benefited the lower classes (Ricourt 2016, 29). Latin American scholar, Milagros Ricourt explains, "Boyer's policies hurt deeply the interests of white landholders and the Catholic Church, resentment intensifying among these groups, and the reaction by landowning elites and the Church to the expropriation of their lands and the abolition of slavery produced a hatred of Haitians that eventually converted into a racist negrophobia that permeated the intelligentsia" (2016, 30). The former

landholders and the Catholic Church supported the independence movements taking place on the former Spanish side of the island, and on February 27, 1844, the Dominican Republic achieved its separation from the Republic of Haiti marking the foundation of a cultural divide that framed Haiti as French creole speakers and vodou practitioners to contrast with the Hispanophilic and Catholic side in the DR.

2. 1. Anti-Haitian sentiment during the *Trujillato*

Almost a century later, anti-Haitian sentiment was re-ignited by the Dominican dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. This was the second major historical event that marked the relationship between the two countries. Trujillo ruled the Dominican Republic from 1930 until 1961 through a period that came to be known as the “*trujillato*.” During the *trujillato*, the massacre of an estimated 15,000 ethnic Haitians took place between the 2nd and 8th of October in 1937. This massacre significantly marked Dominican-Haitian relations which the Dominican elite and intellectuals had been motivating through anti-Haitian propaganda and Trujillo’s command to strictly mark the geographical border between these two nations (Turits 2002).

Years before the Haitian genocide, the border had been a disputed zone since there was not a strict demarcation of land between the DR and Haiti. Furthermore, the borderlands had become an area of multicultural exchange where Haitians and Dominicans intermingled and created inter-ethnic families. Through this massive act of violence, Trujillo was instituting his control over the Haitian-Dominican border and pleasing the Dominican elites that had been following eugenic ideologies that exalted white Spanish heritage to contrast with black Haitians. Historian Richard Turits explains, “Dominican intellectuals represented the Haitian presence in the Dominican frontier as a ‘pacific invasion’ that was endangering the Dominican nation. This ‘invasion’ was supposedly ‘Haitianizing’ and ‘Africanizing’ the Dominican frontier, rendering popular Dominican culture more savage and backward, and injecting new and undesirable African admixtures into the Dominican social composition” (2002, 599).

After the Haitian massacre, Trujillo had to diminish the spotlight on his crimes against humanity given its context right before World War II. The unstable situation in Europe allowed Trujillo’s regime to uplift its international

reputation by inviting European refugees to the DR during the Evian Conference of 1938. Adjacently, Trujillo was also motivated to place European migrants on the Dominican-Haitian border to “whiten” the population in these areas and grow agricultural production. Among them were migrant groups from Spain and Hungary as well as Jewish refugees who sought to escape the Nazi regime. However, this plan backfired given that most of the migrants had no experience working the fields and only saw the Dominican Republic as a temporary stopover before heading to other places such as the United States (Horst and Asagiri 2000; Peguero 2017). It didn’t take long for Trujillo to find a possible replacement for the failed European agricultural settlement by shifting his focus to Asia.

2. 2. The arrival of Japanese migrants

Once the US occupation ended in postwar Japan, the Japanese government began to organize and encourage their population from mostly southern rural areas to migrate to Latin America and the Caribbean (Endoh 2009). This was part of the second wave of migration to LAC organized by the Japanese government which included countries such as Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina, and Paraguay. After losing their colonies, the government of Japan had to deal with millions of returnees coming into the mainland. With the fear of overpopulation and already having the experience and infrastructure to organize migration movements to LAC, the Japanese government saw this as an opportunity to restart the agreements.² As the US placed restrictions on Japan’s international movement due to Imperial Japan’s expansionist history, the Japanese government had to wait until the occupation ended.

Japan and the Dominican Republic did not have an established international relationship nor had there been previous migration agreements. Thus, the migration proposal came as an unexpected coincidental creation. Trujillo’s pursuit of agricultural migrants to place at the border synchronized with Japan’s quest to send their people away. Negotiations began in 1954 and two years later, the migration project became a reality. On July 26, 1956, the ship *Brazil Maru* brought the first group of 28 Japanese families composed of 186

2 Other motivating factors have been theorized by Endoh (2009) such as strategic geopolitical soft power through the Japanese government’s presence in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the “decompression” of potential social unrest from Japan’s rural areas.

individuals into Ciudad Trujillo³ (Peguero 2017). This first group of families was placed in the north-western province of Dajabón bordering Haiti. By 1959, a total of 250 Japanese families composed of 1,319 individuals were placed in *colonias* or settlements throughout the country which were strategically located in the Dominican-Haitian border. A few Japanese settlements were established in the central mountainous regions which had more fertile soil than those in the arid lands at the border settlements. To avoid the same unwanted outcome that took place with the European migrants, Trujillo petitioned for families composed of at least three individuals with experience working in agriculture or fishing. This migration movement was described as a permanent settlement and the Japanese government made sure to bring forth an appealing image to recruit families. Most of the Japanese families that came to the DR were motivated by the opportunity to become landowners of fertile lands in what the Japanese government-sponsored programs referred to as a “Caribbean Paradise” (Perez Hazel 2015; Peguero 2017).

However, many issues arose with the migration program from the moment of arrival. A great number of families, particularly those placed in the border areas, were not able to work the lands that were assigned because of the rocky terrain or the lack of water to grow crops (Comité Ejecutivo 2006). There was also a lack of proper infrastructure such as roads to the markets to sell produce, and a mistranslation regarding the amount of land to be provided created a sense of false advertisement. The plethora of issues became further exacerbated with the assassination of Trujillo in 1961. Ownership of the lands became muddled as the original landowners returned to demand their stolen lands taken by Trujillo and given to the Japanese migrants. Furthermore, the political unrest that came from the abrupt end of 30 years of dictatorship and the ensuing Dominican Civil War (1965) brought massive displacements to other provinces among the Japanese families as they searched for work in urban areas or other agricultural settlements. Most of the migrants eventually moved to other parts of Latin America such as Brazil and a few returned to Japan. Of the 1,319 original Japanese migrants, only 276 remained in the Dominican Republic after 1962 (Peguero 2017; Masterson and Funada-Classen 2004). This is less than 40% of the original total group which led the first and only Japanese

3 Today's capital city of Santo Domingo.

settlement in the DR to be regarded as a “failure.” Not long after these events, this failed settlement would become the source of a divisive lawsuit against the Japanese government which created ruptures within the already small community. The historical hardships and deceptions were the main catalysts of this lawsuit as many of the pro-lawsuit migrants felt deceived by the Japanese government’s campaign to paint the dictator-ruled Dominican Republic as a “paradise” (Perez Hazel 2015; Peguero 2017)

Nonetheless, despite the numerous challenges and conflicts, many of the Japanese families that stayed have been able to integrate into Dominican society by forming interracial Japanese Dominican families and finding economic mobility through entrepreneurship. As of March 2020, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimates there are 800 Japanese descendants and 721 Japanese nationals living in the DR. Although the Japanese Dominicans encompass a small percentage of the population in the Dominican Republic, their placement within the pigmentocracy provides us with an outlook into how Asian minorities are contextualized in Latin America and the Caribbean. To understand where the Japanese Dominicans exist within the Dominican pigmentocracy, we can examine their relationship and perspectives on other more prominent migrant groups such as Haitians and Chinese.

3. JAPANESE DOMINICAN PERSPECTIVES ON ETHNIC MINORITIES

Movements from Asia to Latin America and the Caribbean can be traced back to the late 1500s. However, their historical neglect has made it difficult to ascertain their place as part of national identity narratives in most of the region. Even though some members of Asian communities have been able to achieve positions of political power such as ex-President Alberto Fujimori in Peru, the history of Asian Latin Americans has shown instability and ambiguity that ranges from indentured servitude in the Caribbean to ethnic erasure through nationalization projects in Brazil. In the case of the Dominican Republic, Japanese migrants were brought in with expectations to contrast ethnic Haitians and darker skin Dominicans through “whitening” projects of modernization.

In the Dominican Republic, the pigmentocracy has been framed to

marginalize Haitians and darker skin Dominicans that are regarded as “Haitianized.” Therefore, ethno-racial or skin color groups that do not fit the parameters of racialized Haitians, may be able to move within the pigmentocracy. Asian groups such as the Japanese could attain closeness to whiteness as “nonblack” migrants, but on unsteady grounds due to their “foreignness” and lack of political power as underrepresented minorities. Their potential status as foreign agents of modernity could be influenced by the conflation with their economically powerful ancestral homeland.

To further dissect the placement of Japanese migrants and their descendants in the Dominican pigmentocracy, we can analyze their relationships and perceptions of ethnic Haitians and Chinese through the data gathered from interviews. The interviewees are composed of Japanese Dominicans from different generations who are in interracial marriages with local Dominicans. Their intermarried status and multiracial family formation showcase a greater likelihood of being engaged with more diverse populations outside of the Japanese Dominican community. Some of their non-Japanese Dominican spouses were interviewed to provide broader perspectives as well.

3. 1. Perception of ethnic Haitians

Haitians compose the largest migrant group in the Dominican Republic with steadily growing numbers for the last 30 years⁴. Devastating natural disasters and perpetual political unrest in an already impoverished nation have led thousands of Haitians to leave their homeland and cross the borders. Within the Dominican pigmentocracy, ethnic Haitians, particularly darker skin Haitians have been marginalized to the bottom of the ethno-racial and skin color hierarchy. Their status also includes their othering as “foreign.” In contrast with the Japanese, ethnic Haitians are not considered part of the modernization project because of their international standing as one of the poorest countries in the world and its marginalization as a majority black nation. Furthermore, the historical relationship between the two countries and the exploitation of undocumented ethnic Haitians for manual labor enforces their lower status in the public discourse.

4 Data from 2019 showed that around 4% of the total Dominican population is composed of migrants, and out of this percentage about 86% originate from Haiti (Morales and Rodríguez 2022).

During the interviews, all the Japanese Dominican participants were aware that Haitians were the number one target of discrimination in the DR. However, the correlation between anti-Haitian sentiment and anti-black racism became convoluted in some cases by adding elements such as social class, culture, and history. Adriana, a sansei (third generation) in her late 20s explained,

The strongest discrimination here in the DR is with Haitians. I feel like they get discriminated against a lot even though they are our neighbors on the island but is more because of a cultural topic and the history...there's cultural discrimination. Because it isn't racism in itself, as if to say 'ah, it's because he is black.' No, it is not because of their color. Is more about the topic of culture since there is a history between the DR and Haiti. Is a racism that has been inherited from generation to generation. If you were to ask someone why you treat Haitians badly, they would tell you that it is because they want to invade our part of the island, that they want to take over our country. And a lot of times no, they simply leave their country running away from the situation that they are living.⁵

Adriana's statement seems to contradict itself when saying it isn't racism, but "inherited" racism. However, this phrasing intends to contrast with the racism found in the United States. This was further confirmed when I asked her thoughts on those who had anti-Haitian opinions, Adriana brought up the case of Dominicans migrating to Puerto Rico and the US, as well as Mexicans crossing the borders to the US. Myths of non-racism in majority mixed contexts are still quite prevalent in LAC and by denominating *antihaitianismo* as an "inherited" racism, it normalizes antiblackness as part of Dominican history and contemporary ideology. Another aspect to note is that migrant stories are being correlated with each other to express sympathy while still not addressing how black migrants deal with double stigma in a pigmentocracy because of their ethno-racial and color status compared to nonblack migrants in the DR.

Another interview participant provided similar, but more specific descriptions of the existing discrimination towards Haitians. Kenji, a nisei (second generation) in his 50s replied,

5 Adriana, interview by author, February 2022, Santo Domingo.

…usually, it is directed to Haitians because they are seeing it from the socioeconomic point of view. Because currently Haiti is a very poor country with a very high population, and yet, educational level I think they are a bit better than in the DR. With a country with a lot of social, political, and economic problems…And from their own religious culture of voodoo…the hygiene aspect because they don’t have access to a hygienic system. All types of discrimination come that way because if you see the other way around, is the same thing that happens to Dominicans that go to the US.⁶

Kenji described Haiti’s socioeconomic status as influencing the perspective Dominicans have of Haitians. His comment on education is a bit puzzling but could be explained through his previous answers in which he criticized the insufficient quality of education he experienced in Dominican schools when he was a child or to lessen the criticisms towards Haitians. Other aspects such as religion and hygiene are also significant to point out. Vodou, which is associated with the African diaspora, is also widely practiced by Dominicans. However, its stigma as an African religious practice goes against the Christian Catholic image of the DR. As for hygiene, access to clean water may be difficult in a poverty-stricken country such as Haiti which leads to a lack of proper sanitation. Furthermore, whiteness and hygiene are correlated themes. In a study conducted in Chile by sociologist Macarena Bonhomme (2022) found that local Chileans criticized ethnic migrants from other Latin American countries as “dirty.” Bonhomme explains, “the hygiene some Chileans regarded as an established ‘cultural practice’ allows Chileans to position themselves at a higher hierarchical tier, constructing whiteness through a set of binary oppositions: ‘they’ are ‘darker’ and ‘dirty’ but Chileans, are ‘whiter’ and ‘clean’” (2022, 6). Therefore, hygiene and certain “cultural practices” are associated with whiteness to contrast with the “other” and to perpetuate a lower status as an outsider.

Like Adriana, Kenji also mentioned the case of Dominicans in the United States as an example of migrant experiences having certain elements of universality. Although this is partly true, the experience of Haitians in the DR or racialized black migrants in general, tends to go in opposition to what the

6 Kenji, interview by author, March 2022, Santo Domingo.

“desirable” migrants who are often white or in proximity to whiteness, and therefore, at the higher strata of the pigmentocracy. Furthermore, drawing comparisons to the United States has been a commonly used strategy to diminish the extent of racial and color discrimination found in Latin American and Caribbean countries.

3. 2. Perception of ethnic Chinese

Among Asian migrant groups in the Dominican Republic, the Chinese community has the largest and longest historical presence in the country beginning in the 1860s. The first documented Chinese arrival came from Cuba where Chinese indentured workers moved to the northern Dominican coastal town of Samaná (Chez Checo 2021). Historical events such as the first US occupation of the DR (1916-1924) and the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) also brought new arrivals to the island, but larger numbers came during the 1980s and 90s which revitalized the community (Chen 2008). However, precise numbers of the Chinese community in the DR are difficult to ascertain due to the constant movements to the United States including illegal trafficking and naturalization patterns although it is estimated to be in the tens of thousands (Sang Ben 2022, Chen 2008). Their presence in the Dominican Republic is visible in the commercial arena as many businesses such as restaurants, laundromats, and *colmados* (small grocery shops) are owned by ethnic Chinese which has led to other Asian groups such as ethnic Japanese and Koreans in the DR to be referred as “chino” or “china” (Chinese men or woman). However, the interviews revealed certain variations in ethnic stereotyping between the Chinese and Japanese.

Although aspects of whiteness have been associated with the Chinese and Japanese in the DR, there appears to be contrasting perspectives and reactions between them. Fumiko, a nisei in her 60s explained,

There is still a certain discrimination with the Chinese that they (Dominicans) don’t have with the Japanese. When they call you “china” (Chinese woman) and you reply you are Japanese, they say “ah, but y’all are different.”⁷

7 Fumiko, interview by author, February-March 2022, Santo Domingo.

Fumiko's experience demonstrates the change in behavior which places the Japanese in a favorable light in comparison to the Chinese migrants and their descendants in the DR. When I asked Mieko, an issei (first generation) who has been living in the DR for 20 years, if she has noticed the difference on how the Japanese and Chinese are treated, she responded,

Yes, to be honest, it is not how Dominicans treat Chinese or Japanese. I see how Chinese Dominicans and Japanese Dominicans behave. Because Dominicans react according to how they react to them. So Chinese Dominicans treat Dominicans very bad. Historically, they may have a bad experience that they might think they are higher than them. I have never seen Japanese people ordering Dominican people.⁸

Mieko flipped the narrative on how Dominicans may perceive the Asian "other" to say that the Chinese are responsible for the way they are treated and stereotyped. Asians, including the Chinese, are said to be in a more favorable position than the darker skin Afro-descendant population which could explain Mieko's phrasing of "they think they are higher than them" and her experience of "Chinese Dominicans treating Dominicans very bad." Although Mieko was born and raised in Japan, her perspective was not far off from what local Dominicans would say which demonstrates a desire to create distance between the two ethnic groups by appropriating dominant thought.

I asked Daniela, a Dominican woman who is married to Kenji, what she thought about the difference in treatment between the Japanese and the Chinese in the DR. She responded,

As I have perceived it, Chinese culture is more well-known here. There are "picapollo chino,"⁹ Chinese diners, etc...Their appearance, the way they refer to people, their food, their space where their food is, they are not very hygienic. Those are things about their behavior. They are very careless, the great majority, with their hygiene, dirty clothing...With that kind of appearance, people repudiate it. After seeing the unhygienic

8 Mieko, interview by author, March 2022, Santo Domingo.

9 Popular Chinese-owned establishments in the DR that sell affordable meals.

clothing, they don't want to eat in their establishments. The treatment towards Dominicans as well. The Japanese have a certain level of education, they are always impeccable, their way of speech, etc.¹⁰

Through Daniela's answer, it becomes clear that the Chinese seemed to be excluded from ideas of whiteness as hygiene is also used to create separation between different racial and ethnic groups similar to ethnic Haitians. Mieko and Daniela both mentioned the treatment of Dominicans as a factor in being perceived negatively. However, my positionality as the interviewer must be noted. Since I am ethnically Japanese, Daniela may have felt compelled to create differences between both ethnic groups. If the interviewer had been ethnically Chinese, the answer may have been different.

The participants' negative depictions of the Chinese community in the DR are a bit puzzling given that the Chinese tend to be portrayed as a hardworking and entrepreneurial "model minority" in local Dominican newspapers. However, on those same news articles that speak highly of the Chinese Dominicans, there is a mixed bag of comments left by readers that compared the Chinese as better than Haitians or deemed both migrant groups as unwelcomed.¹¹ In April 2022, headlines of the murder of a Chinese employer by his Dominican employee were said to have caused tensions between the two groups. However, Chinese community leaders quickly dismissed such claims stating that "the Chinese presence in the Dominican Republic has always been valued by the Dominicans."¹² The altercation between the Chinese employer and the Dominican employee was said to be rooted in the constant mistreatment of his employees. Although there aren't many records of violent incidents between Dominicans and Chinese, this 2022 news report speaks of the different interplays of power existing in the DR.

10 Daniela, interview by author, March 2022, Santo Domingo.

11 Valdivia, Javier. 2014. "La comunidad china se inserta en el mercado." *Listin Diario*. February 19.

12 Pérez, Jusety. 2022. "Comerciantes chinos guardan silencio tras muerte de compatriota." *Diario Libre*. April 26.

The Dominican Republic holds a majority *mulato*¹³ or Afro-descendant demographic that encompasses about 86% of its total population (The World Factbook). Given that Afro-descendants have been and continue to be marginalized by the lighter skin or white elite, most of the Dominican population is considered subaltern in the pigmentocracy. Consequently, this influences the status of migrant groups within the Dominican pigmentocracy. The Asian population in the DR does not appear to have a uniform placement and is prone to ambiguity and ethnic differentiation. This difference in treatment between ethnic Chinese and ethnic Japanese, could be explained as a “parallel hierarchy” to the pigmentocracy in which the Japanese have been placed above the Chinese (Affigne and Lien 2002). Furthermore, their smaller numbers and their status as a migrant “other” diminishes the agency of Asians groups as Dominican nationals or as part of the population regardless of their documentation status. Haitians and Haitian Dominicans are an example of double marginalization because of their race and foreignness. Therefore, power, privilege, and whiteness manifest in different arenas for Asian communities in the Dominican context which may deviate from usual notions of pigmentocracies.

3. CONCLUSION

The Japanese migrants that arrived in the Dominican Republic during the 1950s were praised as foreign agents of modernization through the development of agricultural production and techniques while serving as a human shield against the deluded belief of a Haitian invasion in the borderlands. The historical animosity between the DR and Haiti that stemmed from the Dominican Independence and Trujillo’s ethnic genocide for geopolitical border control exemplifies how the Dominican pigmentocracy has been constructed to align with the country’s national identity. Dominican national identity has been built to directly contrast with Haitians at a racial and cultural level in which Haitians

13 I used to term “mulato” (European-African ancestry) instead of “mestizo” (mostly used to refer to European-Indigenous ancestry) because it most accurately represents the Dominican ethno-racial demographic. Even though many Dominicans use the term “indio” for self-identification, the percentage of indigenous Taíno ancestry is quite low given that Spanish colonists eradicated this ethnic group early on during colonization. Also, the historical framework of *antihaitianismo* is the reason Dominicans generally used the term “indio” even though “mulato” would be more accurate.

exemplify Africanism and Dominicans Hispanism.

Paradoxically, this eventually led to the introduction of Japanese migrants as foreign tools to “modernize” Dominican identity. However, the ulterior motives of the migration agreement between Japan and the DR are partially the reason why the permanent settlement was deemed a failure. By giving the migrants stolen infertile lands in the border areas and receiving sponsorship from the dictator, the Japanese migrants were placed in a difficult situation as tensions with local Dominicans brewed. The growing number of issues from the migration program reached its climax with Trujillo’s death. Furthermore, the Japanese government’s pretext of overpopulation and sham advertisement of a “Caribbean Paradise” ultimately led to the divisive lawsuit against the government of Japan. For the Japanese migrants that remained in the DR, their placement within the pigmentocracy resulted in a nuanced understanding of national belonging. Their perceptions of other ethnic groups demonstrate the different layers and branches that go beyond white-black dichotomies.

Through the interviews, there was a clear acknowledgment of the placement of ethnic Haitians at the bottom of the Dominican pigmentocracy which involved their double marginalization as black/darker skin and foreign/other. In the case of the Chinese, there are multifaceted factors to be considered. The global reputation of China as a dominant nation in foreign trade as well as its competition against the US, places them in a conflicting position given the influence both China and the US have in in countries throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Like many migrant groups, the Chinese in the DR are conflated to their homeland which is perceived as a more powerful and modern nation than the DR. However, the interviews as well as comments in newspaper articles reveal the status of the Chinese community in the DR diverges from ideals of whiteness with criticisms referencing hygiene, “cultural” behavior, and undesirability as foreign migrants. Thus, as a nonblack minority group, ethnic Chinese may not be considered in proximity to whiteness compared to ethnic Japanese but may still hold flexibility in their placement given the stable position of ethnic Haitians at the bottom.

For the ethnic Japanese population, their proximity to whiteness appears to be a result of their disengagement from pan-ethnic alliances as well as complacent behavior that upholds color and ethno-racial hierarchies. By assimilating dominant ideology which denies anti-black racism towards ethnic

Haitians and agreeing with anti-Chinese stereotypes, ethnic Japanese have appraised their placement in the Dominican pigmentocracy as above other nonwhite ethnic minority groups. Additionally, the lack of pan-ethnic and ethnic minority allyships has only benefited those who are already in power and at the top of the hierarchy. Just like Trujillo and the intellectuals who sought to eliminate Haitian-Dominican multicultural spaces in the borders, this legacy lives on by reinstating socio-political control over the lower strata of the pigmentocracy. Given the ambiguous status of Asian minorities in the Dominican Republic and many parts of LAC, it is inadvisable to continue to reject the cultivation of racial and ethnic minority ties as social mobility can become unpredictable in both upward and downward trends.

Overall, this research has served to further add into the scarce study of the Asian presence in Latin America and the Caribbean as well as the role of ethnic migrant groups in majority mixed societies. Further research on interethnic dynamics such as intermarriage and family formation between ethnic or racial minority groups in countries throughout LAC could benefit in understanding how dominant racial ideologies are passed down in the private sphere of ethnographically marginalized groups.

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Abstract

Shades of Whiteness, Perception of Otherness: Locating the Ethnic Japanese in the Dominican Pigmentocracy

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During the late 1950s, hundreds of Japanese migrant families arrived in the Dominican Republic (DR) as permanent agricultural settlers. Both sending and receiving countries had contrasting motivations: The Japanese government sought to address the potential of overpopulation in the postwar era whereas the Dominican government grappled to demarcate a geopolitical border with the neighboring nation of Haiti. To cement a distinct national identity away from the Africanisms of Haiti, the DR relied on the creation of a bi-racial and bicultural Spanish-Indigenous national identity to diminish their blackness. The historical animosity between the DR and Haiti ultimately led to the placement of Japanese migrants in the borderlands to “whiten” or “de-Haitianize” the population. White European and nonblack foreigners, such as the Japanese, were said to be the solution to deal with majority mixed populations throughout Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) by “diluting” certain ethno-racial groups such as Indigenous and Afro-descendants. The marginalization of both groups is part of a larger regional development of societies based on ethno-racial and skin color hierarchies known as pigmentocracies in which whiteness and lighter skin are at the top whereas blackness and darker skin has been placed at the bottom. In the Dominican pigmentocracy, ethnic Haitians and darker skin Dominicans have been placed at the bottom and European migrants and lighter skin Dominicans at the top. Through a historical analysis and interviews, this research aims to deduce the placement that ethnic Japanese Dominicans have aligned themselves in the pigmentocracy through their perspectives on other ethnic minority groups such as Haitians and Chinese. As the arrival of Japanese migrants came as the result of the Dominican government’s whitening pursuits, the interviews revealed that ethnic Japanese have placed themselves in favorable positions in closeness to whiteness by assimilating dominant discourse such as the denial of race-based anti-Haitian

sentiment, and compliance with anti-Chinese stereotyping. However, as many Asian groups in LAC, ethnic Japanese continue to be excluded from national identity narratives as “foreigners” which makes their assessment in the pigmentocracy uncertain and everchanging.