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Proposal for Student Research in Progress Paper

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Black behind the Ear: Questioning Identity Discourse in the Art Classroom

I am currently investigating how the art curriculum and artistic practices can serve as spaces to problematize discourses of identity in the Dominican Republic that reject or undermine its African Heritage. The Dominican Republic is a small country in the Caribbean located on the east side of the Island of Hispaniola (Santo Domingo). Due to the slave trade during the colonial times, the Dominican Republic emerged as a mixture of Indian Tainos, Spanish, and African cultures. As it happened in most Latin American countries, creoles in the Dominican Republic claimed a national identity based on Hispanic culture.

Conceptions of identity based on Hispanic and a vanished Indian heritage were consolidated after independence and across the 20th century by conservative dictatorships. Today, the Dominican Republic is seen, both by fellow Dominicans and the international community, in antitheses with Haiti, its western neighbor. For instance, the green, Christian, and developing east side of the island (DR) is depicted in opposition to the deserted, voodoo worshiper, and underdeveloped west side (Haiti). Because Haiti is seen as the embodiment of Africanness, this dichotomy, among other discourses of identity, have made it difficult for Dominicans to recognize the contribution of African culture and aesthetic to their identity.

In my research I have been exploring different ways in which the art curriculum can serve as a space to question this mistaken assumption of Dominican Identity. First, I am interested in how the work of Dominican artists that have created politically-engaged art can serve as starting points for critical reflection and artistic practice. At the moment I am focusing on the work of Jaime Colson and Dario Suro. Second, the study of popular visual culture also provides a window to deconstruct contemporary imagery and text that reinforces biased understandings of identity. Lastly, I am interested in the potential of community-based art

projects, such as murals and public installations, as spaces for this kind of criticality. Public art adds a very important dimension to my research project. While I envision the study of artists' work and visual culture to happen within the spaces of institutionalized education [e.g. School and museums] community-based art provides the opportunity to engage the larger community.

Although this is not an auto-ethnographic research, I bring with me personal experiences of growing up and teaching in the Dominican Republic. In addition, I examine the relevant literature on the topic and selected examples of artworks and contemporary imagery. The goal of this research is to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding socially-engaged art practices, particularly pertaining to issues of race, place, and identity. Ultimately, I am concerned with how the examination of the work of socially-engaged artists and visual culture can incite students' engagement in art projects that critic and reflect upon issues of race and identity within the Dominican context.

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