

Alaí Reyes-Santos

● *Our Caribbean Kin: Race and Nation in the Neoliberal Antilles*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015. xvi + 225 pp.

Our Caribbean Kin interrogates the means by which inhabitants of the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Haiti may imagine themselves as “kin” in the context of fractious colonial legacies and current geopolitical forces that complicate, deepen, or diminish their impulse to gather together as one people, as “family.” Self-identifying as Puerto Rican, Alai Reyes-Santos is unambiguously invested as an ethnonational subject in the book’s matter, which thematically and chronologically spans nineteenth-century independence struggles in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Hispaniola against imperial Spain, Hispanophone Antillean novels of the 1930s, and present-day issues of cross-border migration and contested citizenship. The book asserts itself also as a *prise de parole*, with Reyes-Santos’s utterances exuding a deep sense of political and personal urgency. She sets out to reconceptualize political alliances while “paying attention to kinship metaphors as well as representations of empathy, sympathy, love, and compatibility” across the regions under consideration (p. 187).

The book’s first part adds nuance to the social history of *Antillanismo* by forwarding the notion of a “decolonial affective matrix,” a concept that relies on tropes of marriage, family, extended blood ties, and other forms of intimate connection to convey communal caring. It highlights tensions between national, transcolonial, and transnational histories as paradigms of belonging. The second part examines contemporary kinship bonds between Puerto Ricans and Dominicans as well as Dominicans and Haitians, the latter rendered particularly complicated in the wake of the Dominican Republic’s Constitutional Court ruling of October 2013, which denationalized tens of thousands of Dominicans of Haitian ancestry.

Chapter 1 brings together the discursive legacies of Puerto Rican political thinker Ramón Emeterio Betances and Dominican military leader Gregorio Luperón to identify sites of contradiction and continuity between the venerated nineteenth-century *antillanistas*. Chapter 2 explicates two “canonical” Antillean novels: *La Llamada* (1935), by Puerto Rican Enrique Laguerre, and *Over* (1939), by Dominican Ramón Marrero Aristy. The characters subvert dominant systems of prejudice as they embrace racial and cultural admixture in intimate relations, thereby deviating from the negrophobic and anti-Indian rhetoric that ran rampant at a time when conventional understandings of Hispanic heritage assumed whiteness and European ancestry to be *sine qua non*. Chapter 3 astutely charts the troubled relationship between, on the one hand, Haitian immigrant workers and their Dominican-born children, and, on

the other, Dominicans who trace their ancestry as Hispanic—irrespective of phenotype—in a society reluctant to acknowledge Haitian-descended people as regular citizens entitled to the recognition and civic protections of the State. In light of this disenfranchisement, Reyes-Santos focuses on the novel *The Farming of Bones* (1998) by Haitian American writer Edwidge Danticat and the memoir *Solo falta que llueva* (2002) by Dominican journalist Santiago Estrella Veloz. The chapter derives much of its richness from Reyes-Santos's own field notes, participant observation, and reflections on popular media as well as work on intra-Caribbean migration by literary scholar Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel. It uses to great advantage newspaper and TV advertisements that shed light on the two countries' interdependence, epitomized by the epithets "two wings of the same bird" (from former Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide) and "a marriage without divorce" (from former Dominican president Hipólito Mejía) (p. 107). Chapter 4 replicates the preceding chapter's trans-border dynamic, turning the spotlight on "the spoken and unspoken contours of kinship" between Dominicans and Puerto Ricans using, among others, themes of secrecy and brotherhood (p. 146).

Only a few caveats come to mind when assessing this insightful effort: *Our Caribbean Kin* is focused, above all, on the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and to a lesser extent, Haiti. Because Reyes-Santos is cognizant of the limitations faced by studies that purport to speak holistically about the Caribbean, a title more specific to the societies that form the core site of the project's analysis might have been more fitting. Second, the vignette that opens the book is both novel and invigorating in its rendition of Reyes-Santos's immersion in a ritualized instance of solidarity across difference, while a more sobering tone emerges in the coda when she exhorts that "we must not be afraid of airing our dirty laundry, uncovering our ugly truths and internal silences, as Antilleans" (p. 186). One wonders how the folk communalism of the opening—especially its deep spirituality—can best be harnessed and reconciled with the divisive nationalist rhetoric and State actions that continuously threaten to strangle the hope and promise evoked by the lyrical introductory scene.

Our Caribbean Kin illuminates the pressures posed by exploitative historical and economic regimes, and trenchantly dissects problematic paradigms that currently structure social relations in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Haiti. It encourages readers to question monolithic racial and national truth-claims in order to generate a spectrum of hopeful alternatives. "[H]ow we must care for one another" (p. 185) doubles as the guiding imperative and ongoing challenge to Antilleans and non-Antilleans alike.

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