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Behind Closed Doors: 'Colorism' in the Caribbean

By Michel Martin
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In this interview, Michel Martin discusses Frances Robles's report on colorism in the Dominican Republic. Colorism is a form of prejudice based on the darkness of a person's skin color. Discrimination based on colorism often occurs within the same racial or ethnic group. Robles discusses how colorism impacts people in the Dominican Republic, as well as the root causes for these mindsets. As you read, take notes on how racial identity is determined in the Dominican Republic.

- [1] The hierarchy¹ of skin color — black, brown, dark-skinned, light-skinned — has long been a source of division within African American communities. But it's not just an American thing. Miami Herald reporter Frances Robles talks about her recent report on "colorism" in the Dominican Republic.

MICHEL MARTIN, host: I'm Michel Martin, and this is *Tell Me More* from NPR News.



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Later on the program: He risked his life to bring stories from the frontline of the civil rights movement. But he's never told his own story until now. But first, in our segment *Behind Closed Doors*, we talk about difficult topics that aren't easy to discuss. Today, we're going to talk about colorism. In this country, people of a certain age are familiar with this ditty: if you're white, you're all right. If you're brown, stick around. If you're black, stay back. African-Americans have been trying for years to erase this legacy of skin color hierarchy in the U.S., but in many countries it lives on.

Today we're going to talk about skin color in Latin America, where it's all the more ironic since in many of these countries the official line is there is no racism. Frances Robles covers the Dominican Republic, Cuba and Puerto Rico for the *Miami Herald*. She recently published an intriguing story as part of the paper's multipart series on Afro-Latinos, "Rising Voices." She took a particularly close look at the Dominican Republic. Frances Robles is in our member station WLRN in Miami. Thanks for being here.

- [5] **Ms. FRANCES ROBLES (Reporter, Miami Herald):** Thanks for having me.

MARTIN: As the *Herald's* person in the Caribbean and in Latin America, you spent a lot of time in communities where blacks are a majority. And yet you wrote in your June 16th story that being black is a source of shame for many people. Talk about that.

1. **Hierarchy (noun)** a system in which people or things are assigned different levels of importance or status

Ms. ROBLES: I would say it's a complete denial. I would say that the majority of the black people — particularly in the Dominican Republic — don't consider themselves black. And I'm talking — not people who look like Hispanic but could be considered black. I'm saying people who are in the United States would be an African-American like anyone else. They just don't see that in themselves.

MARTIN: And why not?

Ms. ROBLES: The Dominican Republic is the only country in Latin America that got its freedom not from Spain, but from Haiti, from a black country. In the 1800s, Haiti gets independence, and then a few years later it takes over the entire island of Hispaniola. So for 22 years, the Dominicans were under the rule of the Haitians. And for many years after that, even after they were freed, you had presidents in the Dominican Republic who really instigated² a sense that anything Haitian was bad, anything black was bad.

- [10] So that when you have an island now of, I don't know, something like 10 million people who believed that blackness and Haitianness is bad, it's not even our fault, frankly. It's a historic, learned behavior.

MARTIN: So how those this play out? How does whole color case hierarchy play out?

Ms. ROBLES: That's really interesting. What you see in the Dominican Republic — for one thing what fascinated me — first of all, I should say that I'm not black. You meet black people who will talk bad about black people, and you're scratching your head, thinking "Wait a second, you look pretty black to me." And what you hear over and over again from the Dominicans is that they didn't find out that they were black until they went to the United States.

MARTIN: Well, what do you mean by that — you talk bad about black people? They say — what do they say? That those blacks this, that those blacks that? Or what?

Ms. ROBLES: Exactly. Like, "Oh, look at those blacks." Or, "God, can you believe she married a guy that dark?" Or, "I bet he's Haitian." There's a real pressure on women to marry guys who are lighter so that they can have children — or even men, really — to have children who are lighter than them and not have children who are darker.

- [15] **MARTIN:** Well, you know where we should start? We should back up, because you start your story in the most obvious place, and it's just — it's almost like hiding in plain sight — the hair salon. The hair salon. Many people are familiar with the whole kind of the cult of the Dominican hairdresser. And there's all this — I don't know if you get your hair done, but it's almost like legendary, like the Dominican hairdresser as being particularly skilled at straightening hair. And you're telling us that there's a legacy behind that.

Ms. ROBLES: Absolutely. There's a real obsession with hair texture. One thing that's really interesting about the Dominican Republic that I noticed — I don't have any statistics on this — but even the white people tend to have coarse hair, because there's — the roots with Africa are so prevalent.³ So everybody straightens their hair in the Dominican Republic. It's not a black thing per se.

2. **Instigate** (*verb*) to cause something to happen or begin
3. **Prevalent** (*adjective*) widespread in a particular area or a particular time

So even, you know, Hispanic people who look like the traditional Hispanic person, most of them are straightening their hair. Wearing your hair curly or in braids — I was trying to think of an analogy. And I thought, you know what it would be like? It would be like in the United States with it — shaving your head. You know, that kind of — “Oh, wow, well, you’re shaving your head. Why would you do that?” And that’s how they look at natural hair.

MARTIN: Did you find anybody sort of conscious of the idea that this is really a fundamental rejection of self, to be so obsessed with taking on characteristics of another ethnic group was really a denial of self?

Ms. ROBLES: There’s a small clique, I would even call them, of intellectuals — of black intellectuals who are trying to raise that consciousness. So there’s two women that I interviewed in the story who are feminist⁴ activists in the Dominican Republic. They’re both light-skinned black women who wear their hair in natural state. And it’s been — it’s real painful struggle for them to be accepted that way.

[20] One of the women that I interviewed, Ms. Fortuna(ph), she says she can’t ride the bus. Because if she rides the bus, people are going to stick combs on her hair. But despite that, she’s adamant.⁵ And she’s going to do it. She’s not going to sort of follow the rules of the European tenets⁶ of beauty. She’s going to — this is my hair. My hair is beautiful. And maybe someday, people will accept it.

MARTIN: Wait. Frances, hold up. Wait. People stick combs on her hair on the bus? She really — going outside is really that big of a struggle, wearing her hair natural, that she draws that much attention?

Ms. ROBLES: I heard it a lot. I heard it from people saying, “Well oh, my God. Well, I would never wear my hair natural.” People are going to say, “Light a match to that nest,” you know, and people will scream at them in the street, heckle them.

(Soundbite of laughter)

MARTIN: I’m just trying to take it in. What about...

[25] **Ms. ROBLES:** It’s really sad. It’s really is.

MARTIN: What about for the men? I mean, are the men expected to straighten their hair or adhere to certain European norms?

Ms. ROBLES: No, the men are not expected to straighten their hair. I mean, they wear their hair short like any other black man would. What I heard from men was more stories about racism. Men told you more about not being able to get into nightclubs, you know, being treated bad at work, things of that nature.

MARTIN: That’s the other question I was going to have, is okay, so maybe we can say okay, that’s messed up. People should be able to walk outside without being accosted⁷ over their hair texture. But is there a real social impact or economic impact to being darker? Does — color does it have a real profound⁸ effect on your life?

4. Feminism is the belief in social, political, and economic equality between women and men.

5. **Adamant (adjective)** refusing to be persuaded or to change one’s mind

6. a principle or belief

7. **Accost (verb)** to approach and address someone boldly or aggressively

8. **Profound (adjective)** very great or intense

Ms. ROBLES: A lot of the feedback that I got from people in the Dominican Republic is that the Dominican Republic is a very racially-mixed society. So they say “Well, how can any of this that you’re saying be true if we are such a brown people?” That means that it’s all cool. You know, it’s fine to be black.

- [30] Then you have black people say well, that’s funny, because they had a very — one of the biggest stories in the press this year was about a black girl who was killed at a disco because she went to go to the disco — and apparently she was a regular there. But she went to bring a bunch of guys, a bunch of her friends, and they got into a fight with the bouncers because the bouncers didn’t want to let them in.

And one thing led to another, and this girl was killed by the bouncers. And that opened a lot of wounds. That opened a lot of people saying hey, you know what? I’m tired of not being allowed into the clubs that I want to go to, of being told that tonight’s a special private party.

But I will say that for every person which gave me a story like that, I had, you know, five others say, “No, no, no,” you know, “We’re a very racially open and mixed society,” so I’m not sure. I bet the truth is somewhere in the middle.

MARTIN: What kind of feedback did you get on this series and on the article that you wrote?

Ms. ROBLES: It was amazing. I have to tell you, I covered Cuba for the Miami Herald, and so the general consensus⁹ has always been that the most important issue to our readers is Cuba. This story, I got so many more e-mails and phone calls than I have ever gotten on a Cuba story. I mean, I probably got anywhere between 50 and 100 e-mails from readers all over the country, mostly women, thanking me and saying, “Wow, I can’t believe I’m reading this in the mainstream newspaper. Finally, someone telling my story.” And along, of course, with that was quite a few hate mails.

- [35] **MARTIN:** Saying what?

Ms. ROBLES: Saying a couple of things. You had people who sort of proved my point by saying, “Oh, but that’s a lie. There are no black people in Dominican Republic.” It’s like, oh, okay. So you’re denying that there’s black people, which was kind of the crux¹⁰ of the story. And then you had people saying they felt offended. They felt that I had put the Dominican people down, that I made them look ignorant,¹¹ which, of course, was not my intention. My intention was to explore a sensitive subject that I knew was going to be provocative,¹² that I knew was going to maybe even hurt some people’s feelings.

MARTIN: You just said that a lot of people, when they come to the U.S., it’s when these issues start to sort of come to the fore. Did you get any interesting letters from people about that, about how that affected their thinking about these issues?

Ms. ROBLES: Well, the few people who are very sort of culturally aware and intellectually aware of this issue in the Dominican Republic, most of them have studied in the United States at some point in their lives. And they say that that process of transformation of awareness — of black awareness, mostly happened in the U.S. When someone said, I don’t know, whatever anyone would have said about being black, and the person went, “Me? Who? Who you talking about?” “Well, you. You’re black.” “Well, I’m not black.”

9. **Consensus** (*noun*) general agreement

10. the most important point

11. **Ignorant** (*adjective*) lacking knowledge, awareness, or understanding of a subject or in general

12. **Provocative** (*adjective*) causing anger or another strong reaction

And then, you know, it would happen once, it would happen twice, and it would happen three times, and then they suddenly have to realize, “Oh, wait a second. I am black. In this country, I’m treated different.” And so that opened a tremendous amount of awareness in people. And what was really fascinating to me is that several people that I talked to that went through that process were very light skinned. So then you had very dark-skinned Dominicans who don’t consider themselves black, and then you had very light-skinned black Dominicans who now consider themselves black and embrace that.

[40] **MARTIN:** That’s interesting. Frances, finally, I think you mentioned that you’re Puerto Rican. Why don’t you describe your look and tell me how you were received as you were reporting the story in the Dominican Republic? How were you treated?

Ms. ROBLES: Well, it was interesting. I almost felt uncomfortable because I have really, really straight hair. You know, for 20 years, I spent — you know, I permed to make it curly, but anyway, I do now, accepted the straightness and I wear it straight. So I did feel a little bit of awkwardness in asking people about hair when I have this straight hair. And I have what’s very classic term in the Dominican Republic and in Puerto Rico, I have what’s called good hair. And so what does that mean? That means a curly hair is bad hair. And what I did with every single interview was I asked people — oh, because one of the things that you see in the Dominican Republic is that there’s a lot of different labels for race. Nobody’s black.

I mean, they’re Indian or they’re dark Indian or they’re dirty Indian or they’re — all these other words that don’t make any sense. So I would ask people, okay, what am I? I have pretty brownish skin, but I have a very small, straight nose and I have pin straight hair. So what would I be? And I had people — oh, well, you’re blonde. Oh, you’re completely white. And I didn’t have a single person tell me that I would be, you know, mixed or anything that would suggest brownness, because the way you define brownness in the Dominican Republic is not by your brown skin. It’s by your hair and by your nose, and those make me white.

MARTIN: Wow. That’s interesting. So you’re passing?¹³

(Soundbite of laughter)

[45] **Ms. ROBLES:** Not by any fault of my own, but yes, I suppose so.

MARTIN: Very interesting story, Frances. Thanks so much for talking with us about it.

Ms. ROBLES: I really enjoyed our conversation.

MARTIN: Frances Robles is a foreign correspondent for The Miami Herald. She joined us from our member station, WLRN in Miami. Frances, thanks again.

Ms. ROBLES: Thank you.

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13. “Passing” refers to a person’s ability to be classified as a member of an ethnic or racial group, even if that is not the group they identify as their own. In this context, it refers to Robles passing for white in the Dominican Republic.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. Racial discrimination and violence are less common in the Caribbean.
 - B. The United States and the Dominican Republic struggle with similar forms of racism, even though most people who live in the Dominican Republic are black.
 - C. Colorism has been a tool used in the Dominican Republic to intentionally remind its citizens of the pains their country experienced due to the rule of Haiti.
 - D. Colorism often goes unrecognized, but it leads to significant harm and discrimination within the Dominican Republic.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "So that when you have an island now of, I don't know, something like 10 million people who believed that blackness and Haitianness is bad, it's not even our fault, frankly." (Paragraph 10)
 - B. "[T]o be so obsessed with taking on characteristics of another ethnic group was really a denial of self?" (Paragraph 18)
 - C. "I heard it from people saying, 'Well oh, my God. Well, I would never wear my hair natural.'" (Paragraph 22)
 - D. "[Y]ou know, 'We're a very racially open and mixed society,' so I'm not sure. I bet the truth is somewhere in the middle." (Paragraph 32)

3. How does Robles's inclusion of the story about the young girl getting shot at the disco contribute to the text?
 - A. It shows how violence as a result of one's racial identity in the Dominican Republic is relatively uncommon.
 - B. It emphasizes the idea that colorism in the Dominican Republic has serious and violent consequences.
 - C. It proves that women are more affected by the culture of colorism that exists in the Dominican Republic.
 - D. It portrays citizens of the Dominican Republic as in denial of the problems of colorism in their country.

4. According to the text, how does gender influence how people of color in the Dominican Republic are treated? Use at least two pieces of evidence from the text in your response.

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. How do we define beauty? How does this vary depending on the country?

2. How do you see colorism present in the United States? How does it differ from racism in the United States?

3. How does prejudice emerge? How did the Dominican Republic's problem with colorism initially begin? How has colorism evolved since then?

4. In the context of the text, what makes you who you are? How can the country a person resides in influence their understanding of their racial identity? How does this influence their acceptance of their identity?

5. In the context of the text, how do people create change? How is Robles's story a step towards change? What are other things that could be done to combat colorism in the Dominican Republic?