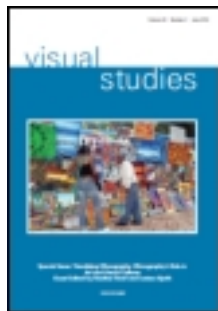


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## Why the cocks trade: what a transnational art market can reveal about cross-border relations

ERIN B. TAYLOR

*In the streets of Santo Domingo, Haitian and Dominican paintings are sold side-by-side, usually by Haitian dealers attracted to their neighbour's much larger tourist market. They are easy to tell apart, for the Haitian paintings generally conform to the naïf style, whereas the Dominican paintings feature rural scenes or Taïno designs. The cultural differences in the designs of the paintings, and their appeal to foreign tourists rather than Dominicans, lend support to decades of scholarship describing Dominican–Haitian relations as being built upon nationalism and notions of racial difference, as well as the 'exotic' appeal that the Caribbean holds for tourists. However, this scholarship falls short of providing a holistic account of Dominican–Haitian relations because it sidelines the crucially important role of trade – historically and contemporaneously – in structuring them. In this article, I reinterpret the history and contemporary nature of art markets in Hispaniola to argue that market relations should be considered alongside symbolic representations when assessing transnational identity politics.*

The tropical rain tumbles down from a cloud-soaked sky, overflowing the gutters and sending the few remaining pedestrians scrambling for cover. Jean Marc, a Haitian immigrant and art dealer, is sheltering under a blue tarpaulin with paintings that he sells to tourists. When the last vestiges of the storm pass, he uncovers his wares once again to display brush-stroked images of brightly clothed women selling vegetables in open-air markets, a country scene with a bright-red *flamboyant* tree, the old Spanish city centre bathed in a golden light and farm animals by a river. Some of these paintings are Haitian, and some are Dominican, all mixed up in his display on the wall of a Santo Domingo construction site. Although there are similarities between them, the main styles are distinctive: only Haitian paintings use the naïf style, whereas Taïno (indigenous) designs are far more common on Dominican paintings. When the storm passes, a young tourist from Atlanta approaches the display (Figure 1). She is visiting Santo Domingo to

study Spanish, and she wants to take home a souvenir of her visit. After perusing the paintings for a while and talking with the dealer, she chooses a small, typical market scene, rendered in primary colours. The dealer takes the canvas off the wooden frame 'so that it is easier to carry home' (and so that the expensive frame can be recycled), rolls up the painting and hands it to the tourist who pays him 350 Dominican pesos (around US\$8.60).

Afterwards, I hang around and chat with Jean Marc, who tells me that the paintings mostly range in price from 200 pesos to 1200 pesos, with many medium- to large-sized ones hovering around the 600 peso mark. He was born in Haiti but has been living primarily in Santo Domingo for the past year. Jean Marc works with family members: a cousin sells alongside him, while an uncle buys some of the Haitian paintings from a workshop in Port-au-Prince. The Dominican-style landscapes and Taïno paintings are sourced locally. Jean Marc tells me that the Haitian paintings sell far better than the Dominican ones because the style is well known and distinctive. When I ask him if Dominicans buy Haitian paintings, he laughs and shakes his head. 'No', he answers, 'Dominicans will sometimes buy paintings by Dominican artists, but never a Haitian painting'. He explains that, to Dominicans, these paintings are primitive; they are scared of Haiti and the crowds and vodou they imagine to be endemic there. This market serves tourists, he claims: Americans are the most frequent customers, but Europeans will spend more on quality as they export it to places such as Italy where primitivism is popular.

The cross-island trade in art can tell us many stories, of which the interaction between the seller and his (mostly) American and European customers is just one. Hidden among the material realities and representations of this street-side stall are all kinds of clues to the history behind Dominican–Haitian relations and the island's international exotic appeal (Brennan 2004). Many scholars point to race as the greatest factor defining

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FIGURE 1. Tourist shopping for art in a Santo Domingo market. Photograph by Erin B. Taylor.

Dominican–Haitian relations, such as in Michele Wucker’s book *Why the Cocks Fight* (1999), and these themes are certainly present in both the art itself and the way it is traded.

However, this story has an angle that is often missed. Just as relevant to cross-island relations are the economic factors that underwrite the construction of race and shape the transnational trade routes for art. In this article, I draw upon the history of art production and its trade in Hispaniola to develop an integrated analysis of the symbolic and economic aspects of cross-border relations. The structure of art markets and the mass production of paintings for this lower end of the market indicate that it may be analytically useful to view the entire supply chain as an ethnographic record, from production and branding to distribution and consumption overseas. This combination of political economy and cultural symbolism can provide insights into the transnational mechanisms by which national difference is created.

### THE AESTHETICS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

How do Dominican and Haitian cultural products (art and craft) differ from each other, and what does this tell us about the historical relations between the two countries? Drawing a distinct line of stylistic demarcation can be difficult because similar styles of art are sold in markets in both countries. However, the

artworks display some differences of form, style and symbolism that locals use to identify them as being Dominican or Haitian cultural products. The Haitian ‘naïf’ or ‘primitive’ style is characterised by a significant level of abstraction. Human and other figures generally remain recognisable, but generally lack facial features. The most common scenes depicted in them are of harvests and market, which use colourful, repeated motifs of human forms and vegetables. One of the most popular styles, reproduced in different sizes and colours, is of women vendors known as ‘Madame Saras’ plying their wares in open-air markets. They are dressed in peasant clothing and the blackness of their skin is emphasised against their colourful dress.

Whereas Haitian paintings are stylised and largely two-dimensional, Dominican paintings have distinctly European influences in terms of composition, perspective and subject matter (Figure 2). This reflects the influence of Spanish artists in the development of the Dominican Republic’s art scene, but also a dominant national discourse of *hispanidad* (hispanicness), an origin myth in which Europeans created the nation and its people to the relative exclusion of African involvement (Howard 2001; Martínez-Vergne 2005; Torres-Saillant 1998, 2000). One style that is sold on the streets depicts Santo Domingo’s colonial zone, which is the old city built by Spaniards from the fifteenth century onwards. There is little of the exotic in these pictures: in fact, from an aesthetic point of view, they could easily be





FIGURE 2. A Dominican artist with one of his paintings of the Colonial Zone. Photograph by Erin B. Taylor.

scenes from the Mediterranean. Dominican and Haitian paintings also differ in their depiction of work and leisure. Haitian landscapes tend to focus on agricultural production, while Dominican rural scenes tend to focus more on the natural landscape, with houses and perhaps a few people performing a cultural activity such as dancing or playing an instrument. The *flamboyant* [sic.] (flamboyant or flame tree) is a common motif in Dominican rural paintings. Rural scenes tend to incorporate more typically Dominican cultural elements, such as forms of traditional dress or musical instruments such as the *güira* (a perforated metal object that is scraped rhythmically with a stick).

All of these artworks, regardless of their price tag, mimic distinctive materialities of life on Hispaniola, in both its contemporary manifestations and historical particularities. They do so through multiple lenses. In some ways, the paintings are shadows of cultural realities that are produced for the tourist gaze. However, they also objectify historical conditions of production that are empirically observable today. In terms of cultural production, they depict the artist's own interpretation of his cultural corpus. In terms of economic production, they reflect the demands of the commodity market that drives the creation and trade of these works. These lenses all tell different stories. Taken together, they permit this transnational art market to act as an ethnographic object that illuminates how the aesthetic

and economic aspects of culture shape relationships and the categories used to organise them. They facilitate analysis of a materiality 'in the round'.

### THE ECONOMICS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

In academic accounts, the Dominican Republic and Haiti are notorious for disagreeing with each other, as evinced in Michelle Wucker's comparison of Dominican-Haitian relations with a cockfight. The forceful ejection of the Haitian military from Santo Domingo in 1844 was just the beginning of a series of border wars that included the massacre of Haitians in 1937, the gradual redrawing of maps in the Dominican Republic's favour during the first few decades of the twentieth century and the regular expulsion of Haitian migrants up to the present day. However, Samuel Martínez disagrees with Wucker's interpretation of Dominican-Haitian relations as a cockfight. He objects to her suggestions 'that the citizens of Haiti and the Dominican Republic are consumed with animosity toward their island neighbors', or 'that the two nations are engaged in some sort of contest for control over the island of Hispaniola' (Martínez 2003, 80). He also critiques Sagás (2000) and Howard (2001) for not giving 'extended consideration to past and present instances of cooperation and evidence of converging interests among the Haitian and Dominican people and their governments' (Martínez 2003, 81).

I find Martínez's criticisms particularly interesting because his work on the migration of Haitians to Dominican sugar plantations very much focuses on the economic inequality that compels Haitians to migrate and the racism they experience at the hands of their Dominican employers (1995, 1999). His comments are not intended to downplay racism, but rather to point out that the picture is more complex than often portrayed. In particular, much scholarship on race in the Dominican Republic fails to recognise how economic factors affect animosity and cooperation between the two nations. An insistence on the autonomy of culture contrasts with a trend in anthropology towards analysing economy and culture together at both the macro and micro levels (Austin-Broos 2009; Ho 2005; Robotham 2005; Tsing 2009, 2011). As Tsing argues regarding supply chain capitalism, 'gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexuality, age, and citizenship status' shape the humans who take part in supply chains; hence, 'We cannot ignore these so-called "cultural" factors in considering the mobilization of labor' (2009, 158). Nor should we ignore the role of labour and other economic factors in the mobilisation of culture.

*Antihaitianismo* (anti-Haitianism) in the Dominican Republic cannot be reduced to a question of cultural values. Rather, the economic histories of the two nations, their differences and mutual interests should be taken into account as well. Scholars who have attempted this task include Lauren Derby (1994) whose article about relations on the national border in the early twentieth century discusses the commodification of Dominican–Haitian relations and how this affected notions of race. Steven Gregory's (2007) ethnography of a tourist resort also points out how a transnational economy creates a racialised 'spatial economy of difference' that marginalises Dominicans as well as Haitians. My own work on a Santo Domingo squatter settlement also shows how poverty underlies racial discourse (Taylor 2013). This is not to say that nationality does not make a difference: it clearly does. Haitians are among those who suffer most from racism and other kinds of discrimination in the Dominican Republic. But addressing racism requires an examination of its basis in the market as well as its cultural manifestations (Robotham 2005).

Another important factor in the economics of representation is the existence of cooperation between Haitians and Dominicans, whether borne out of inequality or mutual benefit. Both the ill-treatment of Haitians and reports of government action against them mask a long history of trade and social relations between the two countries. Dominicans may not buy much

Haitian art, but markets and the marketplace are the basis of Dominican–Haitian economic and social relations, in both their national and local manifestations and their positive and negative aspects. The institution of slavery cemented the importance of markets from the beginning, by imposing a distinction between human beings as commodities and human beings as producers of economy and culture. French-occupied Saint Domingue was the wealthiest plantation society in the Americas, and slavery was the dominant mode of production. It was nowhere near as ubiquitous on the Spanish side, largely because the latter were too poor to invest in a captive labour force. But relations between the two sides were cemented by the trade of Santo Domingo-produced products to the much wealthier Saint Domingue plantations in the west. In the early days of colonisation, settlers in the Spanish side of the island rounded up wild cattle and sold them across the border.

Today, the economic situation has reversed and the Dominican Republic is vastly wealthier than Haiti, with annual per capita income estimated at US\$1300 in Haiti and US\$8200 in the Dominican Republic. Over the past two decades, the Dominican Republic and Haiti have become each other's second most important trading partner, with approximately US\$700 million in goods being exported from the Dominican Republic to Haiti every year (Antonini 2012). Border markets are crucial hubs on trade routes that extend throughout the entire island of Hispaniola. Located in Pedernales, Dajabón and Jimaní, they were institutionalised by the Dominican President Joaquín Balaguer during the United Nations embargo of Haiti from 1991 onwards as a strategy to increase Dominican exports (Antonini 2012). Commodities, people and money flow both legally and illegally across these borders, travelling on trucks, motorbikes, in small fishing boats and on foot. Coconuts, rice and clothing tend to flow from the Dominican Republic to Haiti; art, labour and some agricultural produce flow in the other direction.

This division of market activities exhibits what Paul Farmer (1997) identifies as the convergence of social 'axes' in which multiple structural and status factors combine to create hierarchy. Economically, Haitians possess less working capital and therefore tend to be smaller players in the market than their Dominican counterparts. While many Haitians and Dominicans I spoke with insisted that racism would disappear if economic relations were more equal, racialised nationalism is nevertheless used extensively to reinforce hierarchy. Gender relations in trade are complex, as marketing is a normal activity for Haitian women but

not for Dominican women. Notwithstanding Haitian women's dominance of the market system, Haitian men monopolise the production and distribution of paintings on both sides of the border. Given these complexities, it is misleading to reduce Dominican–Haitian relations to a matter of race or even nationality. This is why the transnational art market is such an ethnographically interesting phenomenon. The paintings visually depict the results of centuries of distillation of cultural representations, while the trade of the paintings reveals how much these distillations are worth in dollar terms – and for whom. It is a trade in culture that is founded upon economic as well as symbolic difference.

### ART AS A REFLECTION OF (NATIONAL) CULTURE

For readers familiar with the production of national culture in the Dominican Republic and Haiti, the differences in painting styles may seem to fit perfectly with their dominant discourses of national culture. Whereas Haiti acknowledges its African roots as integral to its achievements and identity, the Dominican Republic aligns with Europe and its long-extinct indigenous population (Howard 2001; Martínez-Vergne 2005; Torres-Saillant 1998, 2000). Between 1930 and 1961, the dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo mobilised state historians, government departments and the media to distance *dominicanidad* (Dominicanness) from Africa and orient it towards Europe. Trujillo's regime defined the national colour as *indio* (Indian) and disseminated a racist discourse of *antihaitianismo* to posit the nation as civilised and modern in opposition to Haiti's poverty and primitivism. The paintings for sale on Santo Domingo's streets would appear to objectify this process of differentiation, rendering official national culture as a lens through which artists ethnographically record life around them.

However, the history of art production in each nation suggests that the representation of national cultures in these paintings is not simply a matter of internal production. Rather, the representations are significantly influenced by outside forces. In *Painting Culture*, Fred Myers explains how 'Too many people and institutions are involved in making Aboriginal art, making it something more than a "local product" produced entirely within the frameworks of Aboriginal communities' (2002, 8). Encouraged by art dealers who brought them the tools of the trade, members of remote Aboriginal communities began using acrylic paint to record local designs onto canvas. What were once ritual objects or utilitarian line drawings on the ground were thus fashioned as high art commanding equally high prices in international markets, a clear case in which 'art

worlds "make art"' (Beckett 1982, paraphrased in Marcus and Myers 1995, 28). It was not, however, just an act of the art world, but rather of the broader market for cultural production. Dealers, critics and buyers certainly transformed the status and economic value of these works, but these preferences also reflected an entire intercultural field in which they were embedded: one that mixed ancient designs with new innovations, a fascination with primitivism and cultural difference and the commodification of meaning. After all, art dealers encourage the production of art that can be sold for a price.

Until at least the late 1930s, high art production in the Dominican Republic was dominated by European immigrants. During and after the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), a number of artists, including Josep Gausachs, José Vela Zanetti and Eugenio Granell, went into exile in the Dominican Republic. They became some of the first professors of the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes when it was founded in 1942. One notable exception to the dominance of foreigners in this early Dominican art scene was Celeste Woss y Gil, who was born in Santo Domingo in 1890. She trained for 2 years in New York, returned home to Santo Domingo and over the next decade founded two art schools. One of these was the largest in the country until the opening of the Escuela Nacional. Her own art made an impact in the development of a unique Dominican style. According to Elena Pellegrini, 'Woss y Gil's portraits and nude figures were among the first to depict the Dominican criollo, a racial type resulting from the mixture of European, African and indigenous cultures' (1996, 119). Woss y Gil was not alone in this stylistic shift. The late 1930s and early 1940s saw the emergence of artists such as Yoryi Morel, who painted Dominican cultural scenes such as parties with people dancing (including *La Bachata*, 1942) (Sullivan 1996). Other artists, such as Zanetti, painted portraits of peasant families (such as *Familia Campesina*, c. 1941). Although these paintings display a stylistic shift, the majority still exhibit European influences, learned from the artists' studies in Santo Domingo or at art schools overseas. Today, the works of these artists line the halls of the Museo de Arte Moderno (Modern Art Museum) in Santo Domingo.

On the other side of Hispaniola, in Port-au-Prince, the modern art scene appears to have followed a fairly similar trajectory. From as early as 1807 under Henri Christophe, Haitian leaders encouraged the development of Haitian art and brought metropolitan artists in to train local artists. Over the next hundred years, art schools were founded in various sites around the



country, including Port-au-Prince, Cap-Haïtien, Jacmel and Artibonite, developing a modern style in a primarily French tradition. According to Alexis (2010), African influences and the figure of the Haitian peasant began to make an appearance in the work of some artists in the indigenist movement's literature and painting during the American occupation (1915–1934), but was met with resistance by the upper classes who preferred European art (see also Lerebours 1992). The naïf style that we recognise as Haitian today did not gain currency until the establishment of the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince in 1944 by Dewitt Peters, an American watercolour painter and schoolteacher who was sent to Haiti by the United States Department of Education as an alternative to doing military service.

Peters took the novel step of incorporating both formally trained and self-trained artists into his school, as he was attracted to the simple and colourful styles that the latter were producing. These self-trained artists came from a broad and surprising range of backgrounds and occupations. They included Peters' own 'house boy', Castera Bazile, and a worker in a brick factory called Jasmin Joseph (Coates 1992; Richman 2008). One of the most notable of these self-made artists was Hector Hyppolite, a vodou priest who was already painting on cardboard (using chicken feathers because he did not own paintbrushes) and selling his works to US Marines. His vodou-inspired works were promoted alongside those of Philomé Obin, a Haitian clerk from Cap-Haïtien who had received some rudimentary drawing lessons as a child and grew up to develop his own style of painting depicting historical scenes and contemporary urban streets on cardboard and masonite. He earned some money from painting murals in chapels and on the sides of buildings, but appears to have made virtually no money from his artwork until the establishment of the Centre d'Art. By 1947, Haitian art had captured international attention, to the extent that visitors to the UNESCO Paris exhibition of paintings from 30 nations declared the Haitian contribution to be the 'most original' (Rodman 1948, 3).

This initial group formed the basis for an entire movement that would supply artworks to buyers during Haiti's 'golden age of tourism' after World War Two (Plummer 1990). According to the anthropologist Karen Richman, the naïf style appealed to foreigners who were attracted by exotic stories of vodou and island life. Peters commissioned wage labourers to reproduce the most popular styles en masse, and thus an art movement was born. It was so successful that sales of Haitian art 'ranked between third and fifth among the country's exports in the 1950s' (Benson in Richman 2008, 211).

Paintings were mostly produced for the American market, due to tourism and also articulating with the Harlem Renaissance, and this remains the case today (Prézeau-Stephenson 2008). This commodification for foreign consumption, while providing a clear benefit to Haiti's artists and exports, represents a double shift away from the ideal of the independently talented artist recording ethnographic observations of his or her native land. While production predated this new commodity chain, Richman argues that the Haitian style as a corpus was very much a creation of the market. As such, it represented foreign fantasies of a primitive and authentic Haiti:

The celebrated 'naive primitive' canvases and sculptures were commodities produced along with American tourism in Haiti, yet they have been promoted as unique objects of authentic Haitian essence, to attract tourism to the magical island. (Richman 2008, 211)

In fact, Richman asks whether the early unknown artists who turned up on the doorstep of the Centre d'Art were largely engaged in mimesis, copying a style that they already knew Peters preferred. If she is correct, then what we know as Haitian art has been created as a mirror of the other since its very beginning, if we consider that the 'other' in this context means 'of a different nationality'. Certain styles and images have become more renowned than others as representative of Haitian national culture, and foreign buying power has largely underwritten this process. This does not mean that naïf art is inauthentic, any more than Dominican modern art is somehow merely a mimesis of a strange European culture. What is inaccurate here are the ideas that authenticity excludes interculturality, and that commoditisation somehow destroys agency. The artist, dealer and consumer engage with ethnographic products across a greater variety of cultural domains than they often realise. Caribbean life is the result of centuries of cross-fertilisation of ideas, trade and migration across the Atlantic and further afield. The art of Hispaniola is no exception.

## BRANDING PRIMITIVISMS

Economic and cultural factors are interwoven in a market for representations that joins both halves of the island with each other and with the world beyond. In recent decades, the Dominican Republic has unwittingly taken on a more central role in the transnational field of Haitian art. With a steady demise in tourism in Haiti beginning in the 1960s (Yarrington 2007), years of endemic violence and far greater rates of poverty and disease, Port-au-Prince lost its attraction to collectors and

tourists alike. The demise of tourism in Haiti coincided with the explosion of the tourism industry in the Dominican Republic, which proved a more profitable site for the sale of Haitian art than in Haiti itself. Dominican tourist sites, such as Santo Domingo, Boca Chica and Punta Cana, came with their own transnational identity politics promoting images of sex and primitivism. Along with many sites of colonialism, the Caribbean has long been portrayed as a place of abundance and fertility, with great natural wealth, beautiful beaches and, most of all, as highly sensual (Kempadoo 2004). This global imaginary brings tourists who are familiar with images of Caribbean people as hot-blooded and sexually promiscuous, contrasted with views of Westerners as uptight and conservative. As Brennan (2004) notes, these stereotypes are often explained in terms of the climate: the heat and tropical backdrop are viewed as instilling Caribbean people with a languorousness and sexuality that people from cold climates lack. She writes how, on German sex tourism websites, these stereotypes are racialised, presenting black or brown people as somehow 'naturally' sexual. Sex tourism thrives on these stereotypes: white male tourists come looking for beautiful brown women, while white foreign women are attracted to the neatly dreadlocked bodies of brown men (see also Padilla 2007).

Representations of Haiti overseas are arguably even more problematic. Haiti is widely represented in US media as a 'failed state' with a series of 'madmen' leaders (Potter 2009). Dominican media take a similar stance. Sagás (2000) argues that in 1994, the leading candidate Peña Gomez lost the Dominican Presidential elections in part because of a slander campaign that accused him of having Haitian ancestry, which caused him to act in unpredictable and 'primitive' ways. Film footage of him allegedly losing his temper was played on repeat to affirm the message. A difference between Dominican and US identity politics is that, for the latter, Haiti is simultaneously romanticised as an exotic and fascinating location, a Caribbean paradise with the added mystery of vodou (Yarrington 2007). For Dominicans, the proximity of Haiti, their intertwined history and their cultural features make romanticisation difficult, if not impossible. Symbolism in Haitian art therefore has little to offer that is novel or appealing. Dominicans will accept that Haitian art is an attractive commodity to tourists, but, as the art dealer Jean Marc points out, they will disassociate themselves from the cultural object by refusing to purchase it or display it in their homes. However, this does not appear to be a case of 'my primitivism is better than yours', as I do not recall ever seeing Taïno art displayed in Dominican homes either. Landscapes dominate the walls of Dominican houses; Taïno-themed art is

generally reserved for tourist hotels and restaurants. Whatever its nationality of origin, primitivism in Dominican art markets is sold to tourists.

In fact, primitivism is part of cultural branding on both sides of the border, appearing in many more forms than acrylic on canvas. In Haiti's famous Iron Market in downtown Port-au-Prince, vodou bottles, potions and flags provide more unusual purchasing options than the generic range of wooden products with uncertain cultural meanings. On the Dominican side of the island, Taïno designs can be purchased on key rings, mugs, T-shirts, drink coasters and T-shirts at the Mercado Modelo or any tourist shop on El Conde in the *zona colonial*. Tours of indigenous sites are growing in popularity and availability. Official tourist campaigns and brochures feature Taïno designs. Primitivism may have been propelled by demand by a foreign market, but both the Dominican Republic and Haiti have responded by capitalising on their premodern pasts. 'Orientalism' is not always imposed by the West upon the rest (Said 1979); insiders also reify culture and view it anachronistically (Fabian 1983). For example, Terence Turner's (1993, 1995) research demonstrates how the Kayapo in Brazil became adept at manipulating images of themselves in their dealings with outside audiences, juxtaposing culture with technology to give legitimacy to their claims to land and simultaneously presenting themselves as competent citizens of the modern world. Products developed for tourist markets exhibit similar traits in that they apply cultural symbols to mass-produced items (such as T-shirts and mugs). Similarly, Dominicans and Haitians adopt primitivism for their own advantages. The 'traffic in culture' (Myers 2002, 16), as part of the global economy, flows in both directions. Indeed, it always did.

## THE MARKET AS ETHNOGRAPHER?

To what extent do works of art reflect cultural and economic differences as viewed by the artist? According to Hal Foster (1996), artists may have less capacity to ethnographically record culture than we give them credit for. In *The Artist As Ethnographer*, Foster discusses Walter Benjamin's call in 1934 for artists to take over the means of artistic production from the bourgeoisie, taking a place beside proletariat and becoming their 'ideological patron'. Foster critiques Benjamin's call, saying that it implies that artists possess the authority to speak for others and assumes that art production is somehow automatically associated with a politics of alterity. He argues that the danger of this viewpoint is that it equates oppression with truth, as though the reality of the proletariat's experience is reflected directly



in the work of the artists, who may in fact come from a completely different social background (such as being middle class). Today, argues Foster, similar assumptions are made about artists, but rather than viewing them as spokespeople for a class-based social movement, they are considered spokespeople for cultural alterity. This is doubly more dangerous than Benjamin's original proposition, because 'the artist may be asked to assume the roles of native informant as well as ethnographer' (Foster 1996, 174). This is precisely what appears to happen in markets for 'native' art today, as non-Western artists and artworks are assumed to have cultural legitimacy. Much of the economic value of non-Western art stems from its identification with an ethnic group: a painting by Albert Namatjira would not fetch such a high value if it were not Aboriginal art, nor would an acrylic by Hector Hyppolite if it were not part of a Haitian tradition. In contrast, artists in Western societies are not expected to speak for their culture; they are assumed to speak only for themselves.

The individual artist has even less relevance for the value of art sold on the street, where the artist's identity is unlikely to be recognised by buyers (although there are certainly exceptions). A tourist taking a Haitian painting home will keep it as a souvenir of culture, but is unlikely to know much about the artist's creative impulses or cultural loyalties. Indeed, the cheaper the artwork, the less likely it is to be a unique creation. Most paintings sold on the street are close copies of each other, with variation depending largely on the conditions of production. An individual who paints in their own home may potentially have more freedom to create than a person working in a factory with Fordist-style production, where painters are wage labourers who are paid a fixed amount to produce art on a mass scale. They do not own the means of production – paint, brushes, canvas, wooden frames, or a workspace – and their workflows more closely resemble an assembly line than an artist's studio.

Richman (2008) argues that factory-like conditions have characterised a great deal of the production of art for export since the Centre d'Art was opened. While providing employment and meeting the demands of a market, the art factory does not exactly provide conditions for cultural reflexivity, personal expression or the realisation of agency through art as a means of influencing the thoughts and actions of others (Gell 1998). Even if production-line artists view the scenes they are reproducing as authentic cultural representations, they have little to no power to shape the product. As such, they may have more in common with scribes than authors. This does not mean that there is no

originality in their work, as every artist leaves their own mark upon the paintings. Nor does it mean that there is no ethnography occurring, as cultural stories are certainly being recorded. However, the production of ethnography is a collective one that is distributed across the supply chain. It is written in a variety of mediums, including canvases, money changing hands, landscapes and the very bodies of the participants.

There are also plenty of possibilities for autonomous production. In Gazcue, a middle-class suburb of Santo Domingo, there used to be a Dominican artist called José who would set up an easel on the pavement in front of his house and produce his artworks in the open air. He worked independently, selling his paintings to buyers for piece rates in the lower end of the market. While many of his paintings conformed to a similar pattern, and he painted with the market in mind, they were generally not exact copies. José would change the arrangement of forms and the colours and introduce new objects or characters. Talking with him, it was clear that he saw many of the elements of his paintings as being very much indicative of a national culture with which he strongly identified. This included the famous flamboyant tree, the buildings of the colonial zone and scenes of people dancing merengue in front of country houses. Dominicans tend to share a highly consistent idea of what national culture is, thanks in no small part to over a century of state effort to unite the 'unruly' Dominican people under one central identity (Martínez-Vergne 2005). It would seem disingenuous to claim that this man was not recording the story of his people. After all, he may have been reproducing strikingly similar forms over and over again, but this is exactly how the process of cultural reproduction occurs. It is also how culture changes over time.

## TRADITIONS OF CHANGE

Since the earthquake that hit Haiti on 12 January 2010, an influx of foreign workers to Hispaniola has witnessed a boom in the Haitian art market. Independent artists increasingly ply their wares on the streets of Port-au-Prince and Jacmel, as well as sending them to Santo Domingo. In Croix-des-Bouquet, just outside of Port-au-Prince, there is a buzzing art village in which scores of Haitians (virtually all men) make objets d'art out of metal drums. These objects represent the entire range of production, from the most reproduced to the most original. The smaller, less expensive objects, such as bracelets, are often made in bulk and sold en masse in most stalls. Mid-priced objects, especially wall plaques and jewellery, display a significant degree of uniqueness. One stall in particular sells larger, sculptural pieces,

which break entirely from the standard mould, using contemporary abstract patterns and postmodern juxtaposition rather than traditional style.

All of these objects' makers can be said to be ethnographers in the sense that they are recording cultural stories in a manner that can be read by outsiders. The most mass-produced objects record a story about 'tradition' in Haiti whereas the most unique objects record a story of creativity and change. Indeed, creativity and change are traditions in their own right in the Caribbean. In the earliest days of colonisation, enslaved people from various parts of Africa faced the task of inventing a society and a culture in a land that was totally alien to them and under highly adverse conditions. Back then, creativity was the product of individuals who were motivated to find ways to communicate, engage in productive activity and care for their families. It was a creativity geared at survival in the first instance. But it was also, necessarily, a collective endeavour aimed at generating shared narratives and practices.

A similar point could be made for the production of art for the tourist market in Hispaniola today. Recording culture and history onto objets d'art is not dependent on whether one creates as an individual or as a social being: they are one and the same process. Furthermore, if we view the commodity chain of art as an ethnographic record, then we must also pay heed to how the consumers of art influence its symbolic and economic production. Demand gives rise to the production of more art, and it also guides the style of the art that is produced. If primitivism sells, then primitivism will be created. If we view this process through the lens of political economy, we might view this as an economic relationship in which Haitian or Dominican artists are subordinate to tourists with buying power, and whose cultural autonomy is, to a certain extent, overwritten by the need to make a living through meeting demand. But if we look at this process through a lens of cultural and economic change, then we might argue that the artists in question are acting as savvy entrepreneurs in creating a niche market for their work, one in which there is not only economic gain but also heightened appreciation for Haitian cultural capital. After all, as much as representations of Haiti as primitive are allochronic (Fabian 1983) feed into a view of the country as backwards, they are also one of the main forms of cultural currency with which Haiti sold itself to the world in the heydays of the 1950s. What matters is not so much whether primitivism underwrites Haiti's branding, but whether these representations provide opportunities for creativity and

change in an impoverished and often marginalised nation.

## CONCLUSION

Haitian and Dominican art is the result of internationalised chains of cultural and economic production, resulting in two very different art styles that can coexist in the same international market from one tropical island. While differences between the two nations are certainly real, the art markets themselves are somewhat artificial spaces where the cultural products for sale have been disembedded from the contexts of their production. They take on a kind of performative role that, while 'saying something' meaningful about identity, also flatten out its complexities. This is why looking at the entire production chain can be far more illuminating than just looking at the art itself or direct exchange relations. Longstanding differences in Dominican and Haitian national identities and economy are reflected throughout the production chain, from their creation by cultured subjects, their distribution in Santo Domingo's tourist markets and also in their consumption by tourists who are drawn to their 'naïf' or 'colonial' aesthetics. Following this chain reveals just how much of what appears to be a localised difference of identity, rendered in racial terms, is in fact firmly embedded in a transnational socioeconomic field.

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