Juan R. Valdez


*Tracing Dominican Identity* tells an enormously important story about the uses of linguistics to promote exclusionary, white supremacist, militantly Eurocentric ideas of race and nation in Hispanophone areas of the Americas. University of Wyoming Professor Juan Valdez focuses on the intellectual biography and scholarly trajectory of the eminent Dominican philologist Pedro Henríquez Ureña who, having left his homeland in 1901 to return only briefly in 1911 and once again for eighteen months in 1931–32, died in Argentina in 1945. But one gets the sense that the chronology and the conceptual framework that Valdez has outlined can without radical adjustment fit the career of many a prominent linguist in the modern history of the Hispanophone Caribbean and Latin America.

At one point he pits Henríquez Ureña, who placed great emphasis on dismissing the influence of the black legacy on Dominican Spanish, against a renowned contemporary, the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, who sought to raise awareness about the role of “afronegrismos” in Cuban speech (pp. 155–157). But he omits reference to the fact that Ortiz, a proponent of a view of national identity that comes to terms with the mixture of European and African attributes in cultural crossings of Cuban plantation society, had also gone through a negrophobic period, as his early study *Los negros brujos* (1906) virulently illustrates. Indeed, the evolution of Ortiz from the cultural tenets of white supremacy to those of creolization (or *transculturation* in his nomenclature) would lend credence to Valdez’s discursive move in his conclusion, where he speculates, on the basis of some of Henríquez Ureña’s reflections shortly before his death, that in matters of race and cultural identity, the Dominican philologist “seemed open to reconsidering his convictions and ideas of the intellectual climate and ideological matrix from which his previous work had emerged” (p. 166). Negrophobia and anti-Amerindian sentiments were the bane of the Latin American intelligentsia from the start of independence through at least the 1960s because the colonial transaction that had prevailed up to the moment of nascent sovereignty had vilified black and indigenous subjects, and the republics that ensued did not pursue an effort to dismantle colonial racialization. Rare, therefore, was the cultural theorist in the nation-building period who did not voice a Eurocentric vision.

Valdez competently maps Henríquez Ureña’s early years and his rise to the summit of intellectual prestige in Latin America and even in Spain (Chapter 1). He establishes his own command of the pertinent bibliography, surveying
the ideologies prevalent in the history of ideas through an account of scholarship in the discipline of linguistics (Chapter 2). He quite compellingly narrates the primacy of ideas about language, steeped in venerated Hispanic legacy, in the configuration of notions of national belonging and collective destiny in the Dominican Republic and the other countries of Latin America during the societies’ formative stages (Chapter 3). He covers Henríquez Ureña’s fervent commitment to the grand tradition of Hispanic linguistics in Latin America and the pervasive influence of the Spanish philologist Ramón Menéndez Pidal on his thought (Chapter 4). Valdez devotes a tour de force section to documenting Henríquez Ureña’s agonistic wrestling with the task of demonstrating the purely Castilian and Andalusian base of Dominican Spanish, which he describes as the “whitening” of the nation’s identity (Chapter 5). Tracing Dominican Identity closes with a brief conclusion that speculates about the direction in which Henríquez Ureña’s scholarship would have gone had his life not ended at age sixty-one. Valdez gives us reason to consider that perhaps this great Dominican humanist, like Ortiz, his Cuban counterpart, had begun to move closer to those other Caribbean thinkers who in the 1940s had come to terms with their African heritage and had begun to resignify its value as an indispensable asset of the region’s culture.

As a trained linguist, Valdez has made an important contribution to the study of the legacy of Henríquez Ureña, complementing the invaluable work of literary scholar Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, whose chapter on Henríquez Ureña in Sobre los principios: La tradición y los intelectuales caribeños (2006) enormously advances the exploration of the life, glory, and yearnings of this enigmatic and brilliant Dominican humanist. University of Toronto Hispanist Néstor E. Rodríguez has for several years been mining as yet unpublished texts by Henríquez Ureña which, as he reports, complicate the standard versions of his subject’s political trajectory. Independent scholar Miguel Mena, working out of Berlin, has invested much time and effort in organizing Henríquez Ureña’s extant oeuvre and recovering biographical details connected to the constraints, both economic and social, under which he produced his impressive work. Danny Mendez, an assistant professor of Spanish at Michigan State University, considers Henríquez Ureña one of the “displaced” writers in his Narratives of Displacement in Dominican Literature (2012). Tracing Dominican Identity firmly enters the growing field of the study of the complex legacy of the remarkable Dominican humanist in a new way. I refer here to the effort spearheaded by Díaz Quiñones and several Dominican academics located outside Latin America who have tended to approach their subject free of the hagiographic impulse that had long dominated the bibliography on Henríquez Ureña. Thanks to this recent scholarly development we are now witnessing a truly in-depth explo-
ration of the inestimable contributions this eminent man of letters made to our understanding of Dominican and Latin American cultural production without overlooking the exclusionary and prejudicial implications of the views of society, identity, and civilization that he upheld.

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