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*Research Monograph*

# Introduction to Dominican Blackness

Silvio Torres-Saillant

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## Foreword

I am thrilled and delighted to be welcoming new and returning readers to the second edition of Silvio Torres-Saillant's path-breaking work, *Introduction to Dominican Blackness*, in which he unabashedly confronts the effects of white supremacist ideology on Dominican culture and politics. Originally published in 1994, the monograph was the first thoroughgoing analysis of Dominican history through a racial lens and the first of several works by its author to problematize the traditional paradigm of racial categories as understood in the United States. The CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, where I succeeded him as director in 2002, became so inundated with requests for copies of the monograph over the course of the last decade that we had to reprint it several times before we realized that issuing a new edition was the only viable solution. For this new edition, Torres-Saillant graciously agreed to revise the work substantially and wrote a new introduction.

It is with deep pride and great joy that we hereby inaugurate the online edition of the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute Research Monograph Series with this second edition of *Introduction to Dominican Blackness*, initiating a new phase in our relationship with our readers. We hope that the new version will reach a larger audience, attract new researchers in Dominican Studies, and instruct and provoke well into the 21st century.

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## I. Gaps in the Black Atlantic

There is a country in the world—called the Dominican Republic, a place in the midst of the Caribbean sharing the island of Hispaniola (a.k.a. Santo Domingo) with the Republic of Haiti—whose intercourse with blackness and African roots would seem incontestably to qualify it as an ideal candidate for induction into the watery corridors of the “transcultural, international formation” that Paul Gilroy has called “the black Atlantic” (Gilroy 1993: 4). Yet, the black British brothers who have risen to intellectual stardom speaking about race with the advent of cultural studies and post-colonial theory do not know the place. The specialists in social dynamics in Latin America and the Caribbean, writing primarily in English in the United States and England, do not know it either. The titles of some of their most recent books include: *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (1997) by Peter Wade, *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940*, edited by Richard Graham (1990), *African Presence in the Americas*, co-edited by Carlos Moore, Tanyia R. Sanders, and Shawna Moore, and the two-volume collection *Blackness in the Americas: Social Dynamics and Cultural Transformation* (1998), compiled by Arlene Torres and Norman E. Whitten. These fail to include Dominican society in their panoramic vistas of race in the hemisphere. Nor do Dominicans attain any particular prominence in *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (1999), the compendium of knowledge on black peoples of the world gathered by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Only with Peter Winn’s *Americas: The Changing Face of Latin America and the Caribbean* (1999) do Dominicans get center stage in the hemispheric discussion of blackness and racial identity. However, the 1992 PBS documentary on which the book is based offers a representation of Dominicans that borders on caricature. The program highlights the oddity of an African-descended people unable to come to terms with their own blackness. Clearly an astonishing occurrence for an audience socialized to view race as a biological fact, the reticence of Dominicans to privilege the African aspect of their heritage in their self-definition appears in Winn’s documentary devoid of historical context. *Americas* does no better a job in that respect than *Wonders of the African World* (1999), the PBS documentary hosted by Henry Louis Gates. There the Harvard scholar regales the audience with a learned elder from the island of Lamu, just off the coast of Kenya in East Africa, who, despite his

discernibly Negroid features, categorically defines his ancestry as Arabic rather than African. Similarly, another “black looking” interviewee on the neighboring island of Zamzibar describes his heritage as exclusively Persian. The two documentaries, in failing to contextualize Dominican and East African racial discourses within discrete historical experiences, end up inviting perceptions that construe the interviewees’ understanding of their self-identity as delusional.

The recent literature on blackness in the Americas has dealt with the Dominican case, then, in either of two ways: omission or trivialization. This might seem a strange lot indeed for a people whose land must be called “the cradle of blackness in the Americas” (Torres-Saillant 1995: 110). Hispaniola received the first blacks ever to arrive on the western hemisphere. It inaugurated both the colonial plantation and New World African slavery, the twin institutions that gave blackness its modern significance. On this island in 1503 black maroons first rose their subversive heads, and there too the hemisphere’s first black slave insurrection took place on December 27, 1522. The island eventually bifurcated into two contiguous colonial sites, a Spanish domain in the east and a French one in the west. The Dominican Republic, which came into being as an independent nation-state in 1844 by delinking from Haiti, which had unified the island under its rule 22 years earlier, broke the pattern of the typical independence movements in the region. Unlike them, which usually achieved independence by separating from European colonial powers, the Dominican Republic attained selfhood by dissolving its ties to a former colony, a nation founded by ex-slaves.

The Dominican case broke with the normal regional pattern in other ways as well. Black Dominicans interrogated the ideology of the independence movement and succeeded in shaping the way the “founding fathers” imagined the nation. Juan Pablo Duarte, the intellectual architect of the new republic, distinguished himself from the creole elites that championed independence projects in nineteenth-century Latin America in forging a nation-building doctrine that was devoid of racist formulations. He posited the vision of a multiracial society united by a common purpose: “white, black,/ copper-skinned, cross-bred,/ Marching together,/ United and daring,/ Let us flaunt to the world/ Our brotherhood/ And save the fatherland/ From hideous tyrants” (cited in Torres-Saillant 1998: 126). On the surface these lines point to a racial ideology akin to the pluralism favored by the celebrants

of Latin American *mestizaje*, a good many of whom managed to pay lip service to diversity while adhering to white supremacist social practices. However, Duarte went beyond the conundrum of *mestizaje*. He radically proclaimed an end to the “aristocracy of blood.” He also stayed clear of racial othering when articulating the need for the separation from Haitian rule (Duarte 1994: 31). The fact that once the independence had been declared the nascent government quickly passed a resolution to reassure Haitians who wished to stay in the Dominican side of the island that no plans existed to expel anyone and that their “physical safety and their prosperity” would be “protected” may have emanated from Duarte’s anti-racist legacy (Campillo Perez 1994: 45).

If the foregoing did not suffice to stress the richness of the Dominican field for any exploration of the tribulations of blackness in the modern world, the way the country wrestled with slavery and emancipation, culminating in anti-slavery policies of unprecedented radicalism, would most certainly help make the case. First in 1801 the liberator Toussaint Louverture came from Saint Domingue in western Hispaniola to Spanish Santo Domingo in the east and, having unified the island under the French banner he still represented, proceeded to abolish the “peculiar institution.” Then in 1802, during the French invasion sent by Napoleon, the French commander who took over the Spanish-speaking side of the island immediately reinstated it. Slavery would remain in effect—a couple of anti-slavery uprisings having failed—until 1822, when Haitian President Jean Pierre Boyer, effectuating another unification of the island, abolished it.

With the birth of the new country, the independence movement having triumphed in 1844, the black and mulatto population pressured to have their freedom guaranteed. As a result, on March 1, 1844—two days after the founding of the nation—the newly formed government agreed to declare that slavery had disappeared “for ever” from the land. When the resolution was ratified as a law on July 17, 1844 it carried an article that penalized the slave traffic with capital punishment. Another stated emphatically that slaves coming from abroad would become automatically free upon setting foot on Dominican soil (Alfau Durán 1994: 373). This law becomes more radical if one remembers that slavery still existed in the neighboring Spanish colonies of Puerto Rico (until 1878) and Cuba (until 1886), and that enacting it constituted a provocation to Spanish imperial authority in the region. For it created a



lure that attracted runaway slaves whose masters had no hope of reclaiming them once they entered Dominican territory. Indeed, black slaves escaped regularly from Puerto Rico to Santo Domingo from 1822 through 1878 (Alfau Durán 1994: 379). In declaring the immediate change of status of the servile population from abject slavery to unqualified freedom, the policy surpassed any other emancipation declaration in the region in its adoption of a human rights logic. Needless to say, then, the Dominican case is one that merits attention by anyone seriously interested in exploring the complexity of race relations and the black experience in the modern world. Speculation on why the scholars have so strongly ignored it may yield ground for discussing the geopolitical contexts that allow certain sites to emerge as exemplars of the human experience while others do not regardless of epistemic value. But perhaps we can at this point render no better service than to tell the story of blackness in the place where modern blackness—concurrently with the modern world—actually began.

## II. The Genesis of Blackness

The island of Hispaniola or Santo Domingo served as port of entry to the first African slaves who stepped on Spain's newly conquered territories following Christopher Columbus' eventful transatlantic voyage in 1492. Nine years into the conquest of what thenceforward became known as the New World, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella appointed Fray Nicolás de Ovando as new Governor of Santo Domingo, authorizing him to bring "black slaves" to their colony (Saco 1974: 164). Marking the start of the black experience in the Western Hemisphere, the arrival of Ovando's fleet in July 1502 ushered in a social and demographic history that would lead in the course of five centuries to the overwhelming presence of people of African descent in the Dominican Republic today.<sup>1</sup> Blacks and mulattoes make up nearly 90% of the contemporary Dominican population. Yet no other country in the hemisphere exhibits greater indeterminacy regarding the population's sense of racial identity. To the bewilderment of outside observers, Afro-Dominicans have traditionally failed to flaunt their blackness as a collective banner to advance economic, cultural or political causes. Some commentators would contend, in effect, that Dominicans

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<sup>1</sup> The claim that black servants may have arrived with Columbus himself on his second trip to the colony, as echoed by Mellafé (1964: 18), seems to have lost currency. But there is a scholarship, inspired by Leo Weiner's *Africa and the Discovery of America* (1920), that posits a pre-Columbian African presence in the Americas (Van Sertima 1976: 14). Without antagonizing that view, the present essay adheres to the scholarly consensus drawn from direct references to blacks in the written documents from the first decade of the colonial transaction.

have for the most part denied their blackness. Faced with the population's tolerance of official claims asserting the moral and intellectual superiority of Caucasians by white supremacist ideologues, analysts of racial identity in Dominican society have often imputed to Dominicans heavy doses of "backwardness," "ignorance" or "confusion" regarding their race and ethnicity (Fennema and Loewenthal 1989: 209; Sagás 1993). I would like in the pages that follow to invite reflection on the complexity of racial thinking and racial discourse among Dominicans with the purpose of urging the adoption of indigenous paradigms in attempts to explicate the place of black consciousness in Dominican society and culture.

### **III. Dominican Blackness and US Racism**

The Dominican Republic came into being as a sovereign state on February 27, 1844, when the political leaders of eastern Hispaniola proclaimed their juridical separation from the Republic of Haiti, putting an end to twenty-two years of unification under a black-controlled government with its seat in Port-au-Prince. The Haitian leadership originally resisted the idea of relinquishing authority over the whole island and made successive attempts to regain the eastern territory, which resulted in sporadic armed clashes between Haitian and Dominican forces until 1855. As the newly created Caribbean republic sought to insert itself into an economic order dominated by Western powers, among which "the racial imagination" had long taken a firm hold, the race of Dominicans quickly became an issue of concern (Torres-Saillant 1993: 33-37). In December 1844, near the end of President John Tyler's administration, U.S. Secretary of State John C. Calhoun spoke of the need for the fledgling Dominican state to receive formal recognition from the U.S., France, and Spain in order to prevent "the further spread of negro influence in the West Indies" (Welles 1966: 76). Calhoun, as would many other American statesmen and journalists throughout the nineteenth century, conceived of Dominicans as other than black.

When in 1845 American Agent John Hogan arrived in Santo Domingo with the mandate of assessing the country for an eventual recognition of its independence, he sided with Dominicans in their conflicts with Haitians. As such, he became weary of the predominance of people of African descent in the country. Addressing the Dominican Minister of Foreign Relations Tomás Bobadilla, Hogan wondered whether "the presence in the Republic of so large a proportion of the coloured race"

would weaken the government's efforts to fend off Haitian aggression, but Bobadilla assuaged his fears by stating "that among the Dominicans preoccupations regarding color have never held much sway" and that even former "slaves have fought and would again fight against the Haitians" if need be, on account of the oppressiveness of the latter's past regime (Welles 1966: 77-78). In a despatch addressed to U.S. Secretary of State John M. Clayton, dated October 24, 1849, American Commissioner in Santo Domingo Jonathan E. Green reported that Haitian violence had given "force and universality to the feeling in favor of the whites in the Dominican Republic" to the point that a black "when taunted with his color" could conceivably remark: "Soy negro, pero negro blanco" (Cited in Welles 1966: 103-04).

Nineteenth-century foreign observers of the Dominican scene, particularly American ones, had ample occasion to note the reticence of Dominicans to brandish their black identity. But the observers themselves remained ambivalent about the racial and ethnic characteristics of the new republic's population. One thinks, for instance, of the "genealogy" of Dominican political leaders published by the *New York Evening Post* on September 2, 1854 with the intention of frustrating Secretary of State William Marcy's plan to secure the granting of official U.S. recognition to the Dominican Republic. The newspaper meant to show that "the Dominican leaders were all either negroes or mulattoes, and that the pure white population of the Dominican Republic was almost a negative quantity," thereby warning "Southern statesmen" about the danger of extending privileges to a "government based upon negro or mulatto supremacy" (Tansill 1938: 181). The *Post* highlighted the blackness of Dominicans in order to spark antipathy against them in public opinion sectors of the United States, but a book published six years later by an author wishing for the opposite result undertook to underestimate the black element of the Dominican population. The author represented the Dominican people as "made up of Spaniards, Spanish Creoles and *some* Africans and people of color" (Courtney 1860: 132).

Two strains appear to stand out in the observations of Americans commenting on racial matters in the Dominican Republic at the time. One is the sense that "no austere prejudice against color prevails" in the country, as one author put it, or, in the words of another, that "distinction of color, in social life, is entirely unknown" (*Santo Domingo* 1863: 10; Keim 1870: 168). The other strain is the insistence on magnifying the

white component of the Dominican population. Thus, the U.S. Senate Commission of Inquiry that went to the Dominican Republic in early 1871 to assess whether the country was ripe for annexation to the U.S. territory found people there to be “generally of mixed blood,” with the great majority being “neither pure black nor pure white,” but showing areas inhabited by “considerable numbers of pure white” people, and noting that “generally in the mixed race the white blood predominates” (*Report* 1871: 13). Still in the twentieth century, during the government of Theodore Roosevelt one could find American voices attesting to the presumed whiteness of Dominicans. One contended unambiguously that the inhabitants of the small Caribbean republic “with very few exceptions” were white and cited racial hostility, that is, “the refusal of the white Dominican to be governed by the black Haitian,” as the cause of the partition of Hispaniola into two countries (Hancock 1905: 50). In the same vein, an anonymous author affirmed that “white blood preponderates” in the Dominican Republic by contrast to neighboring Haiti where “the black race is in complete ascendancy” (Anon. 1906: 18-19).

With the foregoing series of fluctuating pronouncements on Dominicans and race, the mixed testimony in the late 1920s of yet another American commentator, Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary Sumner Welles, should come as no surprise. While affirming that “race discrimination in the Dominican Republic is unknown,” he deemed it “one of the most noteworthy peculiarities of the Dominican people that among all shades, there is a universal desire that the black be obliterated by the white. The stimulation of white immigration has become a general demand” just as an interest in curtailing or regulating black immigration carried “similar force” (Welles 1966: 909). Welles described what proponents of structural causes for attitudes about race would characterize as a contradiction since his scenario insinuates that negrophobia can exist independent of racial oppression. I would like this baffling possibility to serve as starting point for an inquiry into the concept of race as it has developed historically in Dominican society.

Nor is it insignificant that this inquiry should spring from the statements of Welles and the other North American voices. For I would contend that Dominican identity consists not only of how Dominicans see themselves but also of how they are seen by the powerful nations with which the Dominican Republic has been linked in a relationship of

political and economic dependence. It is not inconceivable, for instance, that the texture of negrophobic and anti-Haitian nationalist discourse sponsored by official spokespersons in the Dominican state may have drawn significantly from North American sources dating back to the first years of the republic. I would propose also that as we proceed forward with this inquiry we avert the pitfalls of investigating Dominican attitudes about race exclusively through the utterings put forward by the scribes of the ruling class. We ought to make an effort to assemble instances of active participation of Afro-Dominicans in building and defining their history. Those instances, compiled from the field of social action, offer an invaluable living text, an indispensable document that is hardly detectable through archival research.

#### **IV. The Spreading of Blackness: The Fall of the Plantation**

The number of blacks in Hispaniola grew dramatically as the Spanish settlers' need for bonded labor increased with the rapid decimation of the aboriginal Taino population. A census of the colony taken in 1508 showed that a mere 60,000 Tainos remained from the original 400,000 found by the Spaniards in 1492 (Moya Pons 1992:26). The high mortality rate of the native workforce and the need for able bodies in the gold mines caused the Crown to overrule an earlier decree that had only permitted the importation of those black slaves who, born to a Spanish master, had received a Christian upbringing. Colonists in 1511 could secure their laborers through the slave traffic directly from Africa (Saco 1974:166-67). By 1519 the Taino population had shrunk to 3,000 souls (Moya Pons 1992: 293). The gold mines had exhausted their deposits. Whites had begun to emigrate massively, and they would do so in greater numbers lured by the mineral riches subsequently discovered in the mainland colonies of Mexico in 1522 and Peru in 1531. Concomitantly, sugar cultivation had made its way into the colonial scene. Brought by Columbus to Hispaniola during his second voyage in 1493, the sugarcane went through successive periods of industrial trial and error until in 1516 an entrepreneur named Gonzalo de Vellosa turned the processing of the plant into a lucrative enterprise.

The success of Vellosa's experiment led to the rise of the sugar industry as the preeminent economic institution of the island. By 1522 the colony boasted a host of plantations that involved the participation of the most notable members of the ruling class (Saco 1974:175; Moya

Pons 1992:32-33). Since the plantation drew its labor force almost exclusively from bonded Africans, the black presence in the colony grew enormously while the emigration of whites continued unabated. The development of plantation economy in sixteenth-century Santo Domingo may actually provide the clue to the historical origins of anti-black racism in the modern world. In an insightfully lucid chapter, Pedro Mir has convincingly argued that the triumph of Velloso's industrial technology dealt a fatal blow to the black slave population by begetting a conceptual association between slavery and race: "From then on slavery acquires new traits and shows the characteristics of a modern institution. It becomes a colored institution" (Mir 1984: 219). A subsequent study of the colonial origins of racial prejudice supports Mir's argument in claiming that prior to the rise of the sugar industry in Santo Domingo "a racial prejudice against the black slave did not exist in the Americas with any meaningful centrality as an argument of the ideology of slavery" (Tolentino Dipp 1992: 189). Comparable though not identical phenomena in what is today the United States delayed until the end of the seventeenth century the historical process whereby "dark complexion" would become "an independent rationale for enslavement" (Jordan 1974: 52). Velloso's success, then, in equating sugar with blackness, inaugurated the racialization of slavery.

Naturally, the importation of African slaves to Santo Domingo gained momentum, with the result that the black population from the second decade of the colonization of the island invariably outnumbered the white, often by a very wide margin. In 1552 alone the colonists from Santo Domingo would make countless requests for licenses to import Africans and many smuggled slaves unbeknownst to the Spanish authorities (Larrazabal Blanco 1967: 37-38). The gap of 1,157 white settlers against 9,648 slaves assessed by a census in 1606 would widen in the decades that followed ("Esclavitud" 1988:77). The numerical disparity would become further accentuated in the extent to which the plantation lost the vitality of its beginnings, and the Spanish settlers opted for emigration.

With the downfall of plantation economy in Santo Domingo, the colony went through a long period of impoverishment. Among other results, slavery lost its economic *raison d'être*, and a good many bonded laborers gained their freedom. A venerable Dominican historian has said that the "premature extinction of the sugar plantations" was a divine

blessing since it “prevented slavery... from reaching the tremendous proportions to which it would rise in Haiti” (Alfau Durán 1994: 364). Blacks did not have the option of leaving, so they stayed and multiplied: “Either slave or free, [they] continued to grow in number, and ... spread throughout the colony” (Larrazabal Blanco 1967:182). Following the depopulation of Western Hispaniola in 1605-1606 by Governor Antonio de Osorio, the inhabitants of the colony became concentrated in the east, and the vacant territories of the island would eventually become the seat of the French colony of Saint Domingue, where blacks would also outnumber whites. But speaking strictly of the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo, we get a sense of its ethnic composition from a 1739 report by Archbishop Alvarez de Abreu who spoke of 12,259 inhabitants with a majority of free blacks (Larrazabal Blanco 1967:183).

## **V. Black Interaction: Hispaniola East and West**

Dominican blacks and mulattos owe their predominance, then, to successive waves of importation of slaves from Africa or elsewhere to the island of Hispaniola and their biological growth through intra- or inter-racial reproduction. But, in addition, various events in the island’s history contributed to increasing their presence. The rise of the French colony of Saint Domingue on western Hispaniola, whose prosperous plantation economy made intensive use of bonded African workers, led to further integration of blacks into the population of Santo Domingo since slaves often crossed the border to the eastern side to escape the brutality of their condition. Runaway slaves from the west first came to eastern Hispaniola in 1676 and founded San Lorenzo de los Minas, a neighborhood that still thrives today in the midst of the Dominican capital although its destruction or dismantling was periodically considered until the mid eighteenth century due to the fear of the Santo Domingo authorities that the site might become a “brood of insurrection” (Utrera 1995: 225-27).

During the period known as the Haitian Revolution, when a black insurrection overturned the French colonial system on the island, many Saint Domingue slaves sought their freedom by fighting as soldiers of the Spanish monarch. Among the many who crossed to the Spanish-speaking colony, Pablo Ali became most prominent, achieving great military distinction in Santo Domingo and appearing by 1820 as colonel of the prestigious Batallón de Morenos. When in November 1821 a creole elite, headed by José Núñez de Cáceres, proclaimed their juridical

separation from Spain—the short-lived enterprise that historians call “the ephemeral independence”—Ali served as their chief military commander. This illustrates the importance of the ex-slave in the armed forces of Santo Domingo at the time (Deive 1980: 426-27).

The black population of Santo Domingo received another numerical boost in January 1801 when the former Saint Domingue slave Toussaint Louverture led his troops across the border to take possession of the Spanish territory for Republican France. By unifying the island under French rule, Toussaint materialized the terms of the 1795 Treaty of Basel whereby Spain had ceded to France the control of its Hispaniola colony. While in Santo Domingo, Toussaint abolished slavery, eliminated racial privileges, and restructured the colonial economy, producing a period of momentary prosperity. Toussaint’s efficiency, leadership, and sense of equity as “general and governor” earned him the “love and respect” of the people of Santo Domingo, and “the blessing of Dominicans,” as nineteenth-century authors Antonio Del Monte y Tejada and Alejandro Llenas had occasion to affirm (cited by Deive 1980:220-21). Toussaint’s government, however, did not last. With the fall of the Republic and the rise of Napoleon in France, an interest developed in regaining colonial control over Saint Domingue. In January 1802, 21,000 French soldiers led by Napoleon’s brother-in-law General Charles Victor Emmanuel Leclerc invaded the island of Hispaniola. Toussaint’s army had to abandon the eastern lands to strengthen the defensive in the west, which allowed the French army to occupy Spanish-speaking Santo Domingo, where they immediately restored slavery. Though we may not know how many black troops, if any, remained in eastern Hispaniola when the insurgents returned to Saint Domingue, they did leave behind a constructive example of social justice which would have repercussions in local movements against racial oppression. The memory that the abolition of slavery came with the arrival of the black liberators from the other side of the island and Toussaint’s implementation of racial equity in filling public service jobs would prove indelible.

Santo Domingo remained under French rule until the War of Reconquest which ended in 1809. Essentially, a faction of the landowning creole oligarchy that had grown dissatisfied with some of the French government’s economic measures rose up with support from the Spanish governor of Puerto Rico. Led by Juan Sánchez Ramírez, the creoles expelled the French and turned the sovereignty of the land over to



Spain. That their political choice did not meet with widespread approval is suggested by the conspiracies that ensued, one of which involved people of African descent. The colored rebels, slave and free, in August 1812 planned to overthrow the ruling class to bring the land under Haitian jurisdiction (Deive 1990: 122). But the authorities discovered the plot, crushed the nascent insurrection, and killed the leaders. To set an example for the rest of the population, they publically dragged the bodies of the conspirators through the streets and fried their remains in coal-tar (Franco 1979: 36-37).

But a faction that favored the unification of Santo Domingo with Haiti continued to exist among the predominantly black and mulatto population. The leaders of a “pro-Haitian party,” as Moya Pons calls it, actually declared in 1821 their independence from Spanish rule in the cities of Dajabón and Montecristi and sought, through communication with the Cap Haitien authorities, “to place themselves under the protection of Haitian laws,” requesting “ammunition and weapons to defend themselves” (Moya Pons 1995:122). It was, indeed, the news of that event that, 15 days later, triggered the proclamation of independence by Núñez de Cáceres and his group to seek a federative association of Santo Domingo with Simon Bolivar’s nascent Gran Colombia (Moya Pons 1995: 122). Haitian President Jean Pierre Boyer, in turn, claimed that unification alone would safeguard the sovereignty of the whole island from European powers. Thus, in February 1822, only several weeks after the installation of Núñez de Cáceres’ government, Boyer and 12,000 Haitian soldiers took over Santo Domingo.

The unification of Santo Domingo with Haiti, which lasted 22 years, marks another moment of growth for the black and mulatto population of the land. Despite the claim by an inveterate anti-Haitian, conservative elite that Dominicans never mingled with Haitians, unification brought about an intensified rapport between the two populations. The proponents of the unbridgeable schism that distanced the two communities have often exploited the story of three Dominican virgins from the town of Galindo who were reputedly raped and killed by Haitian soldiers during the years of the occupation. Chronicling the event in a historical novel, Max Henríquez Ureña enacts a conversation among Dominicans soon after the discovery that the three damsels had died violently. When someone asks who might have committed the crime, a character rushes to reply: “Who else could perpetrate such acts? Only the Haitians! We

are not used to that kind of atrocities, typical of savages” (Henríquez Ureña 1941: 79). The author, on the authority of what he calls “the oral tradition” (p. 328), seeks to show that Haitians appeared as ferocious beasts in the eyes of Dominicans at the time. The available evidence, though, suggests otherwise. As soon as Boyer took power, he abolished slavery, which the creole government of Núñez de Cáceres had failed to do (Deive 1980:228). This measure, while hurting the interests of the creole ruling class, must have earned him the sympathy of the African-descended majority. The occupation, at any rate, intensified the daily interaction of Haitians and Dominicans, adding to the commercial and cultural contact that had for ages taken place along the border areas.

## **VI. Arrivals of US Blacks, West Indians, and Haitians**

During the Haitian period in Santo Domingo, another event further augmented the black population. Between 1824 and 1825 over 6,000 free African Americans from the United States came to settle in lands of their own in Hispaniola upon the invitation of President Boyer. A good many of them settled in Samaná and Puerto Plata, where they became “perfectly adapted” (Deive 1980: 612). A study of those who settled in Puerto Plata, roughly 2,000 according to the author, indicates that African Americans easily accommodated themselves to the way of life of the creole population both in the rural and urban sectors of that city, where they also contributed significantly to the quality of life (Ortiz Puig 1978: 7, 153).

After the republican period which began with the 1844 independence, two other black contingents have become part of the Dominican population, both connected with the growth of the modern sugar industry that started in the 1870s (Castillo 1985: 217). The first was the decision of the Dominican government, pressured by the demands of the expanding foreign capital, to authorize the importation of labor from the British West Indies. Efforts, by means of persuasion and force, to coerce native Dominican workers into accepting the menial salaries and the miserable living conditions of the sugar mills had proved unsuccessful. In 1884, for instance, Dominican laborers in the sugar mills went on strike, “refusing to work for the wages offered,” arguing that with existing salaries they could not even satisfy “basic necessities” (Bryan 1985: 236-38).

Despite the occasional expressions of disapproval by the negrophobic elite, the needs of capital prevailed, and black West Indian labor grew

numerically. From a first 500 Anglophone Caribbean laborers registered in 1884, we find by 1918 as many as 7,000 in San Pedro de Macorís alone (Mota Acosta 1977: 12). Immigrants from the Leeward Islands by 1914 made up approximately 20% of the entire population of Montecristi and by 1917 roughly 10% of the inhabitants of Puerto Plata (Bryan 1985: 239-40). The importation of West Indian workers went on until the early 1940s. Their descendants form part of Dominican society even if their strong cultural traditions and social norms still make them recognizable as a distinct ethnic subgroup, which other Dominicans refer to as the *cocolo* community (Mota Acosta 1977: 140-41).

The American occupation of the Dominican Republic in 1916, following the invasion of Haiti the year before, brought about the other important increment of the black population in the country. The American military government preferred Haiti as the primary source of labor for the sugar plantation, with the first major contingent of Haitian workers arriving in 1916. In keeping with the labor demands of the sugar industry, by 1920 a national census recorded 28,258 Haitian residents in the country, a figure which would rise to 52,657 by 1935 (Hernández 1973: 34-35). In 1980 official sources gave the figure of 113,150 Haitian workers active in the country's agricultural production. Scholars agree, however, that due to an existing trend of clandestine or illegal traffic of Haitian *braceros* (sugar cane cutters), as well as to the informal migration patterns of individual workers, the official sources cannot guarantee an accurate quantification of their presence in the Dominican Republic (Hernández 1973: 53; Báez Evertsz 1986: 194).

By the 1980s nobody challenged the fact that “The job of cutting the sugar cane is performed almost exclusively by the Haitian *braceros*” (Báez Evertsz 1986: 193), which means, in essence, that what until the late 1980s had been one of the main sources of the Dominican Republic's national wealth rested on the shoulders of Haitian workers. Nor have Haitians toiled in enviable conditions. Once recruited into the *bateyes*, by means of an arrangement involving the Dominican and the Haitian governments as well as private capitalists and their watchdogs, the workers endure a process of dehumanization for wages which make it difficult even to reproduce the energy they spend in the fields. Formal regulations deprive them of the freedom of movement, and some voices have already denounced their oppressive situation as “a tale of modern slavery” (Plant 1987: 159). Maurice Lemoine's narrative of

life in the *bateyes* looks at the ignominy endured by the Haitian workers to conclude that: “They are officially kept in servitude, precisely the servitude of slavery” (Lemoine 1981: 280).

Irrespective of whether the penury endured by the Haitian *braceros* in the Dominican sugar industry accurately fits the technical definition of slavery, enough data exist to confirm their unspeakable plight. In 1983 Moya Pons led a team of researchers, under contract with the State Sugar Board, to study the State owned-and-operated plantations, producing a voluminous report that details diverse aspects of the *batey* experience. Among its multiple findings, the study showed a gripping picture regarding the physical conditions of the barracks where the workers live: 64.9% of the housing units surveyed (4,099) lacked electricity and any other form of illumination, and 70.6% (4,464) had no running water; and of 5,515 housing units examined 87.3% made no provision whatsoever for the workers to urinate or defecate (Moya Pons 1986: 521, 515, 509). That native Dominican workers should feel no inclination to regard sugar cutting as an area of employment ought, therefore, to surprise no one. Contrary to the insinuations of the preachers of anti-Haitian hatred, normal Dominicans do not blame Haitian immigrants for displacing them from the workforce. Rather, they seem to recognize Haitians as the ones who bear the brunt of a most dehumanizing industry. In the words of a Dominican worker interviewed by the research team cited above, Haitian immigrants “take the jobs that nobody wants” (Moya Pons 1986: 223). By the same token, an earlier study suggested that Haitians maintained a generally favorable view of the Dominican people (Hernández 1973: 53).

## **VII. Nineteenth Century Black Affirmation: Selected Moments**

Consistent with their large presence, Dominicans of African descent have had an active and decisive political participation in their country. Surveying selected moments one could get a sense of their outstanding role and the high regard they have enjoyed in the eyes of their people. One could begin with the black or mulatto Francisco del Rosario Sánchez (1817-1861), one of the Founding Fathers of the Dominican nation. Dominicans honor him for his championing the birth of the Republic in 1844. The black general José Joaquín Puello (1808-1847) played also a decisive role in bringing the dream of Dominican independence to

fruition. Besides, blacks and mulattos, in defying the original separatist movement, ensured its formally espousing democratic ideals. Finding it necessary to dissolve the political bands which had united them with Haitians since 1822, a liberal elite from Santo Domingo successfully promoted the idea of juridical emancipation. When the moment of truth came, a fearful uncertainty emerged in the black and mulatto population as to the effect of the impending political change on their well-being, particularly in light of the pro-Spanish leanings of some important supporters of the separation. Blacks had valid reasons for hesitating before supporting a separation from Haiti: They recalled that they owed their freedom to their brethren from the Western territory. It was the Haitians who brought abolition, first in January 1801, when Toussaint came, and again in February 1822, with the arrival of Boyer (Alfau Durán 1994: 370). Besides, the people who led the separatist movement had a projected national anthem written by poet Félix María Del Monte (1819-1899) that emboldened the patriots with this exhortation: "Rise up in arms, oh Spaniards!" (Franco 1984: 160-61).

Since an association of the nascent republic with imperial Spain, which still enslaved blacks in Cuba and Puerto Rico, would have imperiled the freedom of many Dominicans, within hours of the independence proclamation an uprising of people of African descent led by Santiago Basora in the Santo Domingo section of Monte Grande challenged the new government. The rebellion forced the leaders of the incipient nation to reaffirm the abolition of slavery "for ever in the Dominican Republic" and to integrate the black Basora in the country's governing structure. (Franco 1984:161-62). The very first decree promulgated by the Junta Central that first governed the country was the immediate abolition of slavery on March 1, 1844 (Alfau Durán 1994: 13). Among various gestures to allay the concerns of blacks and mulattos, the Dominican government went out of its way to reaffirm its commitment to abolition in several decrees that, apart from stressing that servitude had definitely ended, outlawed slave traffic of any kind as a capital crime, ruling that slaves from any provenance would instantly gain their freedom upon "setting a foot on the territory of the Dominican Republic" ("Esclavitud" 1988:81). José Gabriel García, the reputed father of Dominican history, makes no mention of the Monte Grande events in his *Compendio de historia de Santo Domingo*, but the venerable Vetilio Alfau Durán captured the significance of that crucial chapter in Dominican history calling it "perhaps the most glorious epic wrought

by a worthy and long-suffering race possessed by the supreme ideal of all people of good will: human equality” (Alfau Durán 1994: 395).

Less than twenty years after independence, an unpatriotic elite negotiated the annexation of the Dominican Republic to imperial Spain. An armed rebellion to recover the lost sovereignty promptly ensued, and the black General Gregorio Luperón outshined all other patriots as the supreme guardian of national liberation. The participation of people of African descent in that chapter of Dominican history, which is known as the War of Restoration, became significant both in the high command and in the rank and file. The nationalist resistance leaders, aware of the decisive importance of blacks and mulattoes, launched a campaign which warned against Spain’s plans to restore slavery. A document known as the St. Thomas Manifesto of March 30, 1861 illustrates this clearly. Pressured by that campaign, Brigadier Antonio Pelaez, Commander of the occupation forces, rushed his ordinance of April 8, 1861, whereby Spain assured Dominicans that slavery would never return to the land (Alfau Durán 1994: 12). But, even so, Spain having sent its white troops to secure its newly regained Dominican colony, the color of the invaders contrasted sharply with that of the creoles, giving the war racial overtones. With the “massive integration” of the peasant population “which consisted mainly of blacks and mulattos,” the armed struggle “soon became a racial war” against a white supremacist power that preserved slavery and “a truly popular war, as it directed all the energies of the nation toward achieving independence and restoring sovereignty” (Franco 1992:277; Moya Pons 1995:213). General José de la Gándara, the last military commander of the invading Spanish forces, has left his impression of how the racial attitudes of his soldiers, who were “used to viewing the black race and people of mixed ancestry as inferior people,” deepened the opposition of Dominicans to the annexation and brought its downfall (De la Gándara 1975:237-38).

Dominicans commemorate the War of Restoration, fought against white Spaniards, with as much patriotic fervor as they do the War of Independence, fought against black Haitians. And the black General Luperón, who helped to restore the nation’s sovereignty, inspires as much respect and admiration as the white creole Juan Pablo Duarte, the ideological founder of the Republic. Another salient figure of the Restoration War, the black Ulises Heureaux, whose heroic exploits against the imperial Spanish army gained him national prestige, and

who two decades later came to dominate the country politically for over fifteen years. After achieving distinction at various high positions in the Dominican government following the war effort, he ran for president of the country and was elected for the first time in 1882, became head of state through electoral channels two other times, and subsequently extended his rule by dictatorial imposition until 1899 when he met a violent death at the hands of opposition leaders.<sup>2</sup>

### VIII. Blacks and Cultural Production

People of African descent have excelled also in the realm of cultural production in Dominican society. The country's history registers the achievements of many singular black and mulatto thinkers or artists. The Dominican feminist movement, for instance, owes a great deal to three black women: Petronila Gómez, Altagracia Domínguez, and Evangelina Rodríguez, who in the 1920s promoted a revolutionary creed of social, economic, and political equity between males and females (Zaglul 1986:80). Rodríguez distinguished herself also for being the first Dominican woman physician with considerable attainments in that field. Two male physicians, the mulatto Francisco Eugenio Moscoso Puello and the black Heriberto Pieter Bennet, left remarkable contributions as practitioners, educators, and scholars in the medical science during the first half of the present century.

In the field of literature, Dominican artistic writing began to exhibit a distinct voice with the compositions of the mulatto Meso Mónica in the eighteenth century. Another mulatto, the jesuit priest Antonio Sánchez Valverde, authored the seminal *La idea del valor de la Isla Española* (1785), the most important work of erudition to appear in eighteenth-century Santo Domingo. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the mulatto poet Gastón Fernando Deligne achieved great prestige as a literary artist. Scholars normally group him with the mulatto Salomé Ureña and José Joaquín Pérez among the founders of modern Dominican poetry. In fact, the internationally renowned scholar Pedro Henríquez Ureña, himself a mulatto, lavished more passionate praise on him than on any other Dominican literary figure (Henríquez Ureña 1978:315-25).

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<sup>2</sup> Space restrictions dictate that we refrain from surveying the leadership of Afro-Dominicans in twentieth-century social movements. An abridged overview appears in Torres-Saillant (1995: 122-125).

The literary visibility of black and mulatto Dominicans has been no less impressive in twentieth-century writing. Suffice it to mention the black author Ramón Marrero Aristy, who wrote the novel *Over*, easily the most frequently read and highly regarded Dominican fiction work from the first half of the century, or Aída Cartagena Portalatín (1918-1994), a black woman poet who is the most revered twentieth-century Dominican female writer. Cartagena Portalatín, unlike many of the literary artists of her generation, openly asserted “her own racially mixed background” (Cocco de Filippis 1988:15-16). Her discussion, for instance, of the two sixteenth-century female slaves from Santo Domingo Teodora and Micaela Ginés, who managed to travel across to the neighboring island of Cuba and there contributed their talent to the development of popular music, and whom she calls “Dominican black women,” shows a clear sense of identification with her subject, especially in her presenting the topic as a way to “look for our roots” (Cartagena Portalatín 1986:124-25).

## **IX. Blacks and Dominican Folk Culture**

The African presence in Dominican culture transcends, of course, the creative contributions of talented individuals. The great bulk of the elements of African cultural survival in Dominican society has no identifiable leader. Traces of that heritage appear in the language Dominicans speak, the “ethnolinguistic modalities” that characterize the people’s handling of Spanish, showing peculiarities in the “lexical structure” as well as in the “phonetics, morphosyntax, and intonation” that suggest retentions from the languages of African slaves in colonial times (Magenney 1990:233). Evidence also exists of a significant presence of Haitian Creole in Afro-Dominican Spanish as a result of the intercultural contacts that “were firmly cemented” during the unification period from 1822 through 1884 (Lipski 1994: 13). The original culture of the slaves has probably found its way also into the oral tradition of the Dominican people. Some scholarly research suggests the existence of “a type of tale of African origins ... among us which forms part of the oral literary heritage of Dominicans” (Julián 1982:10). Much can be said also to highlight the contribution of blacks to the Dominican cuisine both in the form of cultural transmissions brought by the slaves from Africa and as creole innovations traceable to the “plantation regime” (Deive 1990:133-35). But, in no other realm do African cultural forms manifest themselves more evidently in Dominican society than in spiritual expression.



Carlos Esteban Deive has convincingly posited the existence of a Dominican vodou with an indigenous pantheon and other characteristics of its own that distinguish it from Haitian vodou (Deive 1992:171-74, 182-83). As the author argues, people of diverse class extractions in Dominican society normally have recourse to the services and rituals of this folk religion, which has as much currency in the urban areas as in the rural ones (Deive 1992:17). Probably contributing to the spread and persistence of this and other African-descended forms of worship is the syncretic nature of Dominican culture, which allows for their coexistence with religious expressions of European origin. In fact, the majority of vodou practitioners consider themselves “officially Catholic,” having received their baptism and remaining active in the worship of that faith (Deive 1992:211).

Further research has not only supported the existence of vodou as “part of Dominican folk religious expression” but also has identified its utility as a crucial resource for popular medicine (Davis 1987: 423, 221-23). Besides, the anthropologist Martha Ellen Davis has highlighted certain kinds of folk spiritual expressions with “strong African influences” that provide aid to the Dominican people in many of the social functions of their daily lives (Davis 1987: 194-95). Following the insight of such scholars as Deive and Davis, recently a team combining mental health and social science specialists has stressed the importance of vodou and other folk spiritual manifestations “to understand the Dominican people” from the “perspective of psychiatry and psychology” (Tejeda, Sánchez, and Mella 1993:54).

A religious expression with strong links to the African past but emerging on Dominican soil in connection with the modern sugar industry is the Gaga cult. Reflecting a profound religious sense, the Dominicanized Gaga cult, born of the vibrant interaction of Haitian and Dominican folk traditions in the vicinity of sugar plantations, constitutes the coming together of two spiritual sources which are themselves differentiated expressions of the transculturation between African and European cultures (Rosenberg 1979:17,31). In her pioneering monograph on this folk spiritual form, the anthropologist June Rosenberg insisted that “the celebration of the Gaga is part of the cultural richness of the Dominican people” (Rosenberg 1979:17).

Naturally, the state-funded guardians of the official culture, intent on stressing the exclusive predominance of the Hispanic heritage among Dominicans, have vigorously rejected the trace of any “pagan” forms of

worship in Dominican society. Unable to deny that Dominicans do engage in African-descended spirituality, they have proceeded to ascribe that predilection to an unwelcome foreign influence, a logic that often has justified the persecution of folk religious practices as a threat to morality and Christian values. In the nineteenth century the poet Del Monte construed vodou as a savage, anthropophagous ritual, and an 1862 police ordinance proscribed a series of dances and festivities that involved expressions of African origins (Del Monte 1979:246; Deive 1992:163). During the Trujillo dictatorship, the period when the Dominican State became most emphatically committed to promoting Eurocentric and white supremacist views of Dominicanity, the official daily *El Listín Diario* on August 16, 1939 reported the arrest of two men for commemorating the War of Restoration by engaging in vodou practices along with other men and women who managed to escape. They had surrendered themselves “frantically,” as the column says, to a “ritual that the police has so tenaciously persecuted” (cited in Deive 1992:164).

The Trujillo regime found it necessary to pass Law 391 on September 20, 1943 prohibiting participation in vodou ceremonies. The decree imposed a penalty of up to one year in prison plus a fine of \$500 pesos to anyone found guilty of the crime either by direct commission or indirect collusion (Deive 1992:186). That the government’s campaign to eradicate African spiritual expressions in Dominican society would not relent is clear from an article published in the newspaper *La Nación* on October 5, 1945 by Emilio Rodríguez Demorizi, a scribe of the Trujillo regime. There the author denounced “cucaya dance, cannibalism, vodou, witchcraft, and other evil arts and customs” as rituals coming from “the land of Louverture and Christophe” that have occasionally tarnished “the simple habits of Dominicans,” although he reassured his readers that the “dark roots” of those influences left no perceptible vestiges in the people. But, of course, in such affirmations Rodríguez Demorizi was merely indulging in wishful thinking. For even he, a consummate negrophobe, could ascertain that if his claim were true, the regime’s police persecution, legislative actions, and his own article, which he militantly entitled “Against Vodou,” would have been unnecessary.

But despite the aberrant negrophobia of the scribes of the ruling class from colonial times to the present, with a population that is predominantly of African descent, it is inevitable to find the omnipresence of black contribution to Dominican culture. That contribution began in

1502 and “since then,” as Vetilio Alfau Durán has said, “it has remained constant and decisive” (1994: 342). In addition to the areas of endeavor surveyed above, one could speak of the glorification and celebrity enjoyed by Dominicans of African descent in the fields of sports and popular music. Clearly, blacks have by no means lacked representation in the public sphere nor in the regard of the Dominican people. The overwhelming popular victory during the 1994 election of black presidential candidate José Francisco Peña Gómez of *Partido Revolucionario Dominicano*, against the two white elders Bosch, of *Partido de la Liberación Dominicana*, and Balaguer of *Partido Reformista Social Cristiano*, speaks eloquently. The fraudulent maneuvers of Balaguer’s government did not permit the people’s choice to materialize, and the octogenarian politician stayed in power. Nevertheless, the opposition’s documentation of the fraud and the indignation of the international community caused the ruling party to agree to reduce its administration by two years and convene new elections for 1996, thereby admitting to the illegality of Balaguer’s “reelection” (Peña Gómez and Alvarez Bogaert 1994).

That Peña Gómez did not become the president of the Republic matters less for the present discussion than the fact that the majority of the Dominican population went to the polls and cast their ballot in favor of a black man who, in addition, reputedly comes from Haitian parents. In voting for him massively, the Dominican people disregarded an elaborate, insistent, and virulent campaign orchestrated by the government and the conservative élite that aimed to cast doubt on the Dominicaness of the candidate on account of his race and presumed Haitian ancestry. The campaign, which employed the resources of the state and all the available media on a daily basis, insidiously sought to render it unpatriotic for voters to elect the black Peña Gómez. But the majority of Dominicans showed through their action that they have a mind of their own.

## **X. Racial Awareness: The Paradox of Language versus Action**

At the core of the unchallenged deprecation of blackness by the ruling elite and the quiet but real ethnic self-affirmation by the masses of the people lies the complexity of racial dynamics in the Dominican Republic. For while one can discern the development of a racial discourse and the existence of racial attitudes, one cannot so easily fathom the dynamics of race relations. In fact, one can hardly speak meaningfully about the

socioeconomic and political situation of blacks as a differentiated ethnic group in the country. To measure the living conditions of Dominican blacks and mulattos would mean no more than to assess the social status of the masses of the people, which would correspond more fittingly to an analysis of class inequalities and the social injustices bred by dependent capitalism than to a discussion of ethnic oppression. This by no means implies that there are no racial tensions or instances of racism in Dominican society. I do not mean to espouse the notion that presents Latin American countries as a region free of racial inequities, a view that John Burdick has indicted as a “myth” (Burdick 1992: 44). My contention is that only an interpretative examination of the historical background can help us provide the context for understanding existing racial attitudes in Dominican society.

Scholars face the challenge of shedding light on the sociocultural dynamic at work in the peaceful coexistence of the Dominican population’s self-awareness as a people of African descent and the negrophobia contained in prevalent definitions of Dominicanness. Hopefully one can succeed in grasping the vicissitudes of the concept of race in Dominican society and to explain why Dominican blacks and mulattos seem to accept passively the rigid Eurocentrism of the official cultural discourse. For instance, in the United States, where blacks make up only a relatively small percentage of the population, the candidacy of someone like David Duke, who ran for Governor of the State of Louisiana, suffered great discredit when his opponents stressed his past adherence to the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan. Yet, in the Dominican Republic, where blacks and mulattos predominate, Balaguer can publicly proclaim the mental and moral superiority of whites and dreadfully warn about the country’s “Africanization” without ever needing to recant his racist statements. One has reason to wonder about the remarkable contrast between the racial sensitivities exhibited by these two societies. One might feel the temptation to charge that “Dominicans have generally and voluntarily lived with their backs turned to their culture,” as Fradique Lizardo has indignantly said (Rosenberg 1979: 13). But I find it difficult to accept that a people should willfully choose alienation and confusion as a way of life. Nor does affirming that Dominicans who have voted for Balaguer “live in the past” suffice to explain their toleration of his views (Fennema and Loewenthal 1989: 209). Denormalizing Dominicans does not clarify the issue. Persuaded that Dominicans do not suffer from collective dementia, I would prefer to believe that they do possess the

ability to discern the phenotypical characteristics that distinguish one racial group from another, and they do recognize the traces of Africa in their ethnicity despite the insistent efforts of the conservative intellectual elite to define them as part of a Western, Caucasian community.

I would propose that the mystery lies in the elusiveness of the concept of race itself and its tribulations in the peculiar historical experience of the Dominican people. Observers will note the lesser place African-descended Dominicans accord to racial traits in articulating their social identity as opposed to the centrality assigned to it by societies where ethnic groups are sharply differentiated and rigidly stratified. Black Dominicans do not see blackness as the central component of their identity but tend to privilege their nationality instead, which implies participation in a culture, a language community, and the sharing of a lived experience. Consistent with the racially mixed ancestry of the population, the ethnic vocabulary of Dominicans is rich in words describing gradations of skin color. A scholar looking at the city of Santiago de los Caballeros alone arrived at an elaborate classification of 21 terms used by the people there to denote racial traits (Gúzman 1974:37-40). Generally devoid of the language of racial polarity current in the United States, Dominicans have little familiarity with a discourse of black affirmation. Nothing in their history indicates to the masses of the Dominican people that their precarious material conditions or the overall indignities they suffer constitute a strictly racial form of oppression. As a result, they have not developed a discourse of black affirmation among their strategies of social resistance. This, no doubt, bewilders observers coming from societies like the United States where race tends to outweigh all other elements of human identity.

I am convinced that a close look at the particularities of the historical experience of Dominicans can reveal the clues to explain the elasticity of their concept of race. The specific history Dominicans have lived simply did not beget the rigid racial codes found in North America. Thus, they have no difficulty recognizing a valid identity in their racial fusion, and, for the most part, would not experience the troubling perplexity of the speaker in Langston Hughes' short poem "Cross," who struggles with the dilemma of having a white father and a black mother: "My old man died in a fine big house/My ma died in a shack./I wonder where I'm gonna die,/Being neither white nor black" (Hughes 1974: 158). A measure of familiarity with the concrete historical background that explains the tendency of Dominicans to configure their racial identity in an

intermediate conceptual space between the black and white polarities can enable scholars to overcome the temptation to denormalize the way this community speaks of race. Since the Dominican people's racial language defies the paradigms prevalent in countries like the United States, well-intentioned observers from such countries would wish this community adopted the racial vocabulary generated by the historical experiences of *their* societies. But, apart from safeguarding us all from such ethnocentric compulsions, paying heed to the specificity of the Dominican case can incite reflection on the elusiveness of race as an analytical category both in the Dominican Republic and elsewhere.

## **XI. Deracialized Black Consciousness and Negrophobia**

As one approaches the study of the condition of blacks in Dominican society, one must contend with the not easily assailable fact that the black as a sociologically differentiated segment of the population does not exist in the Dominican imagination. The claim by Pedro Andrés Pérez Cabral that categorically construes Dominicans as the only fully mulatto community in the world points to the pervasive racial fusion of the Dominican population (Pérez Cabral 1967: 19). The folk poet Juan Antonio Alix had little else in mind in his 1883 text "El negro tras de la oreja" (Black Behind the Ear), that mocks the preoccupation of the light-skinned creole elite for asserting their presumed whiteness, bidding them instead to take their concerns to "old Spain" or "Havana" as such worries had no place in "the Dominican land" (Alix 1969: 28-30). The lack of discrete racial groups due to the ethnic intermixture of the country's population does not deny the existence of racial attitudes and a racial discourse among conservative intellectuals that repudiate blackness. But the majority of Dominicans of African descent do not see themselves referred to in those demeaning depictions of blacks. We can see a striking example of this in that, at times, blacks and mulattos themselves have embraced Eurocentric definitions of Dominicanity and actively partaken of efforts to minimize the place of the African heritage in the national culture.

Also, because of the overwhelming racial fusion of the Dominican population, one cannot easily speak of blacks versus whites or identify cases in which people align themselves politically along racial lines. For that reason people of African descent have lacked the incentive to construct a discourse of racial self-assertion and have remained indifferently unmoved

by the negrophobia of the elite. Thus, the racist ideas of the ruling class, which implies a deep loathing for the Dominican people, trigger no retaliation. Among the most pernicious implications of the negrophobic nationalism of thinkers like Joaquín Balaguer is that it denies a place to the popular classes in the forging of a theory of the nation in so far as they posit racial homogeneity, meaning Iberian whiteness, as “a necessary condition for the existence of the nation” (San Miguel 1992: 114, 118). Balaguer can find it expedient to advocate the implementation of measures to halt “the africanization of the Dominican people” so that, in due time, the population may “gradually improve its anthropological traits,” ascribe the country’s moral decay to “the contact with blacks,” and assert the “imperceptible” influence of Africa on Dominican culture without provoking the immediate enmity of the black and mulatto majority of the population (Balaguer 1984: 45, 97-98, 211).

Balaguer’s most recent volume of verse features a text entitled “Romance del amor malherido” (Wounded Love Romance) ostensibly in honor of the Mirabal sisters who were murdered by Trujillo’s henchmen in 1960, when the author himself served as the regime’s puppet president. In the closing stanzas, the speaker compares the crime with the murder of the three Galindo virgins attributed by historians to Haitian soldiers during their occupation of eastern Hispaniola in 1822-1844: “they too were three damsels/of the purest caste/who perished at the hand/of men of another race/spurned by the demons/of Africa’s dark lust” (Balaguer 1994: 154). Yet, the racist overtone of his lines brings no embarrassment to Balaguer, whom Roberto Márquez has aptly described as “dean of the most pusillanimously colonial and racially pretentious wing of the Dominican Right” (Márquez 1992: 32). The statesman’s negrophobia fails to offend Dominican blacks and mulattos, a good many of whom form part of his cabinet or fill the ranks of his *Partido Reformista*. Indeed, a young black scholar named Manuel Núñez recently became an intellectual spokesman for the sectors that repudiate the Haitian influence and the African presence in Dominican society. He has voiced the fear that such influences will inexorably lead to a process of “denationalization” in the country, forcefully contending that the motivation which leads “many young people to search for the transcendent in Gaga rituals, vodou, and other forms” of African cultural survival only attest to “the decline of Dominican culture” (Núñez 1990: 311-12).

Finally, a recent book by the mulatto Luis Julián Pérez, a functionary of the Trujillo regime, has decried the “massive introduction of African slaves” by the French to western Hispaniola, complaining that in leading to the rise of Haiti, that historical phenomenon produced “a transplant extraneous to the civilization of the rest of the hemisphere.” His book retrospectively indicts the insurgent slaves in the Haitian Revolution for “their cruelty, sadism, and brutal crimes” against their white victims, which he insists, included “women, children, and elderly people” (Julián Pérez 1990: 48-49). The author glorifies the 1861 annexation of the Dominican Republic to Spain as the “last and decisive battle won by Hispanic values in our land,” oddly crediting that unpatriotic surrender of national sovereignty with the preservation of the people’s identity since, in his peculiar reasoning, Hispanic values weigh heavier than independence for Dominicaness (Julián Pérez 1990: 89). Julián Pérez defines Dominicans as “a community of Hispanic origins, by virtue of customs and traditions, religion, language, and, in general, a milenary culture in constant interaction with European civilization,” contrary to Haitians who “lack the most elementary attributes of civilized man” and are committed “body and soul to foul dealings and cults that clash with Dominican life” (Julián Pérez 1990: 29, 135). After this dehumanized representation of Haitians, the tone of his reference to the 1937 massacre of 15,000 Haitian immigrants near the border by order of the dictator Trujillo becomes predictable. Instead of grieving for the victims of the massive slaughter, Julián Pérez actually commiserates with the tyrant: “Trujillo was not alone responsible for what finally took place ... he was trapped by circumstances ... The Haitians always evaded solving the conflict and insisted in making it worse... Trujillo assumed the historical responsibility, and Dominicans defended the name and the honor of the Republic” (Julián Pérez 1990: 99). A brutal mass murder turns in the mind of this sad mulatto into a lofty act of patriotic self-denial. Curiously, the second edition of Pérez’ abominable book boasts the proud sponsorship of two guardian institutions of intellectual production in the country, Fundación Universitaria Dominicana and Universidad Nacional Pedro Henríquez Ureña, as the copyright page indicates. Nevertheless, one can rest assured that those august institutions of higher learning harbor large numbers of blacks and mulattos in their student body, faculty, and staff.



## XII. Anti-Haitianism and Dominican Racial Thought

Much of the perplexity of the race question in Dominican society has its root in the peculiar circumstances surrounding the birth of the Dominican Republic. In founding their nation, Dominicans had to separate from the political jurisdiction of Haiti, then the only black republic in the Americas. The various military attempts of Haitian leaders between 1844 and 1855 to bring Dominicans back under Haitian rule gave rise to a nation-building ideology that included an element of self-differentiation with respect to Haitians. When the job of conceptualizing the new nation fell into the hands of the ideological descendants of the white creole, colonial ruling class, self-differentiation seldom failed to contain a racial component. The poet Del Monte represents that racist view of the Dominican nation, but Duarte, the venerable founder of the nation, fortunately does not. Not only did Duarte preach racial equality, but he stayed clear of anti-Haitian sentiments in his political teachings. An extant statement of his says: "I admire the Haitian people from the moment when, cruising the pages of history, I see it struggling desperately against exceedingly superior powers, and I see how it triumphs and how it comes up from the pitiful condition of servitude to constitute itself as a free and independent nation" (Duarte 1994: 31). Yet, the racialized view, which conceived Haiti as the exclusive container of blackness, may have influenced the Dominican imagination, giving currency to a tendency among Dominicans to see themselves as *not black*.

But the subsequent War of Restoration, which Dominicans fought against Spain's white soldiers, had a balancing effect, strengthening also a tendency among Dominicans to see themselves as *not white*. We get a suggestive hint of this in an anonymous "poem written to celebrate the victory of Dominicans over the Spanish," which associates whiteness with the ethnicity of the defeated forces: "The whites have already left from Yamasá. What a beating they got!/The Spanish have already left with their flag on the head" (Torres-Saillant 1994:57). Indeed, when contemporary Dominicans speak of *los blancos* (whites) they normally have in mind either foreigners or a wealthy national elite of recent European origins. We find this illustrated in a 1903 text by Alix where the folk poet urges Dominican politicians to put their house in order lest "whites should come from abroad/.../on pretense of mediation" (Alix 1969: 172). Dominicans in recent times have had reason galore to see themselves in contradistinction to white soldiers, white investors, and

white functionaries. The eight years of the U.S. occupation from 1916 through 1924, when, their sovereignty lost, they had to obey the rules of a military government of *blancos*, stands out as a crucial period. The popular expressions *Ustedes son blancos y se entienden* (That's between whites; don't involve me!) and *Algún día ahorcan blancos* (One day whites too will be hanged) would strongly suggest the contradistinction to whiteness as a strong element of the self-image of the Dominican people.

The relationship with Haiti, therefore, does not fully explain the problematic of race in Dominican society. Besides, that relationship has not been always fraught with animosity, as the preachers of anti-Haitian hatred would have us believe. Beginning in 1860, with the coming to power in Haiti of President Fabré Géffrard, and through much of the nineteenth century, we find a period of collaboration between the two communities, first in the area of trade and later in political causes such as the struggle against annexationist governments on both sides of the island. Anti-Haitian ideas as they exist today in the discourse of right-wing conservative sectors cannot really claim remote origins. Contemporary *antihaitianismo*, which expresses itself in the works of Balaguer and such hysterical pronouncements as are contained in *Proceso histórico dominico-haitiano* (1980) by Carlos Cornielle, one of Trujillo's surviving lackeys, derives from the all-encompassing cultural campaign launched and maintained for three decades (1930-1961) by the Trujillo regime. A recent book by Andrés L. Mateo (1993) on the cultural myths constructed, propounded, and effectively disseminated by the dictatorship shows the great intensity and intentionality that went into the design of the Dominican past, the country's relationship with Haiti, and the Hispanic ancestry of the people.

Two pivotal junctures gave momentum to the growth of contemporary anti-Haitianist discourse during the dictatorship. First, the international indignation provoked by the economically and politically motivated massacre in 1937 of over 15,000 Haitian immigrants near the border made it incumbent upon the scribes of the regime to produce an ample scholarship directed to demonizing Haitians and, thereby, justifying the unspeakable act. Secondly, the publication by the Haitian thinker Jean Price-Mars of *La République d'Haiti et la République Dominicaine* (1953), containing a critique of many of the cultural myths upheld by Trujillo's intellectuals, incited the avenging pens of the regime into authoring vitriolic responses such as the voluminous *La exterminación añorada*

(1957) by Angel S. Del Rosario Sánchez. The regime's *antihaitianismo* reached its most erudite form in the prose of Manuel Arturo Peña Batlle (1902-1954), whom Balaguer praises for the "originality" and "forcefulness" with which he "showed the importance" of "the ethnic factor in the conservation not only of the country's autonomy, but also its national character" (Balaguer 1988:299). But that development of anti-Haitianist thought does not explain the prior racial logic that enabled the dictatorship's intellectual project to succeed nor the devoted participation of black writers like Marrero Arísty in that project, which entailed the exultation of whiteness and Eurocentric values. The dynamic of State-supported anti-Haitianism, therefore, does not explain the negrophobia of Dominican intellectual discourse nor the lenity with which the African-descended majority of the people has tolerated that inimical creed.

### **XIII. Deracialized Consciousness and the Rise of the Mulatto**

I would propose that Dominicans of African descent possess what one might call a deracialized social consciousness whose origins date back to the fall of the plantation economy in colonial times. As we established at the beginning, after generating the widespread and massive influx of black slaves, the Hispaniola sugar industry declined dramatically. Evoking that process, Mir has reasoned that sugar moved from Santo Domingo to Brazil, where it then flourished throughout the seventeenth century (Mir 1984:186). The evanescence of the industry, concomitantly with the constant exodus of white settlers, marked the texture of race relations in the context of the colony's ensuing impoverishment. Throughout the seventeenth century poverty struck the inhabitants of Hispaniola "mercilessly" (Peña Pérez 1985:10). A "mirror of utter backwardness," as Bosch has pointed out, seventeenth-century Santo Domingo "wallowed in almost total wretchedness" (Bosch 1986:117). In a 1691 plea addressed to the Crown, Don Francisco Franco de Torquemada argued for the need to provide the colonists with black slaves "on credit" to help them stimulate the devastated agricultural production (Franco de Torquemada 1942:84-85).

Worsened by the effects of Osorio's depopulation of the western territories, foreign invasions, pirate raids, and various natural disasters, the Santo Domingo economy deteriorated to the point that slavery became untenable and the rigid racial codes engendered by the plantation virtually broke down. The number of free blacks, a segment that had begun to surface

toward the end of the previous century, grew to a majority, just as the social distance between blacks and whites shrank significantly (Cassá 1992:76, 107-8). Bosch has characterized this moment as marking the birth of “Dominican racial democracy, a widespread attitude among the masses of the people” despite its intense rejection “by the small groups of the national oligarchy” (Bosch 1986:191). The testimony in 1763 by Archbishop Fernández de Navarrete about the scarcity of pure whites, affirming that the majority of the free population “including landholders, was of mixed blood,” highlights the pervasiveness of the “demographic phenomenon” of racial intermixture in Santo Domingo (Cassá 1992:109).

The decay of the plantation and the virtual destitution of whites practically brought the statuses of slaves and former slaves to a level identical with that of masters and former masters, breaking down the social barriers between the races, stimulating interracial marital relations, and largely giving rise to an ethnically hybrid population. In that context of relaxed racial interaction we encounter a good many people of African descent who become part of the ruling colonial structure or who stand out as stalwart protectors of the social system. We learn, thus, that in mid seventeenth-century Tomás Rodríguez de Sosa “rose up from slavery to become a venerated priest and a famous orator” (Henríquez Ureña 1960:358-59). Also, when in 1665 Oliver Cromwell sent a military expedition led by William Penn and Robert Venables to take possession of eastern Hispaniola, the mulattos Lucas Hernández, Pedro Medina, and Juan Medina shined forth among the courageous creoles who defeated the English invasion and preserved Spanish colonial rule (Lizardo 1979:53). It may be said that the racial integration and ethnic hybridity that characterized seventeenth-century Santo Domingo explains the emergence of the mulatto as the unequivocally prevalent type in the ethnic composition of the Dominican population.

Interestingly, despite the large presence of people of African descent at the time, one finds that many of the eyewitness accounts that purported to describe the precarious state of the colony bewailed the scarcity of blacks as a primary cause of the decay. A conceptual tendency seems to develop that circumscribes the use of the term black to people still living in slavery or those engaged in subversive action against the colonial system. We know that slaves often had recourse to maroon life and open rebellion to dissolve the throes of their bondage since the sixteenth-century, when the colonial government had to invest a good

portion of its resources in counterinsurgency efforts (Cassá 1992:85). The activities of maroons alarmed the ruling structure continuously east and west of Hispaniola. By the 1777 Aranjuez Treaty, when the Spanish and the French agreed on a formal partition of the island into two geographically discrete colonial spaces, the maroons still worried the system, and the imperial authorities wrote into the accord a mutual strategy to address the problem in both Santo Domingo and Saint Domingue, as we gather from a Martinican writer who visited the island at the time (Moreau de Saint-Mery 1994:424).

But peaceful or cooperative mulattos and blacks seem to have become decolorized in the eyes of the ruling class, which probably explains Franco de Torquemada's plaint about the absence of blacks at a time when free blacks abounded in the land. Similarly, in the late eighteenth century the mulatto priest Sánchez Valverde attributed the "poverty" of Santo Domingo to the lack of blacks, in contrast to the "wealth" of the contiguous French colony, which teemed with them (Sánchez Valverde 1988:248). He, of course, meant *slaves* and groaned that even the comparatively few slaves who existed in Santo Domingo "work for themselves almost one-third of the year," objecting further to those masters who let their blacks go about on their own in exchange for a fee, instead of employing them industrially in effective agricultural production (Sánchez Valverde 1988:249-50). Gradually the sphere of blackness became associated exclusively with slavery and subversion, fostering thereby a conceptual space that permitted free blacks and mulattos in Santo Domingo to step outside the racial encirclement of their blackness to configure their identity or align themselves politically.

The disruption of plantation economy and its demographic impact on the population, namely the high proportion of free blacks and the rise of the mulatto as a national ethnic type, facilitated a split between biological blackness and social blackness. Pigmentation, in other words, ceased to mold political action in the extent to which the racial oligarchy originally generated by the plantocracy had crumbled, the economic pillars that supported it having caved in. Moya Pons notes, in reflecting on the use in early nineteenth-century Santo Domingo of the term "blancos de la tierra" (whites of the land) by colored people to describe themselves, that paradoxically "while their skin became gradually darker, the mentality of Dominicans turned increasingly whiter" (Moya Pons 1986:239). But the context of that paradox is an earlier historical process whereby social

position had come to supersede skin hue in the articulation of identity for people of African descent. Blacks and mulattos who had reached the same level of their former master either negatively or positively, that is, through their own social ascent or the white colonists' descent, were, indeed, the equivalent of former *blancos*. They lacked a material frame of reference wherein to construct a concept of identity based on racial self-differentiation, that is, on affirmation of their blackness.

If the death of plantation economy and indiscriminate poverty in seventeenth-century Santo Domingo contributed to the decline of slavery and the rise of people of African descent as a preponderant social force, those processes also corroded the bases that would have fostered in them a sense of solidarity with blacks in general. As a result, we find, for instance, that in 1802 the mulatto Juan Barón ( -1805) collaborates with the invading French forces against the black troops of Toussaint Louverture, despite the fact that the year before the Haitian leader had abolished slavery and encouraged racial equality in Santo Domingo. Similarly, the black Dominican warrior Juan Suero (1808-1864), popularly known as the Black Cid, fought vigorously against black Haitians during the independence war in 1844 and did not hesitate to side with Spain's invading white soldiers when Dominicans struggled to recover their national sovereignty during the annexation. One could argue that for Dominicans of African descent history had conspired against their development of a racial consciousness that would inform their building of alliances along ethnic lines. At the same time, their deracialized consciousness precluded the development of a discourse of black affirmation that would serve to counterbalance intellectual negrophobia.

#### **XIV. Colonial Nostalgia and White Supremacist Creed**

Despite the demise of the plantation and the decline of industrial slavery, Spaniards and white creoles in colonial Santo Domingo retained much of the racially stratified mentality bred by the former plantation economy. We must remember that black slavery still prospered in neighboring Spanish colonies where the social privilege associated with whiteness showed no sign of abating. The thought that a simple move to Cuba or Puerto Rico would suffice to render them superior beings must have induced in them an urge to tighten their nostalgic grip on the symbolic politics of color, as a kind of security blanket. The War of Reconquest led by the white creole Sánchez Ramírez against the French

to bring eastern Hispaniola back under Spain yields useful illustration of how the Spanish colonial authorities viewed blacks. The Governor of Puerto Rico Don Toribio Montes, a crucial ally of the enterprise, warned Sánchez Ramírez that “under no circumstances whatsoever should a black join the expedition,” and recommended that every ship with arms and troops he sent to Santo Domingo to support the reconquest “should come back carrying shipments of mahogany wood and blacks” (Sánchez Ramírez 1957:261,285). The likes of Montes and Sánchez Ramírez, then, had no reason to applaud notions of racial equality, especially since such equality entailed their loss of economic superiority and social privilege.

The passionate testimony of the wealthy white creole Gaspar Arredondo y Pichardo (1773-1859), a slave-owning landholder from eastern Hispaniola who lost his economic and social rank with Toussaint’s unification of the island in 1801, largely illustrates the angry nostalgia of the former masters. Writing his memoirs from Cuba in 1814, Arredondo y Pichardo, the son of “rich, virtuous, and enlightened parents who, from that state which secured their happiness, attended diligently to [his] education,” sorrowfully recalled how during Toussaint’s government in Santo Domingo: “we endured all sorts of vexation and were levelled with our own slaves in the military service and in all public events” (Arredondo y Pichardo 1955:123,132). To illustrate his woeful plight he bitterly recounts that once at a ball he had to dance with a black young woman, a former slave of his “who was one of the leading ladies at the dance on account of her beauty, and she had no other entitlement or cost to gain her freedom than the arrival of the blacks in the country armed with the weapons of violence” (Arredondo y Pichardo 1955:132). The tone of his doleful evocation makes it easy to understand why this white creole should feel the compulsion to emigrate to Cuba and why, in assessing subsequent developments in Santo Domingo, he should idolize Sánchez Ramírez as “the immortal, the hero of the century” who “gloriously reconquered the Spanish territory” (p.154).

The image of a crest-fallen Arredondo y Pichardo dancing with the proud, newly unbound black female, whose name Dominican historiography has failed to record, visually highlights the available paradigms for understanding racial relations and the concept of Dominicaness. If we, for argument’s sake, thought of the contrasting couple as a sort of white Adam and black Eve, clearly we would have to concede that phenotypically the majority of the Dominican population

must trace its ancestry to her rather than to him. Similarly, of their two moral legacies, that is, his mournful pain at the inability to continue enslaving other people versus her proud dignity as she faces her former master on the same social level, hers constitutes a far more humanizing and empowering heritage to the Dominican people. But it so happens that we have his white supremacist creed and negrophobia preserved in the far-reaching mold of intellectual discourse whereas her humanistic assertion of racial equality and social justice stayed in the realm of action. We have his document but not hers. Dominicans of African descent, therefore, know nothing of her and have no access to a discourse coming from her. The string of biting words that she would have hurled at him to put him in his place did not survive. Consequently, the lessons of his words, unchallenged by the retaliatory reply of hers, have monopolized the education of Dominicans and the official definitions of Dominicanness. While one can say that Dominicans of African descent have for the most part managed to evade the spiritual disfigurement that would come from accepting the tenets of a negrophobic discourse, their deracialized social consciousness and the lack of an education based on the liberatory self-assertion of our black Eve, have caused them to settle for indifference as a way to deal with race-related questions.

## **XV. The Legacy of Black Eve and Dominicanness**

Because the humane legacy bequeathed by Arredondo y Pichardo's dance partner, our hypothetical black Eve, exists in the realm of social action without reproduction in the testimonial parley of the written documents that historians draw from, contemporary Dominicans do not have easy access to it. But if one does not identify fully with the former master, seeing him intellectually, biologically, or by class affiliation as one's forbear, it becomes possible to gather the elements that would go into a reconstruction of her self-assertive discourse. Just as Arredondo y Pichardo inadvertently affords us a precious glimpse of the beautiful black Eve affirming her newly gained freedom on the dance floor, other documents produced by the power structure in colonial times, when read with a degree of subtle subversion, yield ample testimony to the courage, perseverance, creativity, and unswerving commitment to social justice that characterized the people of African descent from the very dawn of the colonial transaction. The image of our black Eve avowing her human dignity across from her former white master in the middle of the floor epitomizes a history of black resistance that both preceded and outlived her.



In 1784, the Spanish colonial authorities in the metropolis, wishing to have their counterpart of the French *Code Noir*, compiled the *Código Negro Carolino* to regulate the “economic, political, and moral government of blacks,” based on the recommendations of a select number of landholders, colonial functionaries, and clerical authorities from Santo Domingo (Malagon 1974:81). The *Código*, whose laws never got to the point of formal implementation, shows the depravity of a mind-set that can conceive of other humans as cattle or mere fuel for industry. But its nervous pages of endless precautions and prohibitions speak eloquently of the fear the slave and free black population stirred in the hearts of the minority colonial élite. In an introductory paragraph, the *Código* ascribes to “slaves and free blacks” the primary responsibility for reducing Santo Domingo to “poverty and the most deplorable situation” through their “shameful idleness, independence, and pride, as well as the continuous thefts and disturbances they commit in the woods and farms” (Malagon 1974:162). Thus, the text argues, they must be governed strictly. Chapter fourteen of the *Código* makes it unlawful, on severe physical punishment, for anyone to dispense “arsenic, corrosive sublimate, or realgar” as well as “medicines” of any kind to blacks “of any class or condition” without a clearance from the proper authorities (pp.194-95).

The fear and resulting loathing of blacks contained in the pages of the *Código* attest to the oppressed community’s age-old struggle to dismantle the unjust ruling structure of the colonial system. The above quotes would seem to indicate that the oppressed masses sought to subvert the established order both by passive forms of dissent, as the reference to their “shameful idleness” would insinuate, and by wily stratagems such as plotting to poison their colonial masters, as the prohibitions in chapter fourteen of the *Código* would suggest. Lurking behind the fears also was a long history of open rebellion which had started on December 27, 1522, the first black slave insurrection registered in the hemisphere. It happened in the Nueva Isabela plantation owned by Governor Diego Colón, the Admiral’s brother. Dominican historiography did not record the names of the leaders of that movement. The leadership of many other uprisings against the colonial regime also remains anonymous. Among those whose named commanders have come down to us, the list of heads includes: Diego de Guzmán (1545) in Baoruco, Juan Vaquero (1546) in Santo Domingo, Sebastián Lemba (1548) in Higüey, Diego de Ocampo (1555) in La Vega, and the mid sixteenth-century rebel leader Juan Criollo whose revolt in Higüey “persisted for more than fifteen years” (Arrom and García Arévalo 1986:46).

One could affirm with all certainty that slaves in Santo Domingo always imagined the possibility of leading a life outside the oppressive colonial structure and did something about it. Individual and small bands of slaves ran away from the jurisdiction of their masters as soon as they set foot on the island. A letter by Governor Ovando in 1503, only one year after he had brought the very first contingent of blacks to the island, already whines about runaways (Deive 1989:20). Subsequently, we witness the emergence and proliferation of maroon settlements, called by historians *manieles* or *palenques*, which were tantamount to alternative societies of runaway slaves existing outside the boundaries of the colonial system. Existing from the heyday of the colonial transaction at various points of the island, Santo Domingo maroons settled most frequently in Ocoa, Neiba, Baoruco, Cotui, Buenaventura, Samaná, Higüey, Azua, and San Juan de la Maguana. A recent archeological exploration adds the province of Altagracia as a setting, since there in the early eighteenth century the maroons of the formerly unknown José Leta *maniel* may have operated (Arrom and García Arévalo 1986:41-43, 53). The best-known maroon society in Santo Domingo, whose population was crushed by the troops of a Captain Villalobos in 1666, had its camp in the *maniel* of San José de Ocoa. And the one historically closer to us existed in Neiba, a section of present Barahona, a *maniel* whose maroon leaders in 1783 negotiated an agreement with the Spanish authorities and consented to become integrated into the larger colonial society (Deive 1985:99).

There is clearly a long legacy of resistance to oppression championed by black slaves in the colonial period that contemporary Dominicans could draw from to empower themselves in their unending pursuit of social justice and full citizenship in a truly democratic society. Their uninterrupted history of subversive self-affirmation--going from the first black runaways that Ovando complains of in 1503 to the first slave insurrection on December 27, 1522 to our black Eve's self-assertive dance in 1801 to the Monte Grande rebellion on February 28, 1844--constitutes a veritable manifesto of human dignity that the African-descended majority of the Dominican population would draw inspiration from if it only knew about it. But it so happens that the people cannot benefit from the liberatory potential of that legacy because, for the most part, the history books used in the schools to educate the minds of the young as to the meaning of Dominicanness generally make no mention of it. The reason for the omission is that the history served to the people on the official platter of school textbooks has invariably been conceived

by a social sector that, when looking back to earlier stages of the national experience, has failed to regard our black Eve as a progenitor, while finding it natural to identify the likes of Arredondo y Pichardo, their white Adam, as an ancestral root of Dominicanness.

## **XVI. Dominicanness and the Descendants of White Adam**

The intellectual elites that have monopolized the conceptualization of Dominicanness are the ideological descendants of the Spaniards and white creoles who directed the colonial system in Santo Domingo. When they imagine Dominican history and the Dominican people only the experience of their ancestors comes to mind, the experience of all others, meaning the majority of the population, receiving only tangential, if any, treatment. Thus, the actions, the suffering, and the dreams of black Dominicans is largely ignored by José Gabriel García (1834-1910), the reputed founder of Dominican historiography. The December 1522 slave rebellion, for instance, matters to him only as an illustration of the ills that befell the administration of Governor Diego Colón. He tells us that Don Diego “had to combat an evil-spirited rebellion,” whose leaders “along with many of their loyal followers,” upon being caught, “met their deaths at the gallows” as payment for “their foolish ploy,” and, after five days of serious battle, “calm reigned once again among the people” (García 1968:100). Because García sides with the slave-masters and the ruling colonial elite, he cannot see the slave insurrection as a cry for human decency and cannot, as a result, see in their uprising a valuable episode of the heroic experience of the Dominican people. He only sees “the people” in those whose “calm” was secured by the defeat of the blacks. He construes Dominican history, then, as a narrative of the deeds of planters and slave-holders. When he gets to the modern period in the subsequent volumes of his *Compendio de la historia de Santo Domingo* (1893- ), he focuses on the modern equivalents of planters and slave-holders, namely, aristocrats, wealthy businessmen, prelates, generals, intellectuals, and presidents.

Bernardo Pichardo (1877-1924), whose *Resumen de historia patria* (1922) basically recasts in textbook format the narrative inaugurated by García, recounts a slave insurrection that took place in 1802 in Santo Domingo by focusing primarily on the feat of the warrior who defeated the rebels. They were crushed, he says, by “don Juan Barón, heir to the legendary valor of the Castilian race which, through times

and harsh hindrances, we Dominicans, their descendants, preserve with pride” (Pichardo 1969:64). Like García, he circumscribes the focus of his narrative to the actions and interests of the ruling class, excluding the sacrifice and the commitment to liberation of the oppressed masses. Curiously, his presentation of Barón as paragon of Dominicanness entails a measure of ideological deformity. We recall that Barón aided Napoleon’s invading forces to take hold of Santo Domingo, aiding the return of slavery, which had been abolished the year before by Toussaint. His frustrating the resistance of the slaves who rose against the colonial system and his facilitating the renewed captivity of blacks in Santo Domingo can only make him a retrograde force that impeded the realization of the native population’s yearning for freedom. In that respect, despite Pichardo’s elevation of him as a progenitor of the collective, Barón is really an execrable foe of the African-descended majority of the country.

Interestingly, Pichardo’s *Resumen* remained unchallenged as a text to educate Dominican youngsters about their past. During the Trujillo regime an official ordinance issued on October 30, 1942 renewed its use in the classroom, and in 1969, under Balaguer, a new edition appeared, updated and corrected by Rodríguez Demorizi. The appeal of Pichardo’s book to the guardians of Dominicanness during Trujillo’s tyranny is natural. For in embracing a book that allies with oppressive slave-masters against people who fought to dismantle the colonial system, Trujillo’s academics, whose job consisted primarily in safeguarding the continuity of the regime, did their best to preserve the dictatorship’s own oppressive model. Indeed, in a footnote to a passage from *La idea del valor de la isla de Santo Domingo*, Rodríguez Demorizi, in the midst of the twentieth century, commiserates with the plight of colonial slave-masters and identifies with their grief over the fact that “slaves enjoyed an excessive number of days when they could detach themselves from their labor,” harming thereby “the advancement of the island” (Sánchez Valverde 1988:249n).

One could probably find it in oneself to understand why the light-skinned mulatto Rodríguez Demorizi, working as a scribe of the Trujillo regime, should espouse colonial slavery and abhor the “excessive” rest that in his opinion Santo Domingo slaves enjoyed. When we get to the black Dominican intellectual Marrero Aristy, however, the same allegiance becomes less understandable despite his working, like Rodríguez Demorizi, under the service of the dictatorship. In recreating the

December 1522 slave rebellion at the Nueva Isabella plantation, Marrero Aristy, too, sided with the planters instead of with the black rebels whose phenotypical traits he clearly inherited. He wrote about the pitiful losses sustained by the landholder Melchor de Castro as the insurgent slaves targeted his plantation and empathized with the potential white victims of the blacks. The slaves, he says, wished to exterminate the whites and take their lands in order “to form there a tribe or nation exclusively for the members of their race” but did not succeed thanks to the “courage” and “skill” of Spanish warriors, like the gallant Francisco Dávila who, “with fierce thrust, invoking God and the apostle James” brought the slaves down (Marrero Aristy 1957:81-82).

Marrero Aristy’s inability to see his ancestry in the rebellious slaves rather than in the white planters, despite the phenotypical evidence to the contrary, has its root in the deracialized consciousness of the free black whose origin we traced to the fall of plantation economy as well as his education based strictly on documents inherited from the white Adams of the colonial plantocracy without the counterbalancing effect of a discourse coming from black Eve. That explains, also, the anti-black ideas of the mulatto poet Deligne, whose text “La intervención, 1801,” evoking the period of unification of Hispaniola under Toussaint, employs racially disparaging images to connote the blackness of Haitians (Deligne 1943:99-106). And it similarly explains the negrophobia of an otherwise eminent humanist like Pedro Henríquez Ureña, a mulatto himself, who, paradoxically, while working in Mexico, had himself occasion to suffer “expressions of the crudest racism” on account of his perceptible traces of blackness (Díaz Quiñones 1994:69).

Disabled by an intellectual tradition that lacked the tools of perception with which to see the Dominican people anywhere else than in the ruling élite and the highest echelons of the social structure, Henríquez Ureña did not recognize the overwhelming presence of people of African descent in his country of birth. In a 1940 monograph on the Spanish language in Santo Domingo, whose “African influence” he terms “very scarce,” the esteemed philologist categorically affirmed that: “Until 1916 the black population did not predominate in Santo Domingo, not even the mixture of blacks and whites” (Henríquez Ureña 1940:130, 134). He argued that the country only appeared “Africanized” to foreigners through a confusion with “the contiguous Haiti,” and highlighted it as “significant” that until 1880 “Dominican literature and culture in

general” rested in the hands of creoles of European origin or mixed with “Indian blood,” citing a long list of the salient names, including both the Ureña and the Henríquez families (p.134). The distinguished scholar circumscribed blackness in the Dominican Republic to foreign influences, hence his uneasiness about the “serious invasion of *braceros*” from Haiti and the Anglophone West Indies, which was “rapidly blackening the country” (p.133).

The notion of the country’s “blackening” as a result of extraneous incursions recurred a decade after the death of Trujillo in a history book that received official approval as a text for use in the high school classroom. The author, Jacinto Gimbernard (1931- ), remained faithful to the narrative structure and the value system contained in Pichardo’s book. In recalling the misfortune endured by Dominicans during the 22 years of unification with Haiti, he stresses President Boyer’s opprobrious “eagerness to blacken the Dominican population and to destroy the culture which it had proudly displayed” (Gimbernard 1971:235). Gimbernard, not without a measure of perversity given the dark skin of the overwhelming majority of the students who would have to buy his book, presents blackness as tantamount to the destruction of Dominican culture. He disseminates negrophobia not only with sanction but also with reward from the State. One can speculate on the predicament of black and mulatto students, who lack an appropriate counter-discourse. Though probably not coalescing with the logic promoted by the State, they cannot help but seek to dissociate themselves conceptually from the realm of blackness so as to secure their Dominicanness. The creed propounded by white Adam thus reigns unchallenged and the legacy of black Eve remains submerged. Also, with that distorted education, students risk replicating and perpetuating the notion reflected by the black Marrero Aristy and articulated by the mulatto Henríquez Ureña that blackness is inconsistent with Dominicanness.

## **XVII. The Limits of Deracialization: Pitfalls and Leverage**

Should Dominican blacks and mulattos fully identify with the systematic disparagement deployed against them by the Eurocentric discourse of the country’s intellectual élite, they would probably suffer from acute self-loathing and chronic alienation. One can speculate that their deracialized consciousness, though, by inducing an indifferent disregard toward State negrophobia, has saved them from the mental atrophy that

would come from such affliction. Their ability to step outside the sphere of their blackness has enabled them to remain whole. We have traced to the seventeenth century the process whereby the concept of race lost the heavy emphasis on biologically inherited features and traits. When the mulatto thinker José Ramón López (1866-1922) published his 1894 essay on nutrition and race, to warn Dominicans against inappropriate eating habits, the term race had become synonymous with nation. López feared that Dominicans would turn into “a race of fasting creeps,” for that would lead to physical degeneracy and, consequently, loss of autonomy, since, “Every race that degenerates, loses its independence” (López 1975:32, 36, 62). He spoke of a concept of race, then, that dwelt on social, temporary, and contingent variables rather than on genetic, permanent, and immanent ones. He meant, in short, the Dominican people.

The Dominican concept of race happened toward the end of the century to find itself in harmonious correspondence with a view that often construed the multiple ethnic groups of Latin America as forming one single race. Many writers from the Spanish-speaking countries of the hemisphere posited a certain spiritual link that somehow unified the peoples of the region. The essay *La raza cósmica* (1925) by the Mexican thinker José de Vasconcelos (1822-1959) succinctly synthesizes the prevalent arguments. Henríquez Ureña, aware of the anthropological awkwardness of lumping “the multicolor multitudes of peoples that speak our language” into one racial group, explained that their oneness does not depend on biological considerations: “What unites and unifies this race, an ideal rather than a real one, is the community of culture, determined primarily by the community of language” (Henríquez Ureña 1978:12-13).

One should look to the vigorous imperial expansion of the United States in the wake of the Spanish-American War of 1898 for the historical context wherein the widespread notion of a single Ibero-American race gained currency. As the young empire put its Monroe Doctrine in motion as a foreign policy creed toward Latin America, which often involved taking military actions against national governments or installing particular social sectors in power throughout the region, a tendency emerged among a liberal sector of the continent’s intelligentsia to express their opposition to American imperialism by singing the praises of Latin-related cultural values in opposition to the Nordic tradition that the U.S. presumably represented. They did not dislike imperialism per se, as one can gather from their nostalgic evocation at times of the greatness of

the older Spanish and Portuguese empires. They mainly objected to its North American variation. The unrestrained celebration by Eugenio María de Hostos (1839-1903) of the colonial domination launched by Columbus as “one of the most fruitful services rendered to humanity since the beginning of time” would typify the prevalent sensibility (Hostos 1969:169). They appear to have thought nothing of the fact that the linguistic unity of Iberian America that they so zealously defended had its root in a bitter drama of genocidal, imperial aggression. The Uruguayan essayist José Enrique Rodó (1872-1917) in his influential *Ariel* (1900) envisioned with terror the likelihood of a *delatinized* Spanish America that would succumb to *nordomania*, that is, an unreasonable admiration for North American values (Rodó 1971:102-3).

The disposition of Latin American intellectuals to see dichotomous value systems in the U.S. and the Spanish-speaking countries of the hemisphere fostered the practice of defining their region as one large unit by contradistinction to the Nordic tradition. Naturally, that regional definition necessitated the companion concept of a Hispanic race that transcended phenotypical and biological characteristics. In the Dominican Republic many thinkers, most notably Américo Lugo (1870-1952), echoed the tenets upheld by the continental intelligentsia about Ibero-American unity. For Dominicans, of course, the affinity was natural since they had already arrived on their own at a non-biological understanding of race. Blacks and mulattos had undergone a process of deracialization of consciousness in themselves and had also become decolorized in the eyes of the Eurocentric intellectual elite. Dominican society had inherited from its peculiar history a concept of race characterized by openness and flexibility, thus facilitating its blending with the racial concept that subsequently developed in Latin America.

The Dominican concept of race, then, had the disadvantage that it could easily play into the logic of a negrophobous intelligentsia nationally and on a continent-wide basis. The deracialized consciousness of the black and mulatto population left them without the instinct to fend off expressions of crude racism. We must remember that turn-of-the-century Dominican intellectuals pursued their education preferably in Europe, at a time, that is, when Western thinkers upheld rampantly racist theories of culture and human society. Also, national school curricula closely followed European models, which means that the voices that sought to explain Dominican life tended to embrace conceptual paradigms prevalent in



the West. For instance, the revered Hostos, the Puerto Rican educator to whom Dominicans owe important advances in the school system, could not relinquish the notion that viewed Caucasians as the sole owners of the wisdom and ability necessary for civilization and progress. In the 1880s he lavished enthusiastic praise on the Dominican government's effort to stimulate the migration to the country of "the persecuted tribes in Russia and Germany" for the likely contribution of those immigrants to "what the Dominican territory could become" (Hostos 1969:370). Hostos trusted that, apart from "measurable benefits," the migrants would bring "incalculable ones, namely what we can call *civilizing* values," a most necessary asset given his view of the Dominican people as "lazy" and "beggarly" (pp.371-72, 388). He placed a great deal of faith in the role that white immigrants would play as "agents of production" as well as "agents of education" who would contribute their "good work habits, technique, foresight, economy, and practical knowledge of industry" to the development of the country (p.390).

Concomitant with the unquestioned superiority of Caucasians was the notion, also prevalent in Western thought, that conceived racial mixture as an oddity that resulted in mental degeneracy. Thus, around 1916 the otherwise estimable novelist and essayist Federico García Godoy, recognizing that interracial marital relations in the Dominican past "led to a specific and differentiated human type during the colony," convinced himself that precisely in that "hybridity of our ethnic origin lie the corrosive germs that" have impeded "the development of an effective and prolific civilization" in the country (García Godoy 1975:55). The result of a deracialized consciousness that precluded ethnic self-affirmation and the exposure to an education that proclaimed the superiority of whites entrapped the minds of notable African-descended Dominican intellectuals. Thus, writing in the 1930s, Francisco Eugenio Moscoso Puello (1885-1959), while affirming his mixed ancestry as "representative" of the Dominican type "as far as race is concerned" since, he conceded, "we are mostly mulattos," he espoused a racial phenomenology whereby he owed the ability to operate fine technology to the portion of white blood in his veins, accepting the myth of the mental superiority of whites (Moscoso Puello 1976:85).

Just as the Dominican concept of race merged unproblematically with the ideological subterfuge of elite intellectuals in continental Latin America, it posed no barrier to the benevolent racism uttered by individuals of

demonstrable commitment to Dominican society like Hostos and García Godoy. Worse still, the openness of the concept lent itself to the malevolent manipulation of the Trujillo regime, whose scribes exploited its malleable flexibility for their ends. They realized the historical identification of the Dominican population with the indigenous Taino inhabitants of Hispaniola, who endured oppression and total extermination at the hands of Spanish conquerors at the outset of the colonial experience. Ethnically the aboriginal population represented a category typified by non-whiteness as well as non-blackness, which could easily accommodate the racial in-betweenness of the Dominican mulatto. Thus, the regime gave currency to the term *indio* (Indian) to denominate the complexion of people of mixed ancestry. The term assumed official status in so far as the national identification card (*cédula*) gave it as a skin color designation during the three decades of the dictatorship and beyond. While, in the minds of most Dominicans who use it, the term merely describes a color gradation somewhere between the polar extremes of whiteness and blackness much in the same way that the term mulatto does, the cultural commissars of the Trujillo regime preferred it primarily because the term was devoid of any semantic allusion to the African heritage and would, thus, accord with their negrophobic definition of Dominicaness.

But Dominicans for the most part survived the alienating negrophobia induced by their malignant education under Trujillo. Despite a long history of State-funded conspiracy against their mental health, Dominicans exhibit a reasonable degree of self-esteem. Irrespective of the racial language they might use, they show considerable self-affirmation in the sphere of action. A national survey conducted in 1995 showed, for instance, that while the respondents hesitated to classify themselves as “negro” or “negra” the majority expressed no particular racial preference in picking a marital partner from the choices of *negra*, *india* or *blanca* given in the questionnaire (Doré Cabral 1995: 9, 12). Nor can Dominicans be said to have succumbed to State-sponsored inducements against Haitian immigrants in the country. They have generally stayed clear of collective racial misconduct although they have not escaped the mental scars inflicted by generations of official vilification of Haitians as suggested by the survey cited above which indicates that 51% of the respondents would deem it objectionable to marry a Haitian person (Dore Cabral 1995: 12). But I would conjecture that, on the whole, Dominicans have successfully escaped greater degrees of atrophy as a result of the desalienating resilience of their open concept of race. Nor can we overlook the social utility

of such conceptual openness for Dominicans. Due to their history of pervasive racial mixture, one can chance upon two Dominican children with strikingly different phenotypical characteristics legitimately belonging in the same nuclear family unit. A flexible concept of race, permitting people with disparate features to share a common identity space, removes the psycho-social turmoil provoked in other societies by the sight of two people, one visibly white and the other visibly black, who identify themselves as biological siblings. The open concept of race saves Dominicans from a good deal of embarrassment and pain.

### **XVIII. Toward Recovering a Black Dominican Tradition**

Dominicans of African descent have found ingenious ways to cope with the vociferous onslaught of the colonial ruling class and their contemporary descendants. In general, though, they have lacked an empowering discourse of retaliation and have settled for non-verbal modes of self-assertion. A retaliatory discourse now exists on the scene, having gradually emerged from the pens of a new wave of progressive intellectuals who since the late 1960s have vigorously reproached the conservative power structure's white supremacist and Eurocentric views on Dominican history and culture. Starting from milestone publications that appeared in 1969 and the momentum incited by a memorable seminar on the "African presence" held in mid 1973 at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo, an impressive body of writings has already accrued in response to retrograde theories of Dominicanity. In briefly surveying that scholarly production, Pablo Maríñez has pointed out "two currents" that predominate among the sociologists, anthropologists, and historians who have championed the debate: "the reinterpretation of Haitian-Dominican relations and the search for the African roots in the nation's historico-cultural experience" (Maríñez 1986:12).

The vindictory scholarship of the new wave of Dominican intellectuals has rendered a valuable service to the society, but all seems to indicate that the longevous discourse of the plantocratic, Eurocentric ruling elite still weighs heavier in the schooling of the citizenry. Indeed, we now witness the unsavory resurgence of Hispanophile and racist declarations of Dominican identity that invoke the teachings of negrophobous intellectuals from the first half of the present century. Curiously, that trend often features the devout participation of black Dominicans such as the essayist Manuel Núñez and the older academician

Jorge Tena Reyes. The mulatto Juan Daniel Balcácer, concurring with Balaguer on the “extraordinary relevance” of the thought of Manuel Arturo Peña Batlle concerning the centrality of “Christian and classical culture” as well as the Dominican people’s age-old struggle against “Haitian ambition,” has taken it upon himself to help Peña Batlle’s living relatives mount an ambitious publicity scheme that would help remove the “mysterious black curtain” that “has lately enveloped” the late thinker’s life and work (Balcácer 1989:v, xi). The mulatto Balcácer would wish to restore the former currency enjoyed by the prose of one of the most caustic of Trujillo’s scribes on account of his “important” ideas on “the ethno-anthropological composition of the Dominican people.” (Balcácer 1989:xii). One would think this an undue measure of cordiality on the part of a mulatto intellectual, especially given Peña Batlle’s opinion of Balcácer’s own African ancestors as a hideous mass of mongrels. We can deduce that opinion from Peña Batlle’s description of the black slaves who rose against colonial oppression in eighteenth-century Saint Domingue as a people “without historical tradition, without cultural lineaments of any kind, without a spiritual structure, without an idea of either public or private law, without an established family order, without a sense of property organization, without collective norms” (Peña Batlle 1989:164).

We cannot deny the fact, either, that, at least until the late 1990s, the power structure in Dominican society and, consequently, the material resources as well as the ultimate authority on how to teach Dominicaness to the population, remained in the hands of cultural policy makers who were hesitant to promote changes that would ruffle the feathers of the old Trujillo guard and their ideological offspring. As a result, the truth about the ethnic and historical origins of the Dominican people persists as an unsettled, contested issue, with the proponents of definitions stemming from privileged portrayals of the old colony’s ruling minority invariably retaining the upper hand. Nor do the intellectual paladins of conservative views of Dominicaness show any sign of slackening, filled as their spirits are with the defiant self-assurance that power confers. We have here an obdurate ruling sector whose adamant commitment to a particular worldview knows no boundaries. To illustrate that commitment one need only note that Moya Pons’ *Manual de historia dominicana* (1992), whose ninth edition brings the chronicle of Dominican history up to 1990, lost its former status as a textbook approved by the Ministry of Education due to the added chapters’ critical appraisal of oppression and corruption during Balaguer’s presidential terms.

Similarly, the Secretary of Education bluntly revoked the National Book Award given by a panel of literary experts in April 1993 to Viriato Sención's *Los que falsificaron la firma de Dios* because of the novel's unfavorable depiction of Dr. Mario Ramos, a character patterned after Balaguer. The conservative sector, in other words, has had the power to name reality and to render the opposition mute, which has put serious limits on what the new generation of Dominican scholars has been able to do for their people. As a matter of fact, the Dominican government in 1994 found it politically expedient to make a gesture of ideological inclusiveness by hiring the services of progressive historians and sociologists such as Emilio Cordero Michel, Raymundo González, Walter Cordero, and Roberto Cassá. They worked with the Ministry of Education on drafting modernized social studies textbooks for the public school classroom. When time came for publishing the eighth-grade volume, the Ministry simply took a look at the chapter on the period 1961-1965, which spoke of "President Joaquín Balaguer and Donald Reid Cabral, critically narrating their political participation following the death of Trujillo," and proceeded to delete it from the manuscript before sending it to the printer (Rosario Adames 1994:6). This clearly suggests that while the conservative power structure may occasionally make courteous concessions to progressive intellectuals, only material that the regime finds ideologically inoffensive will in the end receive the privilege of approval. There is no question as to who really has the last word.

I would contend that intellectuals of the new wave cannot do much more than they have already done to denounce the falsified presentation of Dominican history and culture perpetrated by the ruling class. We can expect the negrohobia and Eurocentric notions of Dominicanness to live on for as long as those who are in power remain there, controlling the official tools of cultural definition and the institutions that shape public perceptions. We can rest assured that they will persevere in their effort to coerce the Dominican people into embracing their entrenched notion of national identity. They will do so either by overt censorship, as the above examples suggest, or by insidious conditioning, as illustrated by the conservative newspaper *El Listín Diario*, whose "society" pages unfailingly manage to fill themselves almost exclusively with photographs of white-looking people. In a country populated overwhelmingly by African-descended citizens such an exclusivity must entail a painfully methodical program of discrimination. The progressive scholarship over the past two decades has done an admirable job of intellectual refutation.

What ought to follow now is a strategy to empower the population with the analytical tools with which, on their own, to dismantle State-funded racism. I would say that this will only come about when black and mulatto Dominicans have access to a liberatory legacy that they can wield against plantocratic discourse. The coming to light of the black experience on its own terms in Dominican society, through the legacy of self-affirmation epitomized by the memory of black Eve, holds the clue to eradicating negrophobia in the cradle of blackness in the Americas.

## **XIX. Recentering the People in the Historian's Eyes**

It is not enough to know that racism is bad and to decry its evil effects. The people need the accoutrements that would enable them to repel the seduction of its spell. A racist education breeds racist thinking in the pupils. The trick is to provide pupils with an alternative model, one that will teach a different way of seeing. I would argue that the African-descended majority of the Dominican population will benefit greatly from a model that allows them to perceive their ancestors as the real protagonist of the epic of the Dominican experience. Seeing their progenitors shaping the course that the country's history took, getting in touch with themselves as a social force that never played the minutely marginal role ascribed to it by plantocratic historiography, will induce in African-descended Dominicans a vital degree of historical self-recognition. With that weapon, even if they hold on to their open concept of race, they will at least feel the wish to put a stop to notions of Dominicanness that detract their own massive presence in the society.

Historians can, by simply shifting the limelight of their chronicles of the Dominican past, contribute to the empowerment of their people. African-descended Dominicans, for instance, when looking at the uprising of December 1522 or the Monte Grande rebellion of 1844, need to see their forbears in the slaves who rose against colonial oppression. In these and innumerable other episodes blacks in Santo Domingo forged an estimable saga of heroic commitment to freedom and justice that goes from the dawn of the colonial transaction to its twilight in the nineteenth century. The ability to appropriate, for instance, the glorious inheritance of maroon dissidence, with its intransigent dedication to the pursuit of a social order that precluded the dehumanization of the colonial regime, will arm the Dominican people with their own retaliatory discourse to direct against white supremacist spokespersons. When they have appropriated

the patrimony bequeathed by their ancestors to Dominican society—an unending drama of sacrifice and struggle for autonomy and social justice that predates by hundreds of years the liberal ideas embraced by the young Duarte during his studies abroad—African-descended Dominicans will muster the impatient self-confidence that will make them intolerant of intellectual negrophobia. The scholars, again, can help bring about this far-reaching change of mind in the Dominican people by simply varying their own intellectual focus.

The vital shift in the chronicle of the Dominican people will necessitate a rereading of the available documents as well as a continuous search for new ones. Deive and others, through the exploration of original texts and conventional archival research, have sought to bring into visibility the experience of the Dominican maroons. In so doing, they have unearthed a human experience that had previously surfaced only as a series of tangential details to illuminate a central story, which was invariably the story of the colonial power structure. But regardless of the research resources that will become available to the scholar, ultimately the most decisive tool in determining success in the enterprise of reconstruction will necessarily be the scholar's own eyes. For one's way of seeing derives from a particular education. Perception is learned. Traditional Dominicans, responding naturally to their education, have learned to see slave-masters and planters as their ancestors. Thus, while they may note a slave rebel or a maroon indirectly coming into the picture, they do not regard the rebel or the maroon as a real agent of Dominican history. Many have written their narratives from a vantage point that construes slave rebellions and struggles for racial equality as mere "alterations of public order," in the words of Fray Cipriano de Utrera, a Spanish priest who wrote widely on Dominican history (Utrera 1995: 281). Our plea here is for Dominican scholars to disobey the way of seeing for which their intellectual upbringing has conditioned them, and that includes the progressive thinkers who have vigorously denounced racism and slavery.

A story about slave-owners does not cease to be a story about slave-owners merely because it repudiates slavery. In either case the chronicle of the oppressed masses becomes relegated to an insignificant margin, and their courageous fight for freedom passes into oblivion, robbing their descendants of the opportunity to learn and be empowered by the liberatory legacy of their forbears. We are asking Dominican historians, in effect, to embrace a narrative that privileges the many rather than the

few. In his evocation of the December 1522 slave rebellion, Mir had occasion to voice this insight: "History could not get his name. The black had no time to pose for the lens of history, which is a dialectical form of photography ... He is, thus, anonymous. To be anonymous is to be unanimous. Not to have a name is to contain all names ... Anonymity is a kind of sum total, collectivity, unanimity. To be no one is, at the same time, to be everyone. Anonymity is plural" (Mir 1984:199). In keeping with this poet's historical wisdom, we would ask chroniclers of the Dominican past to find it in themselves to train their eyes on the anonymous masses of the people. A refocusing of the scholar's eyes will lead to a rendition of the Dominican experience that notices and recovers black Eve and all that she represents. Dominican blacks and mulattos, in turn, with access to a rehumanized version of their historic place in society, will make their own critique, in the realm of discourse as well as in the sphere of social action, to terminate the State-funded distortion of Dominican ethnicity and culture. Our hope lies in their taking the matter into their own hands. With their large numbers, their ingenuity and wisdom, their perseverance and boldness, and their long history of courageous struggle against formidable odds, the African-descended masses of the people are a far better match for the entrenched power structure than the scholars can ever hope to become.

## **XX. Blackness in the Dominican Diaspora**

Nearly seventy years after Sumner Welles wrote his perplexed remarks about the attitudes of Dominicans toward blackness and whiteness, another American commentator, Loyola University Professor James Gaffney traveled to Santo Domingo and returned to the United States in favorable awe at the racial scenario he encountered there. He marveled at the tendency of Dominicans to think of themselves as a *sancocho*, "the popular dish that owes its delicious flavor to a lavish multiplicity of ingredients," which persuaded him that: "It would be hard to imagine a national culture more inherently resistant to racism" (Gaffney 1994: 11). This enthusiastic visitor read into the "faceless dolls" that one finds in the country's tourist market a symbol of "the ethnic indefinability of the country's population" and noted with sadness the political currency of a campaign promoted by the government of Joaquín Balaguer that, in keeping with the dogma of the old Trujillista guard, equates exultation of Dominicaness with deprecation of Haitians. The Loyola University Professor believes that contemporary anti-Haitianism in Dominican society can have dreadful consequences.



He posits that it might engender “a nationalistic animosity” that might evolve “into a downright U.S.-style racism in a country.. whose cheerful acceptance [of racial diversity] is reflected in its typically and beautifully polychromatic families” (Gaffney 1994: 12).

We at this point have no way of knowing the extent to which future Dominican governments would be willing to embrace educational and social agendas aimed at repairing the cultural damage perpetrated by the scribes of the conservative power structure. Nor would it be advisable, as Arcadio Díaz Quiñones prudently warns us, to place the nation’s cultural future in the hands of the State (Díaz Quiñones 1993: 174). But we can be certain of the pivotal role that the Dominican diaspora in the United States will play, with or without the assistance of any government, in the configuration of a humanely inclusive conceptualization of racial identity in Dominican society. This is so because Dominicans cannot help but realize that in the United States race matters tremendously, ours as well as that of others. In this country Dominicans join the cast of an inescapable social drama wherein whites set the normative standard and “black people are viewed as a ‘them,’” to borrow the language of Cornel West (1993: 3). Thus, race has implications that impinge on one’s survival.

It soon becomes obvious to Dominican immigrants that the larger American society does not care to distinguish between them and Haitians as the offspring of the two nations of Quisqueya, along with other ethnic communities of immigrants from the Third World, grapple for access to jobs, education, housing, and health services in an atmosphere of ever scarcer resources and anti-immigrant feeling. In the diaspora necessity allies Dominicans with Haitians. Anti-Haitianism, in other words, becomes impractical. Nor can Dominicans in the United States afford the embarrassment of seeming to detract a community with which, in the eyes of others, they visibly share racial kinship. For despite their particular manner of racial self-representation, Dominicans come into a society that, in the words of Frank Bonilla, “knows only black and white” (Bonilla 1980: 464). A personal anecdote may come in handy here. At a New York college where I taught I was approached by a colleague who was working with a group in the creation of a Black Faculty Caucus. In truth, some members of the group had proposed my inclusion on account of my color, but others had second thoughts in light of my coming from a Spanish-speaking nation. Giving me the benefit of the doubt, the group agreed to let me decide whether or not I belonged in

the caucus. My African-American colleague put the question thus: “Do you consider yourself more black than Hispanic or more Hispanic than black?” Finding the question disarming, I proved unable to quantify the immaterial. I was too fearful of saying the wrong thing and merely spent sentences galore in aimless circumlocution. My indecision made me suspect in the eyes of my colleague, with the predictable result that I never heard about the black caucus again.

In the United States, countless Dominicans, particularly dark-skinned ones, find themselves having to choose among options which their historical experience did not prepare them to recognize. Such is the predicament, for instances, of the Dominican characters in *Do Platanos Go Wit' Collard Greens?*, a recent fiction work by a young African American author named David Lamb. The narrative features the romance of two Hunter College students, an African American young male named Freeman and his Dominican sweetheart Angelita, against a background of racial tension and local politics in New York City at the time of Mayor David N. Dinkins. To persist in courting Angelita, Freeman needs to go beyond the disgust of hearing her speak of her father’s “sort of bad hair,” which at first made him suspect “she had nothing in her head but air” (Lamb 1994: 17). At first he takes her racially self-deprecating language as evidence of an intentional denial of African roots, but later he concludes, with the help of his father who is a learned man, that Angelita and her family are just ignorant, and it would just be a question of time before they recognized “their connections with us, and all of our connections with Africa” (Lamb 1994: 28, 58). Moved by Angelita’s rare beauty, Freeman undertakes her reeducation in racial matters, and at one point he congratulates himself on his “having a positive influence over her after all” (p. 66). Through the contact with Freeman not only Angelita has her mind straightened but so does her brother Ralph, a police officer who had married a Russian woman through a mail order catalogue as part of an existential quest for whiteness. In the end Ralph awakes from his cultural slumber and lifts the “political cataracts” that blurred his vision, and after a series of eye-opening events he starts dating, lo and behold, a Haitian woman (pp. 116, 119). In his gallant dedication to enable Angelita and her family to accept and cherish their African heritage, Lamb’s Freeman embodies the mindset of many African Americans who construe the reticence of Dominicans and other dark-skinned Latinos to make blackness their primary identity as a form of alienation that requires urgent corrective treatment.

Many Dominicans have already assumed a discourse of identity that emanates from the particular struggles of the black liberation movement in the United States. A small contingent already exists in New York made up of individuals of various hues who think of themselves not as “Dominicans” but as “Africans born in the Dominican Republic.” Similarly Dominican youngsters who are brought up in this country, where bipolar racial categories reign supreme, are likely to adopt the racial classifications administered by their environment. Sociologist Ramona Hernández, of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, looked at the 1990 U.S. Census with an eye on how Dominicans identify themselves ethnically and detected a pattern showing that the longer Dominican youngsters have resided in the United States the greater their chances of classifying themselves as black. The Smith College sociologist Ginetta Candelario has unearthed an invaluable six-decade long story of Dominicans in Washington, D.C., highlighting, among other things, that they choose black for their self-definition in the overwhelming majority of the cases (Candelario 2000).

Despite the inherent value of overcoming the vestiges of a negrophobic education, the question remains as to whether upholding a sense of racial identity that stems from the imposition of one’s environment can in the end be considered liberating. For Dominicans to submit to the logic of North American racial polarities, to internalize extraneous paradigms of identity, would be to disregard the complexity of their own national experience as regards interracial relations. But perhaps we cannot afford the luxury of such subtleties. What Bonilla has said of Puerto Ricans applies equally well to Dominicans: our “complacency and equivocation with respect to race and even our more genuine accommodation of racial difference have little place here... We cannot continue to pretend to be an island of civility and racial harmony untouched by the storm of racial conflict that surrounds us” (Bonilla 1980: 464). Like the Puerto Ricans and all other peoples dominated by the West, we come from a background that “taught us to experience blackness as misfortune,” and to pass the test of our moral strength it behooves us individually and collectively to stand up for what is black in us as proudly as we do for our Dominicanness (Bonilla 1980: 464).

We can already point to instances of proud assertion of blackness within Dominicanness in the diaspora as many members of the community have come to terms with the unsung portion of their ethnic and cultural

heritage. The often quoted phrase “Until I came to New York, I didn’t know I was black,” by the U.S.-educated Dominican woman poet Chiqui Vicioso, describes the state of mind of many Dominicans in this country (Shorris 1992: 146). The historian Frank Moya Pons argued fifteen years ago that Dominicans discovered their “black roots” in the United States and that they have in turn influenced their native land by returning home with their discovery. The scholar viewed “returning migrants” as “new social agents of modernity, capitalism, and racial emancipation” that had contributed to the overall transformation of “Dominican society and the Dominican mind,” a claim that he illustrated by pointing to the vogue enjoyed in the Dominican Republic by hair styles, dress, popular music, and other expressions associated with American blacks as well as the popularity of dark-skinned artists and politicians (Moya Pons 1981: 32-33).

Judged from the vantage point of the present, when we witness a virtual consensus among public opinion sectors of the Dominican Republic regarding the image of return migrants as a menace to the health of Dominican society, we sadly fear that the distinguished historian may have overstated his case. A point in his favor, though, could be that the antipathy and rejection that the Dominican diaspora is met with in the homeland may actually conceal a timorous acknowledgment of the diaspora’s power to influence mainstream Dominican society. But the spirit of Moya’s claims continues to find apt corroboration. The Cuban scholar Jorge Duany of the University of Puerto Rico attests to the transformation that Dominicans undergo as they experience international migration. Duany concurs that “migration has transformed the cultural conceptions of racial identity among Dominicans in the United States and Puerto Rico,” arguing that for many of them “coming to America has meant coming to terms with their own, partially suppressed, sometimes painful, but always liberating sense of *negritud*” (Duany 1996: 38).

A people doesn’t ask to become a diaspora. There are normally unfortunate circumstances that render us so. And if we are permitted to invoke dialectical processes, we can speak of a good side to every bad thing. Whatever suffering Dominicans have endured in the foreign shores where despair has expelled them they have also learned to see themselves more fully, more fairly, particularly in matters of race. The long struggles for equality and social justice by people of color in the United States have yielded invaluable lessons from which Dominican people in the diaspora and in the native land have drawn and may

continue to draw empowerment. The diaspora will render an inestimable service to the Dominican people if it can help to rid the country of white supremacist thought and negrophobic discourse, in whatever quantity those aberrations may survive in Dominican society. That done, we shall be in a position to celebrate our rich African heritage as well as the social and cultural legacies bequeathed by Afro-Dominicans from their first arrival in 1502, to the Monte Grande rebellion in 1844, to the struggle for human dignity waged daily by the diaspora in places not always hospitable. Ultimately, this celebratory retrospective will bring our black consciousness into focus on the national arena but in a way that defies racial extremism. On the international arena, one hopes that this black awareness with a Dominican difference might become apparent to the scholars and thinkers who concur with Gilroy in viewing the discourse on racial and ethnic difference as crucial to the idea of culture in the modern West. If one accepts “the year Columbus crosses the Atlantic Ocean” as marking “the beginning of the modern era,” it would seem odd to have a conversation about the sociohistorical processes and the cultural dynamics that ensued—with the fact of blackness at its core—without the least reference to the site where the paradigms of modernity triggered by the conquest of America were first rehearsed (Todorov 1984: 5).

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