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Silvio Torres-Saillant

*Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Race and National Identity in the Americas. (May, 1998), pp. 126-146.

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# The Tribulations of Blackness

## Stages in Dominican Racial Identity

by  
*Silvio Torres-Saillant*

Los blancos, morenos,/Cobrizos, cruzados/Marchando serenos,/Unidos i  
osados,  
La Patria salvemos/De viles tiranos/Y al mundo mostremos/Que somos  
hermanos.

—Juan Pablo Duarte

Dominican society is the cradle of blackness in the Americas. The island of Hispaniola or Santo Domingo, which Dominicans share with Haitians, served as port of entry to the first African slaves to set foot on Spain's newly conquered territories following Christopher Columbus's 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 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 mulattos make up nearly 90 percent 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 have, for the most part, denied their blackness. Faced with the population's toler-

Silvio Torres-Saillant teaches in the English department at Hostos Community College and heads the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute at City College. He is the author of *Caribbean Poetics* and coauthor of *The Dominican Americans* (Westport: Greenwood, in press).

LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES, Issue 100, Vol. 25 No. 3, May 1998 126-146  
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ance 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 to invite reflection on the complexity of racial thinking and racial discourse among Dominicans with the purpose of urging the adoption of discrete paradigms in attempts to explicate the place of black consciousness in Dominican society and culture.

### BLACKNESS AND THE DOMINICAN STATE

A large part of the problem of racial identity among Dominicans stems from the fact that from its inception their country had to negotiate the racial paradigms of their North American and European overseers. 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 22 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 since 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 United States, France, and Spain to prevent "the further spread of negro influence in the West Indies" (Welles, 1966[1928]: 76). As would many other American statesmen and journalists throughout the nineteenth century, Calhoun 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 and therefore soon became concerned over the predominance of people of African descent in the country. Directing himself to 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. Bobadilla assuaged his fears by replying "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" on account of the oppressiveness of the latter's former regime (Welles, 1966[1928]: 77-78). In a dispatch 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, "I am black, but white black" (cited in Welles, 1966[1928]: 103-104).

Nineteenth-century foreign observers of the Dominican scene had ample occasion to note the reluctance of Dominicans to flaunt their black identity, but they 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 *Evening Post* highlighted the blackness of Dominicans to spark antipathy against them in public opinion sectors of the United States, but a book published six years later by a writer seeking the opposite result undertook to underestimate the black element of the Dominican population—representing 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 who 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). Even in the twentieth century, during the administration of Theodore Roosevelt, one could find U.S. voices attesting to the presumed whiteness of Dominicans. One contended unambi-

guously that the inhabitants of the small Caribbean republic "with very few exceptions" were white, citing 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 writer asserted that "white blood preponderates" in the Dominican Republic by contrast to neighboring Haiti, where "the black race is in complete ascendancy ("Romance," 1995 [1906]: 18-19).

Given 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 asserting 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," and an interest in curtailing or regulating black immigration carried "similar force" (Welles, 1966[1928]: 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 to take this baffling possibility as starting point for an inquiry into the concept of race as it has developed historically in Dominican society.

It is no accident that this inquiry should spring from the statements of Welles and the other North Americans, for 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 drew significantly on North American sources dating back to the first years of the republic. As we proceed with this inquiry, I propose to avoid the pitfalls of investigating Dominican attitudes about race exclusively through the utterances of the ruling class by making an effort to assemble instances of active participation of Afro-Dominicans in building and defining their history. These instances, compiled from the field of social action, offer an invaluable living text, an indispensable document that could scarcely be produced by archival research alone.

## BLACKNESS AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY POLITICS

Consistent with their large presence, Dominicans of African descent have played an active and decisive political role in their country. The black or mulatto Francisco del Rosario Sánchez (1817-1861), one of the founding fathers of the Dominican nation, and the black general José Joaquín Puello (1808-1847) were important in bringing the dream of Dominican independence to fruition. Beyond this, blacks and mulattos, by defying the original separatist movement, ensured the republic's formally espousing democratic ideals. Blacks had valid reasons for hesitating to support the separation from Haiti espoused by a liberal elite from Santo Domingo; they owed their freedom to their brethren from the western territory. Slavery had been restricted in 1801, under Toussaint, and abolished in 1822, with the arrival of Boyer (Alfau Durán, 1994: 370). Moreover, the leadership of the separatist movement had proposed a national anthem written by the poet Félix María Del Monte (1819-1899) that emboldened the patriots with the exhortation "Rise up in arms, oh Spaniards!" (Franco, 1984: 160-161).

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 and to integrate the black Basora into the country's governing structure (Franco, 1984: 161-162). The very first decree promulgated by the Junta Central that first governed the country, on March 1, 1844, was the abolition of slavery (Alfau Durán, 1994: 13). Among various gestures to allay the concerns of blacks and mulattos, the Dominican government went on to reaffirm its commitment to abolition in several decrees that, apart from stressing the finality of abolition, made slave trafficking of any kind a capital crime and ruled that slaves from any provenance would instantly gain their freedom on setting foot on the territory of the Dominican Republic (*Enciclopedia Dominicana*, "Esclavitud").

When, less than 20 years after independence, an unpatriotic elite negotiated the annexation of the Dominican Republic to Spain, an armed rebellion to recover its lost sovereignty promptly ensued, and the black General Gregorio Luperón outshone all others as the guardian of national liberation. The participation of people of African descent in that chapter of Dominican history, known as the War of Restoration, was significant both in the high command and in the rank and file. The nationalist resistance leaders, aware

of the decisive importance of blacks and mulattos, launched a campaign calling attention to Spain's plans to restore slavery with a document known as the St. Thomas Manifesto of March 30, 1861. Pressured by this campaign, Brigadier Antonio Pelaez, commander of the occupation forces, hastened to issue a decree of April 8, 1861, whereby Spain assured Dominicans that slavery would never return to the land (Alfau Durán, 1994: 12). Even so, 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 Spanish forces, suggested that the 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 may have brought its downfall (De la Gándara, 1975: 237-238).

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 Heureux, whose heroic exploits against the Spanish army earned him national prestige, two decades later came to dominate the country politically for more than 15 years. After achieving distinction in 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 he was assassinated in 1899.

## BLACKS AND DOMINICAN FOLK CULTURE

The African presence in Dominican culture of course transcends the outstanding political acts of individuals. Elements of African cultural survival in Dominican society appear in the language Dominicans speak—the ethnolinguistic modalities that characterize the people's handling of Spanish, which show peculiarities in lexical structure and in phonetics, morphosyntax, and intonation that suggest retentions from the languages of African slaves in colonial times (Meggenney, 1990: 233). There is also

evidence 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 into the oral tradition of the Dominican people, and the contributions of blacks to Dominican cuisine take the form of both cultural transmissions from Africa and creole innovations traceable to the plantation regime (Deive, 1990: 133-135). But in no other realm are African cultural forms more evident in Dominican society than in spiritual expressions.

Carlos Esteban Deive has convincingly posited the existence of a Dominican voodoo with an indigenous pantheon and other characteristics that distinguish it from Haitian voodoo (Deive, 1992: 171-174, 182-183). People of various class backgrounds normally have recourse to the services and rituals of this folk religion, which has as much currency in urban areas as in rural ones (1992: 17). In fact, the majority of voodoo practitioners consider themselves officially Catholic, having received baptism and remaining active in the worship of that faith (1992: 211). Further research has not only supported the existence of voodoo as "part of Dominican folk religious expression" but also identified it as a crucial resource for popular medicine (Davis, 1987: 423, 221-223). 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 (1987: 194-195). Following these insights, a team combining mental health and social science specialists has stressed the importance of voodoo and other folk spiritual manifestations for understanding the Dominican people from the perspective of psychiatry and psychology (Tejeda, Sánchez, and Mella, 1993: 54).

Naturally, the state-funded guardians of the official culture, intent on stressing the 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 ascribed that predilection to 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 voodoo as a savage, anthropophagic ritual, and an 1862 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, 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 voodoo practices along with other men and women who had managed to escape (cited in Deive, 1992: 164). The Trujillo regime outlawed participation in voodoo ceremonies with Law 391 of September 20, 1943, which imposed a penalty of up to one year in prison plus a fine of 500 pesos on anyone convicted of the crime either by direct commission or indirect collusion (Deive, 1992: 186). The relentlessness of the government's campaign to eradicate African spiritual expressions in Dominican society is clear from an article published in the newspaper *La Nación* on October 5, 1945, in which Emilio Rodríguez Demorizi, an ideologist of the Trujillo regime and a consummate negrophobe, denounced "cucaya dance, cannibalism, voodoo, witchcraft, and other evil arts and customs" as rituals coming from "the land of Louverture and Christophe" that had 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 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 that black contributions to Dominican culture are omnipresent. That contribution began in 1502 and since then, as Vetilio Alfau Durán (1994: 342) has put it, "it has remained constant and decisive." In addition to the areas of endeavor surveyed above, one could speak of the celebrity enjoyed by Dominicans of African descent in the fields of sports and popular music. Clearly, also, blacks have by no means lacked representation in the public sphere or in the regard of the Dominican people. The overwhelming popular victory in the 1994 elections of the black presidential candidate José Francisco Peña Gómez of the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (Dominican Revolutionary party—PRD) against the two white elders Juan Bosch, of the Partido de la Liberación Dominicana (Dominican Liberation party—PLD), and Joaquín Balaguer, of the Partido Reformista Social Cristiano (Social Christian Reform party—PRSC), is eloquent testimony to this. That the maneuvers of the Balaguer government prevented Peña Gómez from becoming president matters less to the present discussion than that the majority of the Dominican population went to the polls and cast their ballots in favor of a black man who, in addition, is reputedly of Haitian descent. In voting for him massively, the Dominican people disregarded an elaborate and virulent campaign orchestrated by the government and the conservative elite that aimed to cast doubt on his Dominicanness and make a vote for him seem unpatriotic. Dominicans showed through their actions that they had minds of their own.

### DERACIALIZED CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE RISE OF THE MULATTO

Dominicans of African descent possess what one might call a deracialized social consciousness whose origins date back to the decline of the plantation economy in colonial times. After generating a widespread and massive influx of black slaves in the early 16th century, the Hispaniola sugar industry declined dramatically. The evanescence of the industry, concomitant 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 afflicted the inhabitants of Hispaniola (Peña Pérez, 1985: 10). A "mirror of utter backwardness," 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 stimulate agricultural production (Franco de Torquemada, 1942: 84-85).

Worsened by the effects of Governor Antonio de Osorio's depopulation of the eastern territories in 1605, occasional 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 sixteenth century, grew to a majority as the social distance between blacks and whites shrank significantly (Cassá, 1992: 76, 107-108). 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 racial intermixture in Santo Domingo (Cassá, 1992: 109).

The decay of the plantation and the virtual destitution of whites helped to break down the social barriers between the races, stimulating interracial marital relations and giving rise to an ethnically hybrid population. The racial integration and ethnic hybridity that characterized seventeenth-century Santo Domingo explain the emergence of the mulatto as the predominant type in the ethnic composition of the Dominican population.

Interestingly, despite the large presence of people of African descent at the time, many of the eyewitness accounts of the precarious state of the colony bewailed the scarcity of blacks as a primary cause of the decay. We begin to recognize here a tendency to limit the term *black* to people still living in slavery or engaged in subversive action against the colonial system. We know that since the sixteenth century, slaves had often resorted to marooning and open rebellion and 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, the maroons were still a concern, and the imperial authorities wrote into the accord a strategy for addressing the problem in both Santo Domingo and Saint Domingue (Moreau de Saint-Méry, 1994: 424).

Peaceful or cooperative mulattos and blacks, in contrast, seem to have become decolorized in the eyes of the ruling class, which probably explains Franco de Torquemada's complaint about the absence of blacks at a time when free blacks abounded. Similarly, in the late-eighteenth century, the mulatto priest Antonio 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 in efficient agricultural production (Sánchez Valverde, 1988: 249-250). Gradually, the sphere of blackness became associated exclusively with slavery and subversion, fostering a conceptual space that permitted free blacks and mulattos in Santo Domingo to step outside the racial circumscription of their blackness in configuring their identities or aligning themselves politically.

The disruption of the plantation economy and its demographic impact on the population facilitated a split between biological blackness and social blackness. As the racial oligarchy originally generated by the plantocracy crumbled, pigmentation ceased to shape political action. Moya Pons, 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, notes that paradoxically "while their skin gradually became darker, the mentality of Dominicans turned increasingly whiter" (1986: 239). But the context of this paradox is an earlier historical process, whereby social position had come to supersede skin color in the articulation of identity for people of African descent. Blacks and mulattos who approximated the level of their former masters through either their own social ascent or the white colonists' descent were, indeed, the equivalent of former *blancos*. They lacked a material frame of reference in which to construct a concept of identity based on racial self-differentiation, that is, on affirmation of their blackness.

While the death of the 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, they also eroded the bases for a sense of solidarity with blacks in general. As a result,

we find, for instance, the mulatto Juan Barón (-1805) collaborating with the invading French forces against the black troops of Toussaint Louverture in 1802, 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 were struggling 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 negro-phobia.

#### THE LIMITS OF DERACIALIZATION: PITFALLS AND LEVERAGE

Should Dominican blacks and mulattos fully recognize themselves as targets of the systematic disparagement deployed against them by the Eurocentric discourse of the country's intellectual elite, they would probably suffer acute self-loathing and chronic alienation. Their deracialized consciousness, by inducing indifference to state negro-phobia, has protected 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 its 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, the term *race* had become synonymous with *nation*. López feared that inappropriate diet would lead to physical degeneracy and, consequently, loss of autonomy, since "a 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 found itself by the end of the century in harmonious correspondence with the construction of the multiple ethnic groups of Latin America as forming a 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 synthesized the prevailing views. Pedro Henríquez Ureña, aware of the anthropological awkwardness of lumping "the multicolored multitudes of peoples that speak our language" into one racial group, explained that their oneness did 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 in which the notion of a single Ibero-American race gained currency. As the young empire set its Monroe Doctrine in motion as a foreign policy creed with regard to Latin America, often taking military action against national governments or installing particular social sectors in power throughout the region, a tendency emerged within a sector of the continent's intelligentsia to express its opposition to U.S. imperialism by singing the praises of Latin-related cultural values in opposition to the Nordic tradition that the United States presumably represented. These critics did not oppose imperialism per se, as one can gather from their nostalgic evocation of the greatness of the Spanish and Portuguese empires; they objected mainly to its North American variant. 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 prevailing sensibility (Hostos, 1969: 169). They appear to have overlooked 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[1900]: 102-103).

The disposition of Latin American intellectuals to see dichotomous value systems in the United States and the Spanish-speaking countries of the hemisphere fostered the practice of defining their region as one large unit in contradistinction to the Northern tradition, and this regional definition apparently 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 of 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 nonbiological understanding of race. Blacks and mulattos had themselves undergone a process of deracialization of consciousness and had 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 negrophobic intelligentsia nationally and continentwide. The deracialized consciousness of the black and mulatto population left Dominicans unprepared 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 when Western thinkers were advancing blatantly racist theories of culture and human society. 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 Caucasians were the 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" (1969: 371-372, 388). He placed a great deal of faith in the role that white immigrants would play both as "agents of production" and 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 (1969: 390).

Concomitant with the unquestioned superiority of Caucasians was the notion of racial mixture as an oddity that resulted in mental degeneracy. Thus, in about 1916, the otherwise estimable novelist and essayist Federico García Godoy, recognizing that interracial marital relations in the Dominican past had "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 results of a deracialized consciousness that precluded ethnic self-affirmation and 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) affirmed his mixed ancestry as "representative" of the Dominican type "as far as race

is concerned," conceding that "we are mostly mulattos," and credited his ability to operate fine technology to the portion of white blood in his veins (Moscoso Puello, 1976: 85).

Just as the Dominican concept of race merged 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 propagandists exploited its flexibility for their own ends. They recognized the historical identification of the Dominican population with the indigenous Taino inhabitants of Hispaniola, who had endured oppression and extermination at the hands of Spanish conquerors at the outset of the colonial experience. Ethnically, the Indians represented a category typified by nonwhiteness as well as nonblackness, which could easily accommodate the racial in-betweenness of the Dominican mulatto. Thus, the regime gave currency to the term *indio* (Indian) to describe the complexion of people of mixed ancestry. The term assumed official status in that the national identification card gave it as a skin-color designation for 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 it was devoid of any semantic allusion to the African heritage and would therefore accord with their negrophobic definition of Dominicaness.

Dominicans have managed to survive the alienating negrophobia induced by their malignant education under Trujillo. Despite a long history of state-funded conspiracy against their mental health, they exhibit a reasonable degree of self-esteem. Irrespective of the racial language they 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). Dominicans have not succumbed, since the death of Trujillo, to state-sponsored inducements against Haitian immigrants in the country. However, they have not escaped the mental scars inflicted by generations of official vilification of Haitians. Anti-Haitianism, fueled by the current vulnerability of impoverished Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic, persists as a viable political instrument for conservatives. The survey cited above indicates that 51 percent of the respondents would deem it objection-

able to marry a Haitian (Doré Cabral, 1995: 12). But I would conjecture that on the whole, Dominicans have escaped serious atrophy because of the dealienating resilience of their open concept of race. Nor can we overlook the social utility of such conceptual openness.

### RECENTERING THE PEOPLE

No matter how much ingenuity Afro-Dominicans may exhibit in negotiating inimical intellectual legacies, the fact remains that negrophobia has endured in the country and can still manifest itself in ways that interfere with the well-being of dark-skinned people. By the beginning of May 1996, for instance, the government and its associates were targeting black people on suspicion of their being foreign (i.e., Haitian) residents who might illegally have registered to vote with the purpose of electing the black candidate Peña Gómez. Blackness, then, continues to be relegated to the realm of the foreign in the land that originated blackness in the Americas. The need to launch efforts aimed at dismantling racism cannot be denied, but these efforts should go beyond mere denunciation. Black Dominicans need to acquire the accoutrements that will enable them to resist its spell. I would argue that the African-descended majority of Dominicans will benefit greatly from a model that allows them to perceive their ancestors as the real protagonists of the epic of the Dominican experience. Seeing their progenitors as having shaped the course of the country's history will induce in Afro-Dominicans a degree of historical self-recognition that will cause them, despite their open concept of race, to seek an end to notions of Dominicanness that depreciate the physiognomy of the overwhelming majority of the population.

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, the very first such uprising in the history of New World slavery, Mir (1984: 199) 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.



## BLACKNESS IN THE DOMINICAN DIASPORA

At this point, we have no way of knowing the extent to which future Dominican governments will be willing to embrace educational and social agendas aimed at repairing the cultural damage perpetrated by the cultural theorists of the conservative power structure. Nor would it be advisable, as Arcadio Díaz Quiñones warns us, to place the nation's cultural future in the hands of the state (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. 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 for one's survival.

It soon becomes obvious to Dominican immigrants that the larger U.S. 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, as they grapple for access to jobs, education, housing, and health services in an atmosphere of ever-scarcer resources and ever-increasing anti-immigrant feeling. In the diaspora, necessity allies Dominicans with Haitians; anti-Haitianism is rendered impractical. Nor can Dominicans in the United States afford the embarrassment of seeming to depreciate racially a community with which, in the eyes of others, they visibly share racial kinship. Whatever their particular manner of racial self-representation, Dominicans come into a society that, in the words of Frank Bonilla, "knows only black and white" (1980: 464). At a New York college where I taught, I was approached by an African American colleague who was working with a group on the establishment of a black faculty caucus. In fact, some members of the group had proposed my inclusion on account of my dark skin while others had had second thoughts in light of my coming from a Spanish-speaking nation. Giving me the benefit of the doubt, members had agreed to let me decide whether 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 that their historical experience has not prepared them to recognize. Such is the predicament, for instance, of the Dominican characters in David Lamb's *Do Platanos Go Wit' Collard Greens?* (1994). The novel features the romance of two Hunter College students, an African American 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. In his gallant dedication to enabling Angelita and her family to accept and cherish their African heritage, Lamb's Freeman embodies the mindset of many African Americans who construe the reluctance 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 in New York is made up of individuals of various hues who claim to see 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. Thus Ramona Hernández of the Latino Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, has looked at the 1990 U.S. Census with an eye to how Dominicans identify themselves ethnically and detected a pattern showing that the longer Dominican youngsters have resided in the United States, the greater the likelihood that they will classify themselves as black.

Despite the inherent value of overcoming the vestiges of a negrophobic education, the question remains whether maintaining a sense of racial identity imposed by 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). Along with the Puerto Ricans and all other peoples dominated by the West, we come from a background that has "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 Dominicaness (Bonilla, 1980: 464).

We can already point to instances of proud assertion of blackness within Dominicaness in the diaspora, as many members of the community have come to terms with the unsung portion of their ethnic and cultural heritage. The U.S.-educated Dominican poet Chiqui Vicioso's often-quoted "Until I came to New York, I didn't know I was black" describes the state of mind of many Dominicans in this country (Shorris, 1992: 146). Moya Pons argued some years ago that Dominicans had discovered their "black roots" in the United States and that they have influenced their native land by bringing their discovery home. He viewed the return 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 hairstyles, dress, popular music, and other expressions associated with African Americans as well as to the popularity of dark-skinned artists and politicians (1981: 32-33).

Judged from the vantage point of the present, when we witness a virtual consensus in the Dominican Republic regarding the image of return migrants as a menace to the health of Dominican society, the distinguished historian may have overstated his case. A point in his favor, though, may be that the antipathy and rejection confronted by Dominican return migrants in the homeland may conceal a timorous acknowledgment of their influence on mainstream Dominican society. But the spirit of Moya's claims continues to find corroboration, for example, in Duany's (1998 [this issue]) analysis in this volume of the transformation that Dominicans undergo as they experience international migration.

No people asks to become a diaspora; unfortunate circumstances render it so. Whatever suffering Dominicans have endured on the foreign shores to which despair has driven them, they have also learned to see themselves more fully and 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 the extent to which those aberrations survive there. Ultimately, this celebratory retrospective may bring our black consciousness into focus in the national arena in a way that defies racial extremism. This will be, in a word, the development of black awareness with a Dominican difference.

## NOTE

1. The claim that black servants may have arrived with Columbus himself on his second trip to the colony, 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 confronting that view, this article adheres to the scholarly consensus drawn from direct references to blacks in the written documents from the first decade of the colonial transaction.

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