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In: New West Indian Guide/ Nieuwe West-Indische Gids 61 (1987), no: 3/4, Leiden, 161-173

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BLACK IMAGES IN DOMINICAN LITERATURE

The historical background

On December 5, 1942, on his first voyage to America, Christopher Columbus arrived on the shores of Hispaniola. The island, so named by the Admiral himself, was populated by Taíno Indians, who were soon enslaved and put to work in search for gold (see Moya Pons 1978). The hard work of mining; the general abuse of their labor; the murders perpetrated by the Spaniards; the massive suicides committed by the Taíno themselves as an act of rejection of colonial domination; as well as the impact of European diseases, soon decimated the indigenous population.

The efforts of the Dominican friars to defend the natives, and the legal measures enacted by the Spanish Crown in 1512 and 1513 to regulate the *encomiendas*, were of no avail. By the second half of the sixteenth century, the Taíno were virtualy exterminated.

In the early colonization process, some elements of Taíno culture were absorbed by both Spaniards and African slaves. Most of these were in the realm of language and religion, others had to do with agrarian methods and techniques (see Cassá 1974, Vega 1981, Moya Pons 1983), and they still form part of the local culture. In the Dominican ethnic configuration of today, on the other hand, the indigenous component is of little significance.

The first black slaves were brought to Santo Domingo in the early sixteenth century. At first they were imported in small numbers, but with insufficient Indian manpower in the mines, demand for African slaves increased rapidly. When the gold deposits were exhausted, cane sugar became the main agricultural product and the primary source of wealth. The black slaves' strength, their enormous tolerance for both exhausting labor on

the plantations and for the abuses perpetrated on them by the white slave drivers, converted them into what was seen as an indispensable economic asset.

The slaves did not passively accept the domination of the Spaniards, as demonstrated by the rebellions and revolts that took place starting in the 1520s during the rule of Columbus's son Diego.[1] All rebellions, including those of the maroons, were crushed by the Spaniards.

Although the slaves were not free to follow their traditions and religious rituals, and many sociocultural elements of the dominant system were imposed, one cannot speak of their 'deculturation'. They were able to preserve many of their cultural traits which in the course of time were modified by a complex process of acculturation (Deive 1981).

Today, the African influence in Santo Domingo can be observed in religious practices in which beliefs originating in African traditions have been fused with those of Christian origin. African influence is also apparent in Dominican music and dance, as well as in the language, food and cooking methods (Deive 1981, Rosenberg 1979), and foremost in the racial composition of the people. A high percentage of the Dominican population is 'mulatto'. The intermingling of blacks and whites began in the first days of the colony, in spite of the racial prejudice and discrimination that blacks suffered and that mulattos experienced to a lesser degree since that time.

In the second half of the sixteenth century the sugar industry declined. The discovery of new lands – Mexico and Peru – and the riches that these contributed to the metropolis, left Santo Domingo abandoned. The island which had been Spain's most important colony, fell into decay and poverty which continued for over a century.

Spain, however, insisted on maintaining its commercial monopoly and strongly disapproved of the contraband trade between the Dutch, French and British on the one hand, and the population living in the northern section of the island, on the other. In 1605 and 1606, in what are known as the 'devastations', various important cities in that area were forcibly depopulated. These events were decisive in the history of the island. Since then, buccaneers and adventurers, many of them French, began to invade the empty northern part of the island from Tortuga (Turtle Island), their center of operations. By the Rijswijk Peace Treaty of 1697, ratified by the Treaty of Aranjuez of 1777, the western part of the island – henceforth named Saint Domingue – was ceded to France.

Saint Domingue became a wealthy French colony where tens of thousands of slaves worked on the sugar plantations in subhuman conditions.

Meanwhile, Spanish Santo Domingo's economy was largely autarchic, except for the export of cattle to the neighboring colony (Cordero Michel

1968; Sillié 1970). From then on, few slaves were imported. This economic structure had, of course, a significant impact on social relations and on local culture.

The French Revolution, with its principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, encouraged the revolutionary activities which the blacks of Saint Domingue had developed in the last decade of the eighteenth century. The revolution which triumphed with the proclamation of the State of Haiti in 1804, was the first struggle for independence in America that advocated the abolition of slavery.

The Haitian invasions that took place in 1801, 1805 and 1822 increased the anti-Haitian and racist sentiments of the dominant classes of Spanish Santo Domingo. Anti-Haitian feelings reached their peak in the period of Haitian domination (1822–1844) and in the ensuing war, after Dominican independence had been proclaimed in 1844. Anti-Haitian sentiment and Dominican national identity have developed side by side in the country's history.[2]

In spite of racial discrimination and the repulsion felt towards blacks in the Dominican Republic, the dominant classes did import black men as *braceros* (sugar cane laborers). In the nineteenth century, the emerging Dominican bourgeoisie brought *cocolos* (people from neighboring English-speaking islands) to the country. At the beginning of the present century, Haitians were first imported to work in the sugar cane industry. By now they have become the most important source of labor for the sugar economy. (Del Castillo 1978, 1981). This dependence on Haitian *braceros* did not abate anti-Haitian sentiments. In 1937, the dictator Trujillo ordered the massacre of thousands of Haitians in the border area between both countries.

The racist tradition in Dominican literature

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Dominican writers sought the origins of Dominican culture in the Indian past. *Indigenismo* emerged and flourished in Latin America during the Romantic era. In countries like Mexico and Peru, which had solid native cultures whose multiple features have been preserved until today, the literary interest in aboriginal culture was a logical nationalist response to the dominance of Spanish culture. However, the idealization of the Indian past was not justified in Santo Domingo, where – as has been pointed out – the Taíno culture disappeared rapidly, leaving few traces of its presence.

Indigenismo overvalued the Taíno contributions to the Dominican culture, mythicized its image and tried to ignore the contributions of the Africans.

The romantic idealization of the Indians was an ideology that pretended to hide African elements because they were considered a source of abasement. Racial prejudice against the black man was a very important ingredient of the dominant ideology. (See Cordero 1975: 152; Cassá 1976: 64).

Enriquillo (1882), the novel of Manuel de Jesús Galván (1834–1920), is the best example of *indigenismo* in all of Latin America's literature.[3] The story of Taíno *cacique* Enriquillo and the rebellion he led in the first decades of the 16th century, was used by Galván to write a novel in which, however, the black people who participated in the first revolts against colonial domination are completely absent. The writer is more interested in the defense of the metropolis than in the defense of the Taíno. (Conde 1978: 20).

In *Fantasías indígenas* (1887), poems of José Joaquín Pérez (1845–1900), and in *Anacaona*, a poetic legend of Salomé Ureña (1850–1897), we read about Taíno culture and the dreadful encounter between Indians and Spaniards. The myth of Dominican *indigenismo* was mostly built upon the poems of these important Dominican writers.

Dominican intellectuals invented other myths that reinforced sentiments of "Dominicanness." The first of these is that of *hispanidad*; the second refers to the inferiority of the Haitian people as compared to Dominicans.[4] Especially during the country's first occupation by the U.S. (1916–1924), some intellectuals tried to find in Spain the ethnic and cultural origins of the Dominicans. In that process of deformation of values, they were presented as white, Catholic, and proud of their Spanish ancestry. (Cassá 1976: 66). E.F. Moscoso Puello (1885–1959) says, in his *Cartas a Evelina* (1941), that Dominicans are, in their majority, "mulattos," but that they are constitutionally white and should never be compared to Haitian *comegente* (cannibals). (Cited in Cordero 1975: 152).

Americo Lugo (1870–1952), one of the country's most important intellectuals in the first half of the present century, adopted a racist thesis according to which the white man is a superior human being, while the black man is vicious and full of physical and moral defects. (See Cassá 1976). Thus, it is not strange that in the last decades of the nineteenth and the first ones of the present century, different goverments promoted white immigration to the Dominican Republic. This white population, it was hoped, would "improve" Dominican racial features, productivity and culture. (Del Castillo 1981: 163).

During Trujillo's Era (1930–1961), other intellectuals continued the work that Américo Lugo had begun several years before. Manuel Arturo Peña Batlle (1902–1954) and Joaquin Balaguer (1907–) enriched his thesis and anti-Haitian attitudes reached their highest theoretical elaboration.[5] The ideology of Trujillo's regime identified "Dominicanness" with pro-Hispanic sentiment and rejected Haitian culture. This racist ideology has produced in

our people a general scorn of Haitians. The Dominican has a scale of values in which the white person occupies the highest position, and the black the lowest. We have created euphemisms to hide our black origins. The common man uses words like "light Indian," "dark Indian," *trigueño* (brunette) to refer to the different tones of black and mulatto. (Del Castillo 1981: 148). A black Dominican considers himself superior to a black Haitian. There are popular expressions that reveal a repulsion towards our African past, and to the black Dominican and Haitian culture. (See Cordero 1975):

El burro y el negro son parientes, el burro por cabezú, y el negro que cree que es gente.	The donkey and the negro are related, the donkey because of its big head, and the Negro because he thinks he is people.
El negro mete la pata a la entrá o a la salida.	The Negro messes up when he comes in or when he goes out.
Los blancos huelen a polvo y los indios a canela y los malditos negros a berrenchín de culebra	Whites smell like powder, the Indians like cinammon and the god damn Negroes smell like the steaming breath of snakes.

Peña Batlle considered that the inferiority of Haitians was the result of a natural, biological condition, and he viewed with horror the presence of Haitians in our country. Joaquín Balaguer, who has been President of the Dominican Republic on five ocassions (1960–61, 1966–70, 1970–74 and 1974–78, 1986–present) condemned in his *La realidad dominicana* (1947), the laziness, the physical defects, and the degeneration of the Haitian immigrant and his negative influence on the life of our country.[6]

THE PAST AS A THEME IN DOMINICAN LITERATURE

The historical novel and history through fiction have interested many of our writers from the last century to the present. (Alcántara Almánzar 1984). In several novels we can find echoes of the wars and struggles Dominicans waged to overcome foreign domination or dictatorship. Dominican novels give a full picture of *caudillismo* and its political effects on national life; eloquent descriptions of fauna and flora; and they depict the ways of thinking, feeling and behaving of different social classes.

César Nicolás Penson (1855–1901) in his *Cosas añejas* (1891), following *Tradiciones peruanas* of Ricardo Palma, sought his inspiration in local tradition. Penson was a writer with a remarkable control of the narrative, and

although his texts are always subordinated to tradition and historical legends, he succeeds in giving them life through a nimble prose. In *Cosas añejas* there is a strong antipathy toward Haitians. Racial prejudices are also obvious in "Las vírgenes de Galindo," one of his most popular writings, in which Haitians are compared with fierce beasts.

However, racial discrimination and political condemnation are not always so explicit. In *Baní o Engracia y Antoñita* (1892), a novel of customs of Francisco Gregorio Billini (1844–1898), black people are practically absent as important characters, and this absence is very significant in a country whose majority is "mulatto". Baní is a town where white immigrants settled in the past century, and where even today one can find their descendants; but the number of blacks and mulattos from Baní is greater than people generally believe. Racial prejudice has always been present in Baní skin color is still directly related to social status.

Tales of the struggle for independence and the War of Restoration (1863–65) have been magnificently told by Federico García Godoy (1857–1924). The historical novel acquired a new stature in his hands. Systematically, he related nineteenth century history in his novels *Rufinito* (1908), *Alma dominicana* (1911) and *Guanuma* (1914). García Godoy was a nationalist and a liberal who underlined the threat of *caudillismo* and of political and military ambitions generally to the democratic life of the country. Anti-Haitian sentiment is also present in García Godoy's novels, but he emphasized above all the problems of sovereignty, and of the instability of the Dominican political process.

The excesses of Ulises Heureaux's dictatorship are shown in *La sangre* (1914), a novel by Tulio Manuel Cestero (1877–1955). Heureaux ruled the country with "an iron fist" in the last decades of the past century. He had Haitian ancestors and was of lower-class origin. His actions during the war against Spain (1863–65) and the protection of Gregorio Luperón, a leading political *caudillo* helped his career. Once in power, Heureaux tried to perpetuate himself in government. He used torture, espionage and corruption. In Cestero's novel, there are descriptions that show the terrible condition of being black in a society ruled by a racially prejudiced class. The novel portrays Heureaux with ironic and socially critical overtones. However, other characters are described in a way showing racial prejudice (see Cordero 1975: 153).

Max Henríquez Ureña (1885–1970), following the elite tradition of Dominican social thought, wrote four books under the title of *Episodios dominicanos*, as Benito Pérez Galdós had done with Spanish history in his *Episodios nacionales*. In *La independecia efimera* (1983), *La conspiración de los Alcarrizos* (1941), *El Arzobispo Valera* (1944) and *El ideal de los*

trinitarios (1951), the writer presents different moments of Dominican history since 1821. He focuses on the participation dominant groups in the process of Independence, and recreates the antagonisms between Haiti and the new-born Dominican Republic.

Other twentieth century writers however, such as Ramón Marrero Aristy (1913–1959), Juan Bosch (1909–) and Marcio Veloz Maggiolo (1936–) present new images of black men in their novels and short stories. Veloz Maggiolo (1977) wrote an interesting typology of the Haitian theme in Dominican literature in which he says Haitians have been treated in five different ways: "flattered", "attacked", "adulterated", "pitied" and "integrated".

In *Over* (1939), Marrero Aristy describes in a heart-breaking way the life of sugar cane laborers on North American plantations, prior, that is, to Trujillo's acquisition of most of the sugar cane factories. In Marrero Aristy's novel, Dominicans and Haitians are not separated by racial barriers: they suffer together from exploitation, misery and injustice. Everyone lives in the *batey* (the compound of plantation workers) under the worst possible conditions. In the short story *Luis Pie* by Juan Bosch, a Haitian man is the victim of hate and harrassment. Bosch presents a picture of friendly feeling and pity toward the Haitian character, unfairly accused of arson in a cane field. Veloz Maggiolo, in *La vida no tiene nombre*, gives a modern and demythicized vision of Dominicans and Haitians living together during the first United States occupation.

Dominican literature coming of age

During the first thirty years of the twentieth century, the Dominican Republic went trough many hard and varied sociopolitical experiences. In a period of twelve years two presidents were assassinated (Ulises Heureaux in 1899 and Ramon Caceres in 1911), there were numerous rebellions by dissident groups and frequent confrontations of political factions that provoked an anarchy that seemed practically uncontrollable. To crown all, the country was occupied by the United States Marines.

Postumismo was the most relevant literary movement of the first three decades of the twentieth century. Domingo Moreno Jimenes (1899–) became its central figure. With *Postumismo*, a truly Dominican poetry was born; for the first time there was a search for what is Dominican, for essential values as well as for trivialities, for *campesino* life. However, this eagerness for finding what was authentically Dominican limited this poetry and was the main reason for the impoverishment of its expression. Besides, the postumists

believed that authenticity consisted in only writing about Dominican themes and they scorned the tremendous contributions of the North American and European vanguard: Ultraism, Futurism, Creationism. They even thought that by trying to eschew the universal literary tradition they would avoid influences that they judged pernicious. That was a grave error that would be costly to Dominican literature.

Domingo Moreno Jimenes has written a great part of the most authentic Dominican poetry for more than fifty years. The thematic gamut of that poetry runs from the trivial to the philosophical, and from the social to the naturalistic, without showing racial prejudice. *Postumismo* did not last long as a movement, but the influence that its followers have exerted on later Dominican poetry can be easily seen. It shunned rhythm and rhyme. In *Postumismo*, there are no strictly poetic words; any word is material for poetry.

In a short poem, "El haitiano", Moreno Jimenes gives a new view of Haitian man. He does not see the color of his skin but his moral values. The Haitian man is a poor, good man:

Este haitiano que todos los días	This Haitian that every day
hace lumbre en su cuarto	builds a fire in his room
y me llena las fosas nasales de humo;	and fills my nostrils with smoke;
este haitiano	this Haitian
que no puede prescindir de la cuaba,	that cannot do without the Jamaican rosewood,
y prefiere tabaco del fuerte	and prefers strong tobacco
y aguardiente del malo,	and bad liquor,
es bueno a su modo,	is good in his own way,
y a su modo rico,	and rich in his own way,
y a su modo pobre.	and poor in his own way,
!Bendito los seres que maltrata el hombre!	Blessed all beings that man mistreats!
!Bienaventuradas las cosas humildes	Fortunate all humble things that
que se yerguen siempre sobre el polvo frío	stand always over the cold dust
de todas las cosas!...	of all things!...

Tomás Hernández Franco (1904–1952) was one of the group of the Independent Poets and the author of the epic poem *Yelidá* (1942). Yelidá, the daughter of a white man (Erick, a Norwegian) and a black woman (Madam Suquí, a Haitian), embodies the conflicts, worries and beliefs of the mulatto. Hernández Franco combined various levels: the ethnic, the mythic and the social, and achieved a masterly synthesis.

Regarding poetry with the Negro as its theme, Manuel del Cabral (1907–) stands out as perhaps the best known Dominican poet abroad. Del Cabral has an original and powerful verse that has elevated the theme of blackness to first-class standing. It is he who dignifies a theme traditionally rejected in

Dominican poetry; a theme avoided and deformed by the great twentieth century poets[7]. Black people – as has been pointed out – have almost always occupied the lowest levels of Dominican society, and this exploitation has battered them cruelly through four centuries of history. It is to this badly-treated man, degraded by the dominant classes that Del Cabral directs his verses. The poetry of Del Cabral, especially *Compadre Mon* and *Tropico Negro*, contains, together with erotic and ritual elements, an enormous amount of social protest:

Hombres negros pican sobre piedras blancas, tienen en sus picos enredado el sol. Y como si a ratos se exprimieran algo... lloran sus espaldas gotas de charol.	Black men chip over white stones, they have the sun entangled in their picks. And as if sometimes they would squeeze something... their backs cry drops of lacquer.
Hombres de voz blanca, su piel negra lavan, la lavan con perlas de terco sudor. Rompen la alcancía salvaje del monte, y cavan la tierra, pero al hombre no. (*Trópico Picanedrero*)	Men of white voices, they wash their black skin they wash it wit pearls of stubborn sweat. They break the savage earthen ball of the mountain, and they dig the earth, but not the man. (*Stonecutter Tropic*)

Of the group of writers in exile, Pedro Mir (1913–) became a formidable figure in Dominican social poetry with the publication of *Hay un país en el mundo* (1949). Mir had begun by publishing love poetry in which one could see a great influence from Federico García Lorca, but little by little he got into social problems in his own style. While never completely abandoning existential themes, he reached mastery with a more radical and accusatory focus. His poetry, however, lacks the epic spirit of the great contemporary social poets; his is a lyric poetry *par excellence* distinguished by its intimacy. In the realm of Negro poetry, his greatest contribution is, without a doubt, "Poema dell llanto trigueño," in which social and racial aspects are combined with sentimental elements[8].

Manuel Rueda (1921–) began to publish his works in the issues of the Poesía Sorprendida's magazine after his return from Chile, where he had made contact with renowned poets. Rueda is an intellectual of many facets. As a poet he is among the best in Dominican literature. He has mastered the classical patterns, especially the sonnet, and his poetry is the result of a profound reflection about the musical and rhythmic possibilities of the

language. His preferred themes are to be found among the intimate traditions and customs of man: religion, magic, human isolation. In his *Cantos de la frontera*, he focuses on the divisions that exist between brothers: Haitians and Dominicans. The poem does not refer to racial prejudice or discrimination against the Black man, but to the separation of human beings who share the island:

Allí donde el Artibonito corre
distribuyendo la hojarasca
hay una línea,
un fin,
una barrera de piedra oscura y clara
que infinitos soldados recorren
y no cesan de guardar.

Al pájaro que cante de este lado

uno del lado opuesto tal vez respondería.
Pero esta es la frontera
y hasta los pájaros se abstienen
de conspirar,
mezclando sus endechas.
(*Fragmento I*)

There, where the Artibonite runs,
distributing the fallen leaves
there is a line,
an end,
a barrier of dark and clear stone

that infinite soldiers traverse and
do not cease to guard.

To the bird who would sing from this side
one from the opposite side maybe would answer.
But this is the frontier
and even the birds abstain from conspiring
mixing their mournful songs.
(*Fragment I*)

THE PRESENT

The death of the dictator Trujillo in 1961 signaled a transcendental date for Dominican literature. From that point on, the number of publications was to grow considerably and many authors who had remained in the shadows of a forced silence began bringing out their unpublished papers. As for liberty of expression, the fact that censorship fell to its lowest point in the years immediately following his death, opened the country to a flood of hitherto prohibited works by both great foreign and Dominican poets and narrators. As some exiled writers returned to the country, some of them spearheaded an artistic renaissance that had already begun in the years preceding the assassination.

The writers of the sixties were not of one generation: they were of different ages, literary preferences, and styles of writing. The only thing they all more or less had in common, at least at first, was the desire to make use of the

climate of political expansion and ideological opening-up of Dominican society. A new theme emerged; the majority then wrote about sociopolitical questions: the injustice of the dictatorship; the failure of the country's first democratic experiment; the expedition, persecution, and slaughter of the guerrilla fighters; and the Civil War of April, 1965[9].

The old thesis of the black man's inferiority was revised and debated. Poets began writing from a different point of view. From thereon, it was not a white poet writing about black themes anymore, but black and mulatto poets looking for their origins, showing with pride their vital situation, their beliefs and feelings. Among the most important voices of the new generation are Juan Sánchez Lamouth (1929–1965), Ramón Franciso (1929–) and Norberto James (1945–) who have tried to express with dignity the black man's ethos[10].

NOTES

1. The first black slave revolt occurred on December 26, 1522 on the sugar plantation of Don Diego Columbus (see Saco 1965: 175–176).

2. The Haitian sociologist Pierre-Charles (1974) states that Dominican national identity was forged out of both an anti-Haitian and an anti-Spanish sentiment.

3. Pedro Henríquez Ureña (1963: 153) names three major literary works in the *Indigenismo* tradition: *Cumaná* (1871) by Juan León Mera; *Enriquillo* (1882) by Manuel de Jesús Galván, and *Tabaré* (1886) by Juan Zorilla de San Martín.

4. Mercedes Acosta (1973) believes that racism appears during the occupation of Santo Domingo by Haiti in the early nineteenth century. Apparently it was the expression of a 'nationalist ideology' based on historical and cultural differences between the two countries.

5. Peña Batlle is considered the most important racist thinker. He believed in the 'natural' inferiority of the Haitians. Balaguer has followed his footsteps in several books (see Cassá 1976: 82).

6. In the 1983 edition of his *La isla al revés* Balaguer ratifies his opinions about Haitians.

7. As James J. Davies (1982) observes, Del Cabral was, of course, not alone in his literary concerns for the Haitians. The theme was also treated by Juan Antonio Alix ('Las bailarinas del judú en la calle Santa Ana' 1904); Domingo Moreno Jimenes ('El haitiano' 1916); Rubén Suro ('Canción del haitiano que espanta mosquitos' 1936); Chery Jimenes Rivera ('La haitianita divertida [sic] 1941); and Fausto del Rosal ('La culebra' 1967 and 'Canto vudú para negros' 1971).

8. 'Poema de llanto trigueño' belongs, in fact, to what has been called *poesía trigueña* by Hector Inchaustegui Cabral (1979).

9. The Dominican Republic's first democratic experiment after Trujillo's death was Bosch's government from Feb. 27–Sept. 25, 1963. A *coup d'état* made an end to it.

10. Sánchez Lamouth is one of the outstanding Afro-Dominican poets. Ramón Francisco has not published much but his poem 'Patria montonera' is a good example of the integration of racial elements. Norberto James, a descendant of *cocolos*, tries to find out his origins in his poems 'Los immigrantes'.

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