# Peoples of the Jumbled Lands:
# The Republics of Hispaniola

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To the memory of René Philoctète[1]

***Two republics on a bit of an isle, with too much history to love each other. Too much blood, too much mud. Too much loathing… Two republics on a bit of an isle with too little space to hate. Too few trees, too few birds. Neither textbooks nor dogmas have been able to find the words that signpost this memory of mishaps and makeshifts. Even the dates are misleading.***

September 1697. Ryswick, a little village in Holland. The French and Spanish crowns sign a treaty ending a war that lasted nine years. No mention of Hispaniola, this far-away Caribbean island that their subjects share. Only much later would textbooks make of this date the beginning of a partition. One wonders how Ryswick became a historical event so far from Europe. Who invented this partition much simpler and clearer than the realities before and after it? No matter. Isn't history also made of false truths, silences, and memory lapses?

In the reality of the times, Ryswick gave the colonists on both sides a chance to renew commercial exchanges interrupted by the war (Moya Pons 1995).[2] The few French men who sneaked in the western part of Hispaniola from the smaller island of Tortuga, were growing tobacco and buying cattle from the Spaniards. The two colonies grew without clear boundaries until 1777. Then, the treaty of Aranjuez explicitly recognized the French dominion over the western part of Hispaniola and set definitively—so it was hoped—the only land boundary in the Antilles, with the exception of the island of Saint Martin.

Between Ryswick and Aranjuez, there grew a gulf. With the rise of the sugar plantations, the colony of Saint-Domingue became the strong link among the Caribbean possessions of an upwardly colonialist France. After 1763—another war, another treaty—Saint-Domingue held world production records for sugar and coffee. Thousands of imported slaves paid the price of that wealth. Their death rate was one of the highest of the Americas. Santo Domingo, on the contrary, struggled along with very few slaves, neglected by an increasingly weak Spain (Moreau 1976). It had a high ratio of free blacks who mixed with whites, to the extent that this was possible. Between Ryswick and Aranjuez, the island of Hispaniola developed two models of colonial societies: in western Saint-Domingue, the hell of plantation slavery; in eastern Santo Domingo a landscape shared by big Spanish cattlemen and petty farmers of mixed ancestry. It took the Haitian Revolution to remind the ones and the others that they were sharing an island.

***Two republics on a bit of an isle with too much black in the white and too much red in the black. Too many challenges to take on. Too many words thrown in the night between the mountains and the sea. Two republics on a bit of an isle with the burden of oaths taken.***

A few skirmishes aside, the Haitian Revolution entered Santo Domingo with the army of Toussaint Louverture in 1801. The first abolition of slavery there followed. Within the logic of Toussaint Louverture's assent, slavery was the only inadmissible compromise (Dorsinvil 1965; Trouillot 1977). But the competing logics that faced one another during this first invasion were not only of a political nature. Between the two societies, the gap was also social, ideological—cultural in the strongest sense of the word, since carried through daily life.

Between Ryswick and Aranjuez, Santo Domingo, a society with one of the world's highest ratios of individuals of mixed ancestry, became also a negrophobic society. Its brown majority notwithstanding—better, because of the very ambiguities inherent in the collective identity of that brown majority, led as it was by a racist elite--Santo Domingo claimed

shamelessly the purity of an imagined whiteness (Moya Pons 1986). Dominican critic Silvio Torres-Saillant (1997:33) summarizes the dilemma: "The tragedy of the construction of creoleness in the Dominican Republic is that the process implied a refusal of social blackness that could provide no defense against the intellectual negrophobia the Dominican elite would subsequently promulgate to control the lower classes." In short, whether from the elites or from the masses, to be Dominican also meant not to be black.

While this absolute refusal of blackness grew on the eastern side of the island, the Haitian Revolution—as Aimé Césaire reminds us—made of Haiti the country where "Négritude stood up for the first time." A négritude explicit in the uncompromising refusal of slavery by Toussaint Louverture's party. A négritude implicit in language and in customs. At the time Louverture entered Santo Domingo, the word ***nèg*** already meant "person" in the Haitian language, an indication—if needed—that the humanity of the black is an undisputed ontological fact.[3]

The Haitian invasions of the eastern side have often been held as the starting point of Dominican negrophobia.[4] However, Torres-Saillant's penetrating analysis suggests an internal genesis that precedes Toussaint Louverture's entry in Santo Domingo. The gulf that grew between Ryswick and Aranjuez had propelled the two societies onto different paths. Although the revolution turned upside down the particulars of the Haitian political situation, it did not decrease the demographic and cultural weight of the former slaves. Quite the contrary. The anti-slavery struggle turned Haiti into a black country that claimed its blackness. From Toussaint Louverture to Faustin Soulouque, the military campaigns thus only aggravated social-cultural differences that preceded them, reinforcing among each people the idea it had of the other. The devastation Dessalines and Christophe caused during their military campaigns of 1805 in the east did not help the situation. However, the more severe wounds were to the soul. The more Haiti claimed to be black, the more Dominican negrophobia boiled down to anti-Haitian racism. From one invasion to another—until the massacre of Haitians

around the border by the troops of Trujillo in 1937, at the very time that Haiti, pressured by the "Indigenous Movement," was renewing its negritude—the ideological confrontation repeated itself with each military encounter between the two societies, way beyond the political issues of the day. That was even more so since the Haitian elites, proud of their independence and anxious to maintain a political legitimacy that relied on their négritude, push their negrophile discourse to the extreme. Haiti was and remains for them the country whose history forever rehabilitates the black race (Price 1900).

We shall skip the ambiguities of that assertion—in light of the depth of color prejudice among those very same elites. Yet we will insist on these elites' capacity never to waver on the historical and ontological value of the revolution in spite of this prejudice (Nicholls 1979; Trouillot 1986;1990). Thus, President Jean-Pierre Boyer, a prototypical Haitian mulâtriste, was not at home among the mulattos of Santo Domingo in 1822. Nor did they recognize him as one of theirs. Instead, loyal to the logic of Louverture's party, and to its republican pretensions, Boyer repeated Louverture's very own gesture, abolishing slavery in the eastern part of the island for the second time, and definitively. That gesture was indeed unique, the only case in the Americas where slaves were freed by an army of former slaves.

The fact that the Haitian elites could not herald a whiteness to which the Dominicans laid claims no matter the odds, reduced the chances of a class alliance across the border throughout the nineteenth century. Early in the twentieth, while both countries were occupied by the U.S. marines, Haitian elites came to terms with the occupiers just as they had opened themselves to German immigrants. Still, they continued to view with great embarrassment the Dominicans' loud racism. That these elites might themselves be both racist and pro-black at the same time is possible. However, Haiti was and remains for them, or at least within their discourse, a black country that said no to the whites.

Inasmuch as the masses on both sides shared and still verify the discourse of their respective elites, there is -- we can understand -- a major misunderstanding.  On one side, we see a country where pro-black sentiments, forever "politically correct," are inherently part of national identity; where proof of color prejudice acts as a damning condemnation.  On the other side, we see a country where the "blancos de la tierra," whites of the land but black skinned, upheld in turn both slavery and white immigration, wishing to whiten themselves at all costs; where the darkest inhabitants choose to call themselves "indians" to avoid the inevitable disgrace of a black descent. ***Indio chocolate.  Blanco de la tierra.  Negro, pero negro blanco.*** White Negroes, chocolate indians![5]

***Two republics on a bit of an isle caught between history and geography, between a past of conflicts and a geographical present of local and immediate exigencies.  Two republics stuck between time and space.***

The occupation of both countries by U.S. troops verified their proximity and launched a massive migration of Haitians towards the cane fields of the neighboring republic.  Ebbs and flows followed in the aftermath. How many Haitians are there today in the Dominican Republic: 100,000 or a half a million?[6]  On both sides, the ambiguous and embarrassed attitude of the authorities have helped to mask the facts of this migration (Moya Pons et al.; Martinez 1995).  Similarly, in Port au Prince, ambiguity and embarrassment color the presence of the ***panyòl***[7] prostitutes, that other legacy of the U.S. Marine Corps.  Likewise, silence and ambiguity surround the Haitian torturers who take refuge in the Dominican Republic, escaping state justice and popular retaliation.  Does the same collusion hide the movement of the petty drug lords?  How can all these people cross the border?  Conspiracy of two U.S.-trained armies?

The border is porous and it will remain so as long as there is an island with two weak states incapable of controlling their own internal space.  That is not necessarily bad.  Market women cross it. So do rivers

and tontonmakout, prostitutes and ideas, the fruits and the wind. Yet the palmchat (Dulus dominicus) does not cross anymore. A species unique to Hispaniola, it seems to have disappeared from the Haitian side and can be found only in the Dominican Republic. The caïman is starting to follow, with the agouti and many parrots, including the Hispaniola parrot, also unique to the island. The list of endangered species includes the wanga-nègès (Hispaniolan Trogon or Temnotrogon roseigaster), the Haitian national bird.[8]

***Two republics on a bit of an isle with too little space to hate each other. Too few trees, too few birds. Peoples stuck between the mountains and the sea with rivers right in the middle. Two half countries. Peoples of lands jumbled in the dusty wind.***

Peeping through the airplane window, a passenger cannot fail to notice the extraordinary difference between the Haitian and Dominican landscapes. On the one hand, the desert. On the other, vegetation. No wonder the palmchat ran away. But that naked-eye difference is analytically misleading. For in sharing an island, the two peoples also share an ecosystem.

To be sure, the eastern side has better protection against erosion—the usual case when a central mountain chain towers over a Caribbean island. To be sure, the highest peek of that chain is also in the eastern part, reinforcing its relative advantage. To be sure, the demographic growth of the peasantry and the excessive poverty of the countryside further complicate the Haitian case. Yet for the longue durée, neither erosion nor sea pollution is sparing the Dominican Republic. The Haitian ecological disaster threatens the entire island of Hispaniola. Is anyone aware of this on either side?

Since the 1970-80s, a growing number of writers within the sphere of influence of the Dominican left have begun to take a new look at Hispaniola. Some call into question the Dominican past as conceived since at least Trujillo. Others try to rethink their country within the space

of the island.  Behind their historical writings or their critical analysis of the Haitian situation in the Dominican Republic the idea is sneaking in that neither of the two people will make it for good without at least taking into consideration the presence of the other.

Admittedly, that proposition is barely exposed in subtle and timid ways through a discourse that defines itself most of the time as primarily academic (but see Dore-Cabral 1987).  Admittedly, these scholarly interventions have not modified the racist domination over public discourse in the country.  Thus, in the 1980s, Balaguer's racist book became a bestseller.  More recently, Mr. Peña Gomez lost the elections to the presidency of the Dominican Republic because of his Haitian origins.

All this to say that the walls still exist.  Be that as it may, the breach introduced on the eastern side is a sizable one.  It is an invitation to rethink the time and space of Hispaniola.  To date, there is no equivalent on the Haitian side of the border.

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[1] Among the many books of Haitian writer René Philoctète (1932-1996), the 1989 novel, ***Le Peuple des terres mêlées*** (The People of the Jumbled Lands), tells the love story of Adèle Benjamin, a Haitian peasant woman, and Dominican worker Pedro Brito. The setting is the Haitian-Dominican border during the massacre of Haitians by Trujillo's army in 1937.  Philoctète wondered: "Two nations, one island! And why not a single people?" This is a reply to René, a man of hope, beyond death.

[2] The earliest treaties recognizing a de facto occupation that Spain officially judged unacceptable date from the beginning of the seventeenth century. Today's Haiti is larger than the French colony of Saint-Domingue. Even the limits set by Aranjuez would change as the French and then the Haitians gnawed on the neighboring territory. On the history of the border, see Moya Pons 1992.

[3] Haitian anthropology repeatedly insisted on that point since its birth (e.g. Firmin 1886).

[4] On the Haitian invasions, see insert.
[5] The history of the Dominican Republic is punctuated by immigration policies explicitly targeting the physical settlement of the border areas and the whitening of the human landscape. In the absence of actual whites, anyone who did not look like the Haitians would do, from Canary Islanders to Japanese! On Dominican racial categories and the construction of race, see Torres-Saillant (1998) and Charles (1992).
[6] Lozano (1992b) estimated between 60,900 and 117,900 Haitian workers and dependent involved in Dominica agriculture outside of sugarcane in 1988. The numbers are fuzzy, just as those of the sugar bateys, exactly because who is Haitian is problematic in the Dominican context. Individuals of Haitian descent born in the Dominica Republic or perfectly legal Haitian immigrants are treated as foreigners and criminals by local authorities. Dominican soldiers burn their papers without sanction (Martinez 1995:9-10).
[7] In Haitian, the adjective ***panyòl*** means "Spanish," but the noun ***panyòl*** means either a Spaniard, a Dominican, or a prostitute, preferably of Dominican origins.
[8] The Palmchat is not only a species but a whole family unique to Hispaniola. It is classified with the wanga-nègess and ten other birds endemic to the island among the world endangered species.

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