

## Editor's Note

Hispaniola has been on my mind. My first encounter with this part of the Caribbean was through Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World* (1949), which fascinated me as a first year graduate student. In the early stage of my studies, I learned about the island's magic and unique history as it was revealed to Ti Noel by individuals like Mackandal, Boukman, Toussaint, Dessalines, but also by Lenormad de Mezy, Blancheland, Leclerc, Rochambeau, Christophe, and Boyer, who constructed aspects of the island's history. Hispaniola has the unique reputation for being a first in many areas. Most noteworthy, it garners the distinction of becoming the first black and independent republic in Latin America. However, it also claims to be the first in other spaces. It housed the first European settlement in the New World, the first church, the first university, the first seat of government, the first cathedral, but also the first enslaved Native Americans and Africans, the first massacre, and so on.

I first visited the island in 1980, during the reign of Baby Doc, shortly after he, Jean-Claude Duvalier, married Jean-Marie Charnoine, in what has been considered an excessively expensive wedding in light of the country's economic conditions. The previous year, as a graduate student, I participated in the inaugural meeting of the Association of Caribbean Studies, founded by the late O.R. Dathorne, at the University of Miami. It was an exciting period in my emerging career, especially as I came in contact with distinguished scholars and writers whose works I had read but would meet personally at this and other gatherings. In Miami I had the pleasure of meeting and exchanging ideas with the late Lemuel Johnson, with whom I established a strong intellectual and personal bond. We always looked forward to seeing each other and exploring the Caribbean together.

While I was hesitant about traveling to Haiti, for the obvious political reasons of appearing to support the son of the one the most ruthless dictators ever; and although the father had passed, the mulatto son was no better. I attended the meeting to support the newly created organization, but also out of curiosity, to see for myself the history and culture other writers had described so eloquently. It was no secret that I admired the struggle of a people that set into motion the country's modern history.

I remember the day before the conference held at the Hotel Montana. Baby Doc had been invited to speak. Undercover agents, without a doubt all members of the infamous Tonton Macoutes, scouted the hotel, searching the top of the buildings, hallways, offices, and all the guest rooms to ensure that the hotel was secure. There was a more noticeable presence of armed security forces the opening day of the conference. Men with drawn weapons were visible in every location, especially during the morning session. I remember meeting a fairly tall and chubby—but well dressed—mulatto and his beautiful wife. Baby Doc presented

himself in a calm and dignified manner; he spoke in a soft and conciliatory tone. The young dictator welcomed the members of the association and described the country's much improved condition. While he attempted to mesmerize everyone with his deliverance, there were a few Haitian exiles in the association, who were not satisfied with his response. Baby Doc assured them that the country had chartered a new course, and invited the exiles to return. After the meeting, one accepted the invitation. However, he was mysteriously involved in an automobile accident and met with an untimely death. It was clear that nothing had changed!

I was most impressed by the spirit, friendliness, and resiliency of the Haitian people. Lemuel and I left the comfort and safety of Pétionville and made our way towards the center of Port-au-Prince, where the façade of tight fitting homes visible from the streets hid from sight, barely perceptible through narrow alleys, rows of shacks that revealed more clearly the deteriorating economic, social, and political conditions of the country: lack of running water, destitute sanitation, unemployment, and widespread hunger.

We made our way to the central Iron Market, full of small vendors, who displayed the artistic creativity of the Haitian people through paintings, woodcarvings, metal engravings, jewelry that had been laboriously put together, and most anything you could think marketable. The excitement increased after we were identified as possible buyers, and clusters of people approached us wanting to lure us to their respective stands to purchase whatever we found attractive. Some grabbed us by the arms, and others shouted at each other, claiming that we had spoken to them first, and they had the right to show us their products. Having been raised on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Jewish merchants shouting at customers at the top of their lungs and bargaining aggressively with them was not new to me. In fact, overactive exchanges on Orchid Street were part of the economic cultural interaction when dealing with vendors. The seller began with a high price and the buyer proposed a lower one. Then, a heated interaction ensued, followed by the perennial statement, "give me a price," or the question, "how much do you want to pay?" But the Iron Market was infinitely more exhilarating. There was excitement in the air, and French and Kreyòl added another level of mystery. We went back and forth haggling for paintings, but only the merchant knew what his products were worth. I remember Lemuel attempting to convince a seller that they were "brothers in the struggle," and for this reason he should be given a good price. I thought it was an outrageous argument, especially since we were in a foreign country. Much to my surprise, it worked! While Lemuel got his painting, I am convinced that the seller still got his price.

The most memorable part of the trip unfolded after the conclusion of the conference, as we boarded a bus and made our way northward, towards Cap

Haitian. The countryside was surprisingly arid for a Caribbean nation, where the lush vegetation is usually in abundance. Today's Haitian deforestation can be traced to Napoleon's claim to victory, and his demand for war reparations. As we moved further north, the landscape changed, and the green predominated over the previous shades of browns. In the far distance we saw the Bonnet a L'Eveque mountain, with a rectangular structure at the very top that, as we got closer, increased in size. It could not be anything other than the Citadelle Laferrière, Henri Christophe's last place of refuge. Our excitement grew as we got nearer to the fortress. Its immenseness soon became clearer to us when the structure became fully visible. Upon arriving at Milot, we stopped at the Palace of Sans-Souci; though in ruins, it still conveyed the majestic air of a bygone era. Afterwards, the intrepid bus driver made his way up the mountain road; then, when the road came to an end, he continued further upward as if to take the bus straight up to the mountain top, with tires spinning and sliding at the edge of the precipice, to everyone's alarm. We were eager to descend from the bus, all in one piece, and start climbing still higher, up the steep side of the mountain. Children immediately appeared from nowhere and lobbied to guide us up Laferrière, offering horses and water to relieve the stress of hiking such a steep and difficult terrain. In conversation I found out that some made the trip two and sometimes three times a day, and most did so in their bare feet! While a few from the group agreed to ride, I wanted to experience the "same" journey of Ti Noel and other Haitians who were forced to carry cannons, munitions, and other sundries to arm the fortress against a Napoleonic invasion that never materialized. The trip was long and arduous, climbing a narrow, rocky, and winding path that appeared to date to the early nineteenth century (In a subsequent trip, a paved trail had altered the character of the climb).

As we made our way around the final bend, I could see Laferrière in front of me. It was tall, massive, imposing, and beautiful, unlike anything I have ever seen, situated at the very top of the highest point of the mountain. The walls were thick, about twelve feet wide and more than one hundred and twenty feet high, with the necessary space and amenities to house an entire army and withstand the assault of any type of invasion. While I had seen fortresses in the various Caribbean islands, Laferrière was unique, especially when thinking of all the workers who perished in its construction. The best-known death was that of Christophe who, after experiencing a debilitating stroke, committed suicide at the royal residence, and his body was carried up the mountain and interred in the fortress's walls.

My first trip to the Dominican Republic took place much later, almost fifteen years after my visit to Haiti, in 1995. At Vanderbilt we have the opportunity to create an intensive course in the month of May, what we call our Maymester. The

first one I organized involved traveling with students throughout the Spanish Caribbean: Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba, reading the works of select writers, and meeting and spending time with them. We began the course in Miami, which we considered to be a Caribbean city. From there we traveled to Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and expected to complete the course in Cuba. However, since we did not obtain the necessary permission to enter the island, we spent the latter part of May in Peru, traveling to the Pueblos Jóvenes outside of Lima and making our way to Cuzco and Macchu Picchu. Indeed, this was a most demanding course, since I had dedicated all of my available time to the students. In Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, I rented a minibus and drove the students to the various locations of interest. In Santo Domingo, I met up with one of my graduate students, David Garcia, who was there visiting his family. He served as my guide, though he was there to rediscover a country his family had abandoned when he was a child.

I found the Dominican Republic to be just as beautiful as Haiti, but in a different way. The vegetation was sumptuous, just as I remembered seeing it in the northern part of the neighboring nation. The people were just as warm and friendly, and the food was typically exquisite. We visited the Centro Histórico in the Colonial Zone, the famed disco known as the Guácara Taina, but we also made our way to Puerto Plata, San Cristóbal, and other nearby cities. Of particular interest was the Faro a Colón, a lighthouse in the shape of a massive cross that lights up the sky and commemorates the Spanish colonization of the New World. I have heard it said that the light is so intense that it produces blackouts in parts of the capital city. The best part for me was the food, in particular the goat, but also the lamb and pork, with red beans and rice and, of course, *mangú*. I have become an aficionado of Dominican cuisine. While visiting David's parents in the States, I quickly acquired a taste for Dominican *sasón*, and in the Dominican Republic I felt close to heaven. I found Dominicans to be just like Haitians: friendly, helpful, conversant, talented, and highly artistic, with a healthy appetite for food and rum.

Haiti and the Dominican Republic stand out in my mind, but for different reasons. After all, they share an island and a common history. The western part of the island continues to be assaulted by political turmoil, somewhat reminiscent of the cycles of history Carpentier wrote about many decades ago. As in the past, Mother Nature also has contributed its share of misfortunes. Most recently, the earthquake of January 12, 2010, which devastated the country. It produced over 300,000 deaths, the same number of injuries, and over 1,000,000 homeless. Yet, in spite of the promises of world leaders to help the Haitian people, four years after the disaster many continue to live in makeshift homes, lacking the basic human

and decent necessities. I often ask myself, why does the world treat Haitians as third class citizens? Could it take that many resources to help this small nation with a historically spirited people? Is the historical defiance to oust the French a crime the Western World does not want to forgive? Why does it continue to turn a blind eye to Haiti? Certainly, a handful of wealthy people can provide, with little inconvenience to them, the necessary assistance to help those who appear to suffer more than most. Regardless, Haitians continue to be a resilient people.

The Dominican Republic has also garnered its share of attention, with its turbulent political affairs. Though there is no one historical novel that captures the evolution of Dominican history, like the one Carpentier published many decades ago, Mario Vargas Llosa's *La fiesta del Chivo* (2000) does uncover a tragic moment in Dominican politics that continues to determine historical events well into the present and future. I often ask myself, how is it possible that after the death of the infamous dictator, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, for one of his Cabinet Ministers, Joaquín Balaguer to rule even longer than his predecessor? Dominican American writers living in the United States and writing in English are telling a different history of the Dominican Republic. Authors like Julia Álvarez, Junot Díaz, Loída Maritza Pérez, Nelly Rosario, and others are writing about issues of their country of origin Dominicans on the island prefer not to discuss. In fact, with their writings, these and other authors have placed Dominican literature and history on a world stage. Haitian and Dominican writers convey an essential part of the common history of the Hispaniola evident in the present issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*.

Recent Dominican events seem to take history backward in time. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Dominican Republic defied historical progress by reverting to its former condition of a Spanish colony. This was to deter another Haitian invasion. Dominican fear of Haitians continues today, developing into a source of cultural trauma and identity. The resulting phobia has taken the country backward once again. The most recent Constitutional Court ruling, known as case number 168-13, denies Dominican citizenship to Haitians born in the Dominican Republic after 1929, thus displacing some 200,000 people living in the country. Haiti and the Dominican Republic are linked by an island and the history and culture the two countries' share.

I want to thank my Assistant Editor, Megan Myers, for conceptualizing the current issue on Hispaniola, which focuses on the common heritage of the two neighboring countries. Her deep seated passion for justice and love of Dominican and Haitian people and culture, and her commitment to promoting Border of Lights, an organization that commemorates the Haitian Massacre of 1937, guided her concerns. Further scrutiny of the histories of the two nations is needed, and

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the *Afro-Hispanic Review* joins the effort to foster these connections. It was through Megan's effort, contacts, and vision that she gathered writers, artists, and critics that make up this special issue. The journal places before our readers a topic that can begin at the dinner table and be further expanded to reach academic, social, and political sectors of our society. Our work calls for a reevaluation of history and historical events, with rigor, seriousness, justice, humanity, and patience in order to set events of neighboring nations on the right course of history.

William Luis  
Editor