



Fictions of Sex, Fear and Loathing in the Caribbean: Revisiting the Haitian/Dominican Borderland

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ABSTRACT: Haitian-Dominican border narratives invariably draw attention to debates concerning the Dominican Republic's (historical) hysterical drives to maintain an untainted "Raza dominicana" and simultaneously point to the threat posed to this ideal by their othered ethnic neighbours, the Haitians. What is less prevalent is an exploration of the sexual history of the border. Equally sparse are critical explorations of the fictional narratives of this border which privilege sex and the erotic as principal investigative prisms. Yet the literary architecture of the border is unsustainable without its sexual elements. This essay revisits key moments in the narrative construction of the border and investigates a few border texts that participate in the discussion on race and nationhood in the Dominican Republic. The aim here is straightforward; I intend to highlight the tenacious presence of sex and fear in narratives which record, interrogate, denounce or celebrate the border. The putative "problem" of the border, the essay reveals, is as much a problem of gender as it is of race. Accordingly, the fear of black masculinity on one hand and the celebration of new world erotics on the other become key components in unravelling the meanings of border identity.

KEYWORDS: Haiti; Dominican Republic; Border; Sex; Fear; Gagá

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RESUMEN: *Ficciones de sexo, miedo y desamor en el Caribe: Otra mirada sobre la frontera entre Haití y la República Dominicana.*- Las narraciones de la frontera haitiano-dominicana invariablemente centran su atención en debates relacionados con los (históricos) históricos esfuerzos que se han hecho para mantener una immaculada "Raza dominicana" y, simultáneamente, apuntan hacia la amenaza que para este ideal significan sus *alterizados* vecinos étnicos, los haitianos. Menos frecuente es, sin embargo, la exploración de la historia sexual de la frontera e igualmente escasas son las exploraciones críticas de las ficciones narrativas de esta frontera que den preferencia al sexo y a lo erótico como principales prismas de investigación. Pero lo cierto es que la arquitectura de la frontera carece de fundamento sin sus elementos sexuales. Este ensayo regresa a momentos claves en la construcción narrativa de la frontera y examina algunos textos fronterizos que participan en el debate sobre raza y nación en la República Dominicana. Mi propósito aquí es claro: pretendo poner de manifiesto la irrefrenable presencia de sexo y miedo en las ficciones que narran, cuestionan, denuncian o celebran la frontera. Como revela este ensayo, el supuesto "problema" de la frontera es un problema de género en igual medida que lo es de raza. En consecuencia, el temor a una masculinidad negra por un lado y la celebración de la erótica del nuevo mundo por otro se convierten en componentes claves para desentrañar los significados de la identidad fronteriza.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Haití; República Dominicana; Frontera; Sexo; Miedo; Gagá

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“Nada atrae tanto a la carne negra como la blanca” declares Henry Chirinos, one of Trujillo’s deputies as he is represented in Mario Vargas Llosa’s *La fiesta del chivo* (Vargas Llosa, 2000: 227). Chirinos, or the Constitutional Sot (*el Constitucionalista Beodo*), as Vargas Llosa calls him, is just one of the many conduits used in *La fiesta del chivo* to articulate the anxieties of race and sex which by 1937, the historical moment that the novel re-stages at this point, had come to be prominent features in the definition of the Dominican national character. The 1937 genocide of Haitians (and Dominicans) on the border between the two countries does not only mark the moment in Caribbean history in which Dominican society becomes complicit in one of the most horrendous crimes against humanity, but as the Dominican scholar Silvio Torres-Saillant has pointed out, the massacre “ilustra el alto precio moral que la imaginación colonial nos haría pagar” (Torres-Saillant, 2003: 224). Torres-Saillant’s linking of the massacre with colonial cartography and the colonial imagination in this essay is part of recent scholarly attempts to place this egregious event into wider contexts beyond that of Trujillo’s biography and the tyranny of his regime. Historian Eric Roorda, for example, is quite clear in his view that the massacre ought to be understood in global rather than local or personal perspectives. For him, it was part of “the worldwide paroxysm of racism and nationalist violence from 1937 to 1945 that includes the rape of Nanking, China, by the Japanese army and the genocide of the European Jewry” (Roorda, 1998: 127).

Novels with an international audience such as Vargas Llosa’s (2000) *La fiesta del chivo* and Edwige Danticat’s (1996) *The Farming of Bones* are significant in terms of their capacity to re-energize global debate on a local event silenced for decades in the Dominican Republic and, even if to a lesser extent, in Haiti. The recent resurgence of debate among mainly Caribbean and North American scholars on Haitian-Dominican relations in general and on the 1937 massacre in particular is due in no small measure to the appearance of these works of fiction. The novel *El Masacre se pasa a pie* (Preston Castillo, 1973) suggested a break with the Dominican intelligentsia’s complicitous silence on the subject of the massacre. However, despite recent assessments of the novel as subversive in its compelling indeterminacy (Lifshey, 2008) the prevailing critical opinions of Preston Castillo’s massacre novel point to its obsession with justifying the actions of the “unwilling” Dominican participants, a guilt ridden disengagement from the murdered subjects/victims, its insidious evocation of worse atrocities perpetrated by Haitians in the past and its overall lack of success in transforming anti-Haitian ideology in the disquisitionary practice on the massacre and the relationship between the two nations (Sommer, 1983;

Gil, 1997; De Maeseneer, 1997; Den Tandt, 2003; Torres-Saillant, 2003).

Writing in the 1990s, twenty years after the publication of *El Masacre se pasa a pie*, Dominican novelist and cultural critic Andrés L. Mateo comments on the effectiveness of the Trujillista apparatus of indoctrination in at once justifying the event and searing it “como determinación silente” into the collective memory of the society (Mateo, 1996: 150). Mateo’s reflections emphasize the complex ideological and creative struggles involved in recovering memories of collective trauma and the ways these struggles are inevitably complicated through both the construction of myth and the manipulation of history. History and myth coincide in the national rhetoric of the Trujillato to establish the massacre as indispensable to national security and autonomy. Andrés Mateo summarises this belligerently imagined, macabre national identity presided over by Trujillo, in the following terms: “Masacre de 1937 es igual a fronteras seguras, a integridad de la patria ... si hay fronteras es por la montaña de cadáveres de 1937. Si hay patria, es por Trujillo” (Mateo, 1996: 150). Ultimately, Mateo stridently observes, the submerged myth of the massacre “no se atreve a nombrar” (Mateo, 1996: 152).

La fiesta del chivo satirically enunciates the principal ideological doctrine implied in Mateo’s commentary. According to Vargas Llosa’s Trujillo, the massacre of 1937 was the hardest thing he had to do in order to protect his country as father of the nation and to ensure its solvency, greatness and perpetuity as benefactor:

Por este país, yo me he manchado de sangre. Para que los negros no nos colonizaran otra vez ... Hoy no existiría la República Dominicana. Como en 1840, toda la isla sería Haití. El puñadito de blancos sobrevivientes, serviría a los negros. Ésa fue la decisión más difícil en treinta años de gobierno (Vargas Llosa, 2000: 225).

In response to Simon Gittleman, the caricatured voice of US military sycophancy in the novel, Trujillo confirms the firm patrician resolve to retain sovereignty and protect the nation state against an imminent re-colonization of the Dominican Republic by their Haitian neighbours as the singular motivation for commissioning genocide. The twenty two year occupation of Santo Domingo by Haiti in the early 19th century along with the general fear sparked across the Caribbean by the Haitian Revolution became a prop that would be used constantly by several of the male nation-builders throughout the 20th century to inculcate an ideology of truculent separatism into the fabric of the Dominican nation’s sense of itself. But here the idea of making the Dominican Republic great is also synonymous with whitening it as much as possible.

Thus the price for modernity and sovereignty is paid by the Haitian body politic or the otherwise ethnically suspect figures on the border. In *La fiesta del chivo* Vargas Llosa uses bitter satire in pointing up the brutal fallacies of Trujillista historiography as he has the fictional Trujillo re-state the received knowledge, what had in Gramscian terms become the “common sense”, chronicled in many official sources and authorized biographies, such as Robert Crassweller’s (1966) famous *Trujillo: The Life and Times of a Caribbean Dictator*, that the massacre was explicable and therefore excusable because the threat to the nation by its neighbours had to be contained by any means necessary. But the language in which the subject is articulated undermines the general’s argument concerning a justifiable reaction to a credible threat to the continued existence of the nation and highlights the seminal functions of the fear of blackness and the yearning for whiteness which is at the heart of the nation building project.

Trujillo’s project of national consolidation is one which necessitates the culling as far as possible of the country’s contaminating/gangrenous black elements which in *Colouring the nation ...* (Howard, 2001) jeopardise its potential for greatness. This, in *La fiesta del chivo* as indeed in the lived history for which the novel serves as fictional commentary, is a matter of foreign policy and in staging this ideology Vargas Llosa is indicating the pivotal role that race plays in international (border) relations during the dictatorship.¹ In the novel Henry Chirinos and Agustín Cabral two of Trujillo’s obsequious front men scandalously report to him a catalogue of evils being fostered by what they see as the growing encroachment of the Haitian presence on the Dominican side of the border. Beginning with the spectre of economic invasion, they articulate the same myths, specious assertions and unquestioned assumptions which, interestingly enough, progressive present day critics of the policing of difference in developed economies have identified in official discourses which distort arguments concerning immigration and border crossing.² Commerce, language, religion and medicine are among the indices of Haitian infection tainting the border. Trujillo’s informants bewail the displacement of Dominican workers by cheap Haitian labour; the threat to Spanish posed by “los gruñidos africanos del creole”; the assault on Catholicism by voodoo and *santería* which they term “el salvajismo precristiano” and the incursion of atavistic African healing practices sabotaging the progress of Western medical technology (Vargas Llosa: 225–227).

The greatest anxiety in this political milieu, however, rests within the sexual domain. International (border) relations are, of course, not just a matter of economics and politics. Diplomacy is ultimately a matter of social relations. Foreign policy, whether in the so called democracies of the first world or in

the justifiably maligned dictatorships of the third world, often becomes inseparable from personal and sexual matters. 1937 links race, violence and international relations in obvious ways through the massacre. What Vargas Llosa indicates at this stage of the novel through revisiting the haunting drama of the massacre is that this episode in Caribbean history is also inexplicable without recourse to the role of sex within the region. The paranoia concerning interracial sex in general and more specifically the terror invoked in the bosom of the patriarch with the contemplation of sex between Haitian (black) men and Dominican (anything but black) women recasts the massacre as one more historical moment in the Caribbean in which taboos concerning sex combined with colonially inherited warped hierarchical thinking result in nefarious tragedy.³

The fear of the black body here is the fear of its purported sexual capacity. It is not Haiti’s belligerent potential which threatens the dictator’s project for national greatness; it is its seductive capacities and the Republic’s weakness to resist its advances that threaten the solidity of the nation state. “Los estupro de dominicanas por haitianos son el pan de cada día”, continues the zealous Henry Chirinos, in his attempt to please Trujillo and to consolidate his position within the dictator’s inner circles (Vargas Llosa, 2000: 227). The import of Chirinos’s warning is that succumbing to the beguiling male (Haitian), the defenceless female (Dominican) is violated and thus the fortitude of the nation is imperilled. Acting in concert with Chirinos, his sidekick Agustín Cabral follows this outburst with his own vociferous lament of the malfunctioning of that other key apparatus of state control, the border: “Las bandas de facinerosos cruzan el río massacre como si no hubiera aduanas” he exclaims. “La frontera es un colador” (Vargas Llosa, 2000: 227). Securing the nation involves policing sex as much as it requires the management of the border. At the core of this philosophy of maintaining sovereignty is a jealous envy of an assumed black male sexual voracity and a vindictive desire for the proscription of interracial sex. Thus the juridical and libidinal implications of the border are coalesced by Vargas Llosa in a lecherous Dominican functionary whose ostentatious bemoaning of the loss of what he refers to as “nuestra raza” to a putative “Haitian barbarity” is accompanied by “un vaho lujurioso” (Vargas Llosa, 2000: 227).

Haitian-Dominican border narratives, whether historical, political, biographical, poetic or fictional, invariably draw attention to debates concerning the Dominican Republic’s (historical) hysterical drives to maintain an untainted “Raza dominicana” and simultaneously point to the threat posed to this ideal by their othered ethnic neighbours, the Haitians. What is less prevalent is an exploration of the sexual history of the border. Equally

sparse are critical explorations of the fictional narratives of this border which privilege sex and the erotic as principal investigative prisms. Yet the literary architecture of the border is unsustainable without its sexual elements. This essay revisits key moments in the narrative construction of the border and investigates a few border texts that participate in the discussion on race and nationhood in the Dominican Republic. The aim here is straightforward; I intend to point up the tenacious presence of sex and fear in narratives which record, interrogate, denounce or celebrate the border. By border texts I simply mean texts which thematize that space. This allows for an expansion of the debate beyond strict national boundaries and so in addition to the fiction of Peruvian Vargas Llosa with which I began, I consider the work of Dominican poets Manuel del Cabral, Tomás Hernández Franco and Chiqui Vicioso and conclude with a discussion of *Del rojo de su sombra*, a narrative reconstruction of the border by the Cuban novelist Mayra Montero (1992).

TWO SIDES TO EVERY STORY: CONFLICT AND COHESION ON THE BORDER

One of the points Crassweller emphasizes in his famous biography of Trujillo is the dictator's inheritance of a legacy of desultory administration of the border.⁴ In addition to a catalogue of Haitian related social problems there was conceptual confusion and practical difficulty in establishing the precise location of the border: "No one knew exactly where the border was" (Crassweller, 1966: 151). Soon after he seized power in 1930 Trujillo began to exercise control over the border. His main objective was to formalize the border. Of course this process of formalization actually predates Trujillo having been started a year before by Horacio Vásquez (Moya Pons, 1995: 368). Negotiations took place over a three year period between 1933 and 1936 during which time Trujillo visited the Haitian capital and the then Haitian president, Stenio Vincent, visited Santo Domingo. The outcome of the juridical process in March 1936 might be seen as a combination of ruthless parsimony in negotiation on the part of Trujillo and naive self-interested capitulation on the part of the Haitian officials involved. Simply put, double dealing, the concession of a small piece of Dominican land and payment of handsome bribes in the right places secured a definitive line of demarcation. This was to emphasize in unequivocal terms the exact details of the physical boundary between the two countries. As a corollary to the cartographical demarcation Trujillo imposed a system of quotas on the number of non Dominican workers that could be employed on the sugar estates and simultaneously he began a process of deporting Haitians who could not produce documentation to establish their place of birth or nationality. If the racial

imperative underpinning both the regime's border policy and its approach to pan-Caribbean relations was already sufficiently clear it would soon become even clearer since along with the deportation of Haitians the dictatorship established a policy to actively recruit white immigrants from Puerto Rico.

In addition to the issues of demagoguery, corruption and a failure to foster an anti-colonialist spirit of new world cooperation which emanate from this process of border negotiation, the agreement and subsequent administration of the border speak to the much discussed antipathy towards Haiti which serves as the basis for Dominican identity. Haiti is a negative signifier; it is what the Dominican Republic is not and will never be if certain people have anything to do with it. Or, as Sibylle Fischer puts it, "At the centre of the fantasies that characterize the Dominican Cultural imaginary is Haiti as the nightmare of a barbarian future" (Fischer, 2004: 146). The premium placed on a Hispanic identity and on Hispanic cultural and aesthetic traits is communicated through, among many other sources, much of the writing of Joaquín Balaguer, one of the most negrophobic thinkers of the twentieth century and President for what seemed like two eternities having ruled the Dominican Republic for a total of 22 years. Justifiably, Vargas Llosa's ominous portrait of him in *La fiesta del chivo* has him hovering over the novel and the Dominican Republic as a darker more sinister figure than Trujillo whose assassination in the text marks the end of his sexual and political decline.

Ten years after the massacre Balaguer, in his much quoted *La realidad dominicana* (Balaguer, 1947), synthesises Dominican culture with Hispanism and highlights Haiti as a threat to the economics, politics, sexual morality and racial purity of the Dominican Republic. Later on in his essay *La isla al revés* (Balaguer, 1983) he asserts that once the Africanization of the Dominican Republic is curtailed the country's future would be secured. In order for the Dominican Republic to be seen as a Hispanic (and therefore progressive) nation, Balaguer believed, the somatic difference between itself and Haiti had to be clearly demarcated. Once that is accomplished Balaguer assures us the country's anthropological characteristics would gradually improve and the nation could then regain its original purity ("la pureza de sus rasgos originarios").

So what does Dominican imaginative literature of the Trujillato have to say about these conceptual crises? The reluctance to assert a cultural affinity with the rest of the Caribbean and the resultant lack of prestige of much Dominican literature has been noted by scholars of Caribbean literature in many places. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that both *negritude* and *negrismo* at best did not affect the Dominican "clase letrada" or at worst were rejected by it. A few writers from the early decades of the twentieth century stand out

as exceptions to the pattern of disengagement with the African Caribbean subject except in the terms of vilification as expressed above.⁵ The best known is Manuel del Cabral. Cabral consciously cultivated the African and, more specifically, the Haitian subject in his poetry and named himself as one of the three founders of “Poesía negra” in the Caribbean. The other two poets he named were Cuban Nicolás Guillén and Puerto Rican Luis Palés Matos. *El presidente Negro* (Cabral, 1973), which imagines the rise to power of a black president of the United States, might be read subversively as a paradigm shifting text of disengagement from the thematic concerns of his Dominican contemporaries. Similarly his poem *Pulula* which simultaneously sympathises with and chides the exploited black domestic helper is significant since it centralizes that (Haitian) figure in terms that foreground race and class. “Negra Pulula, qué bien, / Que planchas la ropa ajena / ¡Cuando plancharás tu cara: / mapa de penas!” (Cabral, 1942: 46). In the context of 1940s Dominican literature especially, this use of poetry as sociological critique through an attempt at empathy with the psychology of the victimized black female subject is highly significant.

In *Compadre Mon en Haití* from his now celebrated collection of poems *Compadre Mon* (Cabral, 1998), first published in 1943, del Cabral has the idealized Dominican peasant cross the border to Haiti and makes him participate in the social and cultural discourse on the “danger side”. Mon, the prototypical “hombre gallo” from the Cibao region of the country, has murdered a woman and ends up in Haiti because he is fleeing from the Dominican authorities. As though returning to the womb Compadre Mon spends nine months in Haiti. Eugenio Matibag argues that here “the border becomes a threshold and crossing it brings the hero into an ancestral knowledge tied to the blackness of Haiti” (Matibag, 2003: 73). The poem might be read as transgressive in so far as it reverses temporarily the dominant ideology of separation and distance between the two countries. Instead the poem engages in what Eugenio Matibag has referred to as a “dialectic of approximations and distantiations” (Matibag, 2003: 73). Compadre Mon discovers a range of social and religious practices that are exactly the same as on his side of the border. He participates in various rites of social communion, struggles to learn Haitian patois and enjoys sexual relations with Haitian women. But this empathy is only temporary. The text raises the spectre of *mestizaje* and simultaneously resolves the would be crisis in what might be read as an act of *coitus interruptus*:

Con dos delitos viviendo en tierra que no es la mía,
me pasaba todo el día patuá con hambre aprendiendo.
Para aliviar los dos males me metí con una haitiana,
¡y qué berrán!, pero a ratos, por no tener un mulato ...

Pensaba más en mañana que en el goce del presente,
Es decir, que estaba ausente cuanto más me le
acercaba ...
(Cabral, 1998: 141).

So what happens in Haiti, stays in Haiti. *Coitus interruptus* implies the abortion of the wider project of social and cultural communion. What the text does eventually is to demonize everything Haitian. Compadre Mon rejects the good will of Haitians who offer to help him, casts aspersions on the honesty of the “brujo” with whom he comes into contact and in belligerent language berates Haitian attempts of political alliance. Ultimately he receives some communication “en español” (Cabral, 1998: 150) and returns to the Dominican Republic. The message is clear; Compadre Mon would prefer to risk death in the Dominican Republic than establish any meaningful connections with Haiti. Thus the pattern of estrangement and disengagement continues.

One of the texts which best encodes the ideology of racial/sexual danger lurking on the border is Tomás Hernández Franco’s (1942) poem “Yelidá”. Written five years after the 1937 massacre, Yelidá is an epic narrative poem that is steeped in anti-Haitian feeling and is pregnant with the fear of racial mixing. In Yelidá Erik is a young virginal Norwegian who sets sail from his homeland and ends up in Haiti. In Haiti he is trapped by Madame Suquí who after praying to voodoo gods and performing the relevant sacrifices not only possesses Erik’s body but also taints his soul. Néstor Rodríguez identifies Hernández Franco, along with del Cabral and Aída Cartagena Portalatín, as part of a corpus of Dominican writers who voiced resistance to Trujillo’s cultural project during the dictatorship (Rodríguez, 2010: 61). Seeing “Yelidá” as a forceful subversion of hegemonic Dominican identitarian discourse (Rodríguez, 2010: 68) he points to the puzzling retraction from the resistance implicit in the aesthetic project of Yelidá implied in Hernández Franco’s subsequent writings in which he lends his voice to the justification of the massacre proffered by several of his contemporaries (Rodríguez, 2010: 69).

Notwithstanding an appreciation of the serious difficulties involved in deploying the delicate strategies of negotiation required to stage any kind of resistance from within the dictatorship, I am less convinced than Rodríguez about the extent of the transgressive achievement of the poem.⁶ According dichotomous moral values to black and white (Williams, 2000: 39) the poem designates Erik the Scandinavian as pure and Suquí the Haitian as unclean; he is a virgin and she embodies sexual vice. Imbued with qualities of calamitous possessiveness Suquí’s malignant sexuality facilitates the creation of “the fiction of white male innocence” (Williams, 2000: 70). Their union produces a child, Yelidá, but Erik dies, his body having succumbed to Suquí’s

destructive sexuality. But while the body stays in the Caribbean, the soul is not allowed to and thus it returns home to the Norse gods.

As Dawn Duke argues persuasively, the text's vilification of the black Haitian woman attempts to absolve itself in a "belated celebration of mulatto-ness" (Duke, 2009: 70) Yelidá lives but she is an example of a tainted and diseased *mestizaje*. This composite, as Duke suggests, is a sign of "national anguish". An example of arrested development and a model of turbulent self-estrangement, Yelidá poses a serious challenge to history and to identity. She is an un-representable subject whose real story somehow remains outside the possibilities of language (perhaps the Spanish language) and the concluding line of the poem emphasizes the befuddlement that she constitutes as far as her creator is concerned: "Será difícil escribir la historia de Yelidá un día cualquiera" (Hernández Franco, 1976: 214).

So, as is often the case with politically contested national boundaries, on the Haitian-Dominican borderland power, place and language are semanticized in racial and racist terms. Danger and fear permeate the border and a discourse of separation us/them frustrates any possibility of communication or solidarity.⁷ But the border is also a zone of merging and emergence and this perhaps is one of the major keys to understanding the political problematic of cultural relations between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Here sex, commerce, religion and language combine to frustrate official ideals of separation and the maintenance of a pure, Hispanophile Dominican race. Today, as in the early twentieth-century period recast in Vargas Llosa's novel, the prevalence of Haitian creole, voodoo and a range of other forms of Haitian cultural currency permeating transactions on the Dominican side of the border effectively defeat the purist nationalist desires that culminated in the massacre of 1937.

Richard Lee Turits's judicious analysis of the history of the massacre points to the conceptual dangers inherent in telling the story of the massacre in reductive binary terms simply as one nation/ethnic group pitted in violence against another. Numerous indices of cultural cohesion complicate the official version of the narrative of Haitian-Dominican relations before the massacre. Turits contends that a refusal to take into account the plurality of border dynamics runs the risk of essentializing "historically variant and contingent ways of imagining the nation" (Turits, 2002: 593). Privileging, among other things, an understanding of the massacre as an occasion of state violence against multi-ethnic communities, Turits calls for the discourse on the massacre to be reframed as a "conflict between two visions of the Dominican nation" (Turits, 2002: 594). This approach productively troubles the unitary conception of the story of Dominican history and

national identity as synonymous with Anti-Haitian prejudice.

Of course fiction continues to be one of the principal sites where the hegemony of the nation is most acutely problematized and where these culturally pluralist discourses of which Turits speaks are constructed and represented. This is staged in several places in Edwige Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* where she synthesises crises of birth, birthright and the linguistic and cultural hybridity which defines the Haitian-Dominican borderland. In the following quote Danticat articulates these questions through the anguished voice of a border woman who is both at home and homeless, rooted yet de-territorialised in the borderland of her birth:

I pushed my son out of my body here, in this country, one woman said in a mix of Alegrian Kreyól and Spanish, the tangled language of those who always stuttered as they spoke, caught as they were on the narrow ridge between two nearly native tongues. My mother too pushed me out of her body here. Not me, not my son, not one of us has ever seen the other side of the border. Still they won't put our birth papers in our palms so my son can have knowledge placed into his head by a proper educator in a proper school (Danticat, 1998: 69).

Danticat's novel here records the defiant enterprise of heterogeneous border culture even in the face of official persecution. The state is shown to be in dissonance with the community and on a broader level the very existence of the hybridized identities explored in the novel draws attention to an alternative discourse on Haiti, that to some extent has always existed "on the ground" so to speak, which emanates from the lived histories of cooperative difference.⁸ These lived histories undermine what Samuel Martínez refers to as the "fatal conflict model" of analysis of Haitian-Dominican relations. These histories, demonstrating as they do, "tenderness and violence, love and hate, incorporation and rejection" (Martínez, 2003: 81), suggest an alternative perspective on the border which in turns embodies a different way of seeing Dominicanness. Accordingly, Dominican ideological and discursive practice on the Haitian occupation, 1937, the border and the wider question of race relations has never been monolithic.

A growing dynamism in this respect is evidenced in the work of young Dominican scholars such as Néstor E. Rodríguez whose *La isla y su envés* re-maps the terms in which Haitian-Dominican aesthetics and ethnic relations might be seen.⁹ In this study, drawing on a wealth of literary and ethnographic sources, Rodríguez signals the priorities placed on rethinking national culture by younger Dominican scholars as he confirms that the Hispanophile

nationalism which dominated the Trujillo period and which survives to some extent in the post dictatorship period is completely removed from historical reality (Rodríguez, 2005). The poetry of Blas Jiménez (1950–2009), cultivated over three decades in many senses from the margins, stands as a potent literary challenge to the virulent ethnic hatred espoused by the rhetoric of establishment figures such as Joaquín Balaguer. Antonio Lockward and Norberto James Rawlings, like Juan Sánchez Lamouth (1929–1968) before them have cultivated Dominican blackness from within the society in terms which contest official dogma, point to multiple axes of internal exile within the Dominican home and celebrate African diasporic culture through the prisms of immigration and cross border fusions. Reading progressive Dominican scholars and literary practitioners such as Rodríguez, Jiménez, Lockward, Rawlings and Sánchez Lamouth amplifies the significance of Silvio Torres-Saillant's warning against some of the prevailing discussions on the question of race among critics of Dominican racism. More judgment than analysis, Torres-Saillant contends, certain strands of the discussion exaggerate the exceptionality of Dominican negrophobia and often impute to the "entire Dominican population the words and deeds of the country's rulers" (Torres-Saillant, 2006: 181). This approach to the study of race in Dominican culture Torres-Saillant laments, tends to supplant what he refers to as the "good story of Dominican blackness" (Torres-Saillant, 2006: 182) the one that bears witness to a far more balanced sense of where Haiti stands in the national imaginary. In this de-emphasized aspect of Dominican history, he reminds us, racial inclusion is a founding principle of the nation and Dominicans are at the forefront of black liberation in the Americas (Torres-Saillant, 2006: 184).

It is this complex understanding of the pitfalls and triumphs of her country's cultural and political history that emboldens the female voice in *Evalsion/les*, Chiqui Vicioso's epic poem. *Evalsion/les* re-inscribes history through both myth and gender. More importantly it stages the Dominican Republic as a place where the old regimes, old politics and old androcentric meanings have now lost their immediacy if not their import within a woman-centred poetics and a woman centred world. Central to the re-inscription of meaning and the pronunciation of the death of the *Ancien Régime* is the place of the border, the relationship with Haiti and thus the significance of Africa and Africanness within both lived experience and national political discourse. *Evalsion/les* speaks to the creation of a productive reconciliation which goes beyond the paralysis of patriarchal/patriotic decrees which privilege cultural separation. This impulse is what drives the poem: "Ignorante de decretos / Analfabeta / la vida se abre paso / entre

dispersos pilotos fronterizos / muralla de papel / en los desiertos" (Vicioso, 2007: 22).

Haiti and the Dominican Republic are re-united in the text not in the past but in a utopia of the present. The bitter sweet taste of sugar and all that it implies is present at the very end of the poem but this becomes an occasion to celebrate the rich mixed heritage of the two countries:

Trompetas de Jericó:
De la risa de la mujer y la niña
Surge de los escombros del llanto
Una Quisqueya de azúcar
Un Ayití de pájaros y soles
(Vicioso, 2007: 24).

DEL ROJO DE SU SOMBRA: SEXUAL AND RELIGIOUS EMERGENCE ON THE BORDER

One of the irrefutable conclusions that might be drawn from the embroiled debates concerning the events of 1937 and the wider border politics in which they are enmeshed is that the state, in both the Dominican Republic and Haiti, has repeatedly betrayed and abandoned its duty of care to its most vulnerable citizens. In the case of Trujillo this is hardly an issue for debate and making an apt comparison to Hitler, Torres-Saillant has identified the dictator's betrayal of the country in making Dominican citizens "cómplices de su empresa delin-cuencial" (Torres-Saillant, 2003: 228). And it would not be improbable to surmise that cross-national political machinations leading up to and succeeding the massacre played a beneficial role in securing Élie Lescot's presidency of Haiti (1941–1946). If the lives of the Haitian migrant workers are the ultimate symbol of the complicated history of the border, their destinies are also marked by the denial of their rights as citizens by both nation states. Mayra Montero's *Del rojo de su sombra* (Montero, 1992) is a fictional elaboration of this constituency that has been erased consistently, except when politically expedient, from the official narrative discourse of both societies. Imbued with a trans-Caribbean sensibility, the novel distances itself from insular and sectarian understandings of Caribbean cultural identity.

A quintessential border text, *Del rojo de su sombra* has as its thematic focus Gagá, a socio-religious practice followed by Haitians and their descendants who live in the sugar growing regions of the Dominican Republic. Most of the inhabitants of this region are migrant workers who, as Mayra Montero says in her introductory note to the reader, are forced to live "a life of untold privation and misery in working conditions patterned after the cruellest slave regimes" (Montero, 2002: xiii). Their religious beliefs, encapsulated in the Gagá, are the only thing they have to cling to and the novel explores

in painful, sensitive and beautiful detail the community's multiple negotiations between body and soul. Recent anthropological work (Landies, 2009) has highlighted the function of Gagá as a healing community and Montero's novel, I will argue, is an attempt to show the Gagá as a site of social and psychological refuge for the constituency whose destiny it investigates. As Margarite Fernández-Olmos has pointed out in her seminal study of the novel, Gagá is an interesting example of non-traditional Caribbean syncretism since instead of a hybridity between the European and the colonized, Gagá exemplifies a second type of syncretism, one between ex-colonized peoples (Fernández-Olmos, 1997: 273). One might say that this is the religious component to the hybridized identity spoken by Danticat's character cited earlier. Gagá is a religious socio-cultural performance emanating from Haitian travelling groups whose climax in a highly carnivalesque procession during holy week. The Gagá travels great distances throughout the countryside of the border region and in the process often comes into contact with other Gagás. The encounter, says Montero in the blurb to the novel, can be absolutely cordial or extremely bloody, "dependiendo del humor impredecible de los dioses" (Montero, 1992: 10). Culturally hybrid, Gagá accommodates both orthodoxy and transgression and embodies productively dialogic negotiations of difference.

Del rojo de su sombra tells the story of Zulé a Gagá priestess and her all consuming passion for Similá who is himself a Gagá priest and a former member of Duvalier's paramilitary force, the ton ton macoute. Zulé and Similá are lovers as well as rivals since he is a leader of a competing Gagá. The narrative is inspired by real events which took place just a few years before the novel was published. A tumultuous affair between a voodoo priest and a priestess culminate in the murder of the priestess. The Dominican police write the case off as a "crime of passion" and through the creation of an epic narrative Montero redresses the dismissal of the significance of the lives of the marginalized Haitian communities that is implied in this official response to the murder. On one level, *Del rojo de su sombra* is a disaster novel. Zulé's story is one of flight, flight from Haiti to the Dominican Republic, flight from hunger and the tragic loss of mother and brothers in the massacre river on the Haitian side of the border. But her destination in the bateys on the Dominican side is hardly paradise. There are several indices in the novel that point to the acute social difficulty which defines Zulé's border life. What is painted in stark detail from the opening pages of the novel is a poignant picture of neo-slavery in the Caribbean at the end of the 20th century. But what is more significant about *Del rojo de su sombra* is its investment in and exploration of the spiritual world of the labourers. So while the novel does not ignore the material

specificities of batey life or the lack of a political will on the part of Dominican officials to address those difficulties, those difficulties are counter-balanced by the passion and strength derived from the spiritual beliefs of the characters.

The novel moves between the spiritual and the physical, oscillates between good and evil, heterosexuality and homosexuality and indeed between life and death. Thus as a border text, liminality rather determinacy is the preferred mode of fictional articulation. Zulé is forced to defend her Gagá against that of Similá's. But at the same time she is forced to struggle with and against the overwhelming sexual desire she feels towards him. The meaning of this duality is only completely fruitful through an engagement with the spiritual forces or loas which each character represents. Zulé is Erzuli-Freda, at once virgin and goddess of love. Similá, whose grandfather is killed in the 1937 massacre, represents Toro Belecou who is a very virile, hyper-masculine loa who has three testicles. Similá, who significantly also has three testicles, is not just a priest but a Bokor, a priest who works with both hands, having the capacity to do both good and evil. It is important to note here that as far as Gagá cosmology is concerned Zulé is a suitable match for Similá Bolosse because in one of her many incarnations, the loa mistress Erzuli is also Erzuli-Toro (the Bull).

Montero refers to the protagonists interchangeably by their spiritual and earthly names. Thus the novel tells socio-political history through Gagá theology. After much passion, tension and suspense, Zulé is stabbed to death when both Gagá's finally meet each other. Interestingly enough her death does not come from the source which the reader expects. She is killed by Jérémie Candé a half African/half Chinese member of her Gagá whose relationship with her is a source of rage and sexual jealousy throughout the novel. If we are to read *Del rojo de su sombra* purely as a disaster novel, then her tragic death at the end completes the cycle of a universe of doom staged from the opening pages of her story.

But the novel demands to be read in terms of what it suggests about salvation rather than tragedy. An erotic vocabulary becomes indispensable in narrating this process which is at once religious and sexual; in other words Montero harnesses the transcendental potential within the carnal quotidian dynamics, in this case of migrant communities on the Haitian-Dominican border, which has always been a feature of new world syncretic spiritual worldviews. As Zulé walks toward Similá Bolosse in what could either be a final duel, a showdown, or an amorous highly eroticised reconciliation Jérémie Candé approaches her from behind and stabs her in a fit of jealousy.

Zulé's first incarnation as Erzuli Freda, her birth as the loa so to speak, appears in the novel after a torrid ten day sexual olympiad in which she

is slaughtered, subdued and abandoned by Similá: “Similá Bolosse la destazó así mismo, como se destazaba los careyes de la costa, la revolcó sobre los taburetes derribados y la sometió mil veces, haciéndola besar la tierra” (Montero, 1992: 91). In the final encounter between Zulé/Erzuli-Freda and Similá/Toro Belecou the fatal attraction of sex is also paramount:

La Hija de Papa Luc, con la navaja en alto y la pelambre suelta se parece más que nunca a la metresa Erzuli-Freda, puta caliente del corazón profundo, amante de perfumes y condumios blancos, de todo lo que tenga harina y todo lo que huelga a leche. Cuentan los santos que la Metresa Freda se empeñó en probar la meaja de Toro Belecou. Pero Toro Belecou se dedicó a humillarla, la maltrató en las noches y la obligó a beber de los orines blancos que desaguaban por aquellos tiempos las culebras negras ... Zulé echa a caminar hacia el bokor, sumisa, como si le hubieran ofrecido un refresco amarillo, un cigarillo mentolado, una enorme verga retinta, todo lo que más le gusta a la Metresa Freda. (Montero, 1992: 171)

It is at this point that Jérémie Candé attacks and kills Zulé. How is this to be read as a salvation text which distances itself from the discourse of barbarism which I have been arguing permeates much of the Dominican texts on Haitians? Well Montero is engaged in witnessing a spiritual struggle; one in which the terms of sacrifice and redemption are rewritten in gendered terms that correspond with the priorities of new world syncretic religious cultures. In the novel Jérémie Candé is the earthly counterpart of the loa Carfú who, in Gagá, is the lord of the Crossroads. As a server of Carfú, his jealous rage is re-semanticized as spirit possession. One of the descriptions of the loa Erzuli-freda is “The dream impaled eternally upon the cosmic crossroads where the world of men and the world of divinity meet” (Deren, 1983: 145). Erzuli crucified then becomes the opportunity for the earthly and the celestial to converge. Zulé, who from the beginning of the novel is imaged interchangeably as messiah and sexual transgressor at this point merges both aspects of her identity in what is instantly a sacrificial death and a sexual/spiritual *ménage à trois* between Erzuli-Freda, Toro Belecou and Carfú. Here the love, passion, tenacity and defiance of the black Haitian woman are conduits through which a collective salvation might be achieved. The white male crucified Christ is replaced in Gagá by the black Haitian woman whose death ought, the novel seems to be suggesting, to stand for, in some way, the possibility of the reversal of fortune for her people.

To return from the mythical to the more immediate socio-political dimension of the novel, there is a clear distinction to be made between the intransigent structural pressures imposed on the characters and their tenacious capacity, nonetheless,

to survive and foster a dynamic cooperative cultural environment. The novel serves as a brilliant testament to the essential nobility of the human spirit and its potential to make alliances even in the face of unrelenting institutional obstacles. As a corollary to this discourse on spiritual alliance *Del rojo de su sombra* also bears witness to a powerful natural recognition between black bodies which propels them towards each other variously through maternal, filial, religious or erotic impulses. In all cases these bodily alliances between blacks are never superfluous or gratuitous. Depicted with urgency, they fulfil very primal needs of survival and of self-knowledge.

As I have indicated above, disease, death and deprivation permeate the individual life stories in *Del rojo de su sombra*. The massacre river is a haunting protagonist wielding its mystical/mythical powers of death and destruction decimating Zulé’s family on the Haitian side of the border. The poisonous fallout of a corrupt Haitian political apparatus exacerbates the crippling effects of poverty and natural disasters on the residents of the batey. Never named explicitly but referred to as the big boss, (el *mandamás*), Jean Claude Duvalier (Baby Doc) and the social evils of his regime are both the context and the subtext of the novel. In fact, through his fusion of destructive criminality, political corruption and a decided immersion in the negative potential of voodoo culture (he bathes in blood indicating his intention to kill) Similá Bolosse powerfully recalls Baby Doc’s pernicious legacy. Fleeing Haiti after the fall of Jean Claude Duvalier, the macoutes extend their reign of terror into the bateys on the Dominican side of the border, disrupt the rules which it establishes for itself and destabilize its fragile sense of peace. It is not Similá’s “identity” as Haitian or his designation as voodoo priest that marks him out as the major source of evil in the text. It is clear that it is his association with a corrupt regime, his criminal activities (drug trafficking, human trafficking) and his contamination of religious rituals that set him at odds with the moral codes upheld by the rest of the community.

The conflict between Zulé and Similá is therefore essentially a conflict of commerce and economics as far as Similá is concerned and one of law and integrity as far as Zulé is concerned. The mistress refuses to allow him to traffic drugs through the Colonia Engracia batey, in so doing scuppers a major deal of his and thus becomes a target for revenge. So the border becomes the site of a war not between Haitians and Dominicans but between a Haitian man and a Haitian woman each representing two different moral and ethical standpoints. Bounded by sexual desire they nevertheless embody opposing moral energies; while the one exploits all the destructive possibilities of new world syncretic powers the other signifies their regenerative and ennobling potential. This disparity between the two becomes clear from

their very first encounter. Arriving in the community diseased, starved, naked and alone Similá leaves healed, fed, dressed and with his sexual appetites sated. However he repays the vulnerable Zulé with complete arrogance and ingratitude.¹⁰

Ironically, the war between Zulé and Similá becomes one of the many opportunities in the novel in which the cooperative alliances between Haitians and Dominicans most forcefully emerge. Zulé's informants, guides, protectors and consolers come from both sides. Restrictive concepts of national identity and national solidarity have no meaning in the negotiations in which Zulé and her followers are engaged. The transactions between Zulé and Lino the Haitian are a case in point. Lino the Haitian, who is not in fact Haitian but a Dominican from the Cibao region of the country, is twice indebted to Zulé who has used her powers to save his life and rescue him from imminent dispossession. In exchange, Lino the Haitian who the narrator describes as "un hombre agradecido" (Montero, 1992: 80) repays her with food and shelter for her gagá and more importantly with key intelligence concerning the whereabouts, grievances and battle plans of Similá Bolosse. The text exposes a political sensibility in the community which is far removed from insular and prejudicial understandings of nationhood. If the institutionalized memories of a politically oppressive past (1822–1844, 1937) continue to be manipulated to suit the purposes of divisive cultural nationalisms on both sides of the border, in *Del rojo de su sombra* Montero creates a border community in which ethnicity is often forgotten, literally. The discriminatory social constructs of the larger society marginalize the border community and define, initially, the terms within which people establish contact and relate to each other. However the familiarity of social, economic, religious and sexual communion, (the reality of quotidian dynamics) shatters the contempt learned through collective memory. While an inherited language of ethnic malice remains readily available as a resource for trading insults or for the articulation of fear or presumed moral and cultural superiority, in execution it loses its discriminatory meanings.

The evolution of Anacaona as a pivotal figure within the world of *Del rojo de su sombra* helps to demonstrate the novel's investment in exposing the inherent fluidity of identity and the transformative potential of border life implied in my discussion so far. Married consecutively to two Haitian brothers, Zulé's uncle and father respectively, she defies doubly the fear and prohibition of inter-ethnic sex which defines her family background. A false yet potent sense of ethnic supremacy, a kind of somatic delusion, characterises the politics of sexual desire among Anacaona's Dominican peers. In a social environment where Haitian cane cutters both need and want wives (Montero, 1992: 23), Dominican women

"reinaban distantes y burlonas ... y se resistían a juntar sus carnes mejoradas con la polvorienta negritud de aquellos bichos de cañaveral" (Montero, 1992: 22–23). However, despite the "chaparrón de maldiciones" from her family, Anacaona abandons their ethnocentric values, forges her sexual and economic destiny with Haitians and participates in the creation of a new border family. Hence Anacaona, the Dominican archetype, becomes the mother of Haitian Zulé. In the ensuing years and amidst the vicissitudes of loving, living and enduring this hybridity, the translation of her identity is marked not by a tenacious memory of ethnicity but of communal oblivion of origin. Overcoming Dominican condemnation and Haitian suspicion Anacaona learns the cultural mores of the community and comes to symbolize the ecumenical potential of the border:

Pero Anacaona se las fue ganando una por una. Aprendió a decir de sus palabras y a cocinar un poco de sus guisos, y al nacerle el primer hijo, que le salió retinto y mohíno como Jean-Claude, la gente terminó por olvidar de dónde había venido (Montero, 1992: 23).

People forget where she came from and the text is emphatic in cementing the fact that Anacaona also forgets where Zulé and her father came from (Montero, 1992: 30, 89, 107, 176). The priority accorded to the erasure of a deterministic significance to origin and a concomitant inscription of a new trans-national border family is evidenced in the totality with which Anacaona assumes the mothering of Zulé. This is poignantly revealed through the staging of rituals of care at Zulé's *de facto* border birth (her first arrival in the batey) and at her departure in death:

Anacaona lava el cadáver de Zulé con la lentitud rigurosa de quien adoba un animal abierto. Ha empezado por el final, raspándole las plantas de los pies y metiendo entre los dedos una toallita blanca para sacar la sangre seca; luego le sube por las corvas, frotando las rodillas que nunca fueron del color del resto de su cuerpo, es decir, que siempre fueron grises.

- La bañé cuando llegó al batey y la baño ahora que se me va (Montero, 1992: 175).

Haitian-Dominican border practices (social and religious) incorporate a transcendental sense of the way the constituency lives and understands itself. *Del rojo de su sombra* distances itself from Anti-Haitian scepticism which vilifies Haitian-Dominican syncretic practices. To return to where I started, in *Del rojo de su sombra* there is no rapacious black yearning for white flesh. Within the erotics of Gagá it is the white dominant society which becomes irrelevant as either object or

subject of desire. Despite the abject poverty in which they live the characters are seen to inhabit a highly developed spiritual universe and are participants in a sexual economy which is culturally self-sustaining and self-sufficient. Also the insistence on difference and separation (us and them) advocated by authors such as Balaguer, del Cabral and Hernández Franco and which is satirized in Vargas Llosa's *La fiesta del chivo* disappears in *Del rojo de su sombra*. Here it is replaced by the recasting of a highly complex and functional cultural border syncretism. The novel lifts the characters way beyond the squalid poverty of their everyday lives and invests them with a power and authority which only a deep engagement with the spiritual world can confer. Thus out of sex, fear and loathing the characters emerge redeemed.

NOTES

1. Enunciated at what turns out to be his last supper these disingenuous pronouncements concerning putative sacrificial self-culpability punctuate Vargas Llosa's sardonic treatment of the dictator's diplomacy which is a running theme throughout the novel.
2. See for example a discussion of race, immigration law and US foreign policy in *They Take Our Jobs...* (Chomsky, 2007).
3. Of course the Dominican/Haitian relationship in this sense is the rule rather than the exception as far as Caribbean racial and sexual relations are concerned. Even the most cursory social history of the region must automatically take into account the definitive role that hate, desire and sex play in the construction of society.
4. Itself crucially marred by ethnocentricity, Crassweller's biography, using the politically correct language of the day, blames an inherited border culture of pillage and violence rather than "colour prejudice" as the catalyst for the 1937 massacre. There is not enough scope in this essay to attempt an exegesis on Crassweller's concept of blackness and African inspired socio-cultural practices but even a brief assessment of his commentary on Haitians, law, disease and religion in this account of Trujillo's life will suffice to show the troubling similarities between his viewpoint and that of Trujillo's intellectuals.
5. Though not many, it must be noted that del Cabral had influential predecessors in this regard. The nineteenth and early twentieth century figures of Muñoz del Monte (1800–1868) and Juan Antonio Alix (1833–1918) were the most important.
6. Civil servant and diplomatic representative of the government Hernández Franco, like Manuel del Cabral, was effectively a part of the official machinery of the Trujillo government.
7. The compelling poetry of Gloria Anzaldúa's analysis of the US/Mexican border, offered almost twenty five years ago, demands to be quoted here: "Do not enter. Trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled and shot" (Anzaldúa, 1987: 25).
8. For a highly informative discussion on the work of Sonia Pierre and her grassroots organization MUDHA see Duke (2009) and Ferguson (2006). Myriam Neptune's moving and elegantly narrated thirteen minute film Birthright Crisis indicates, among other things, the joint work of Haitian and Dominican activists outraged at contemporary human rights violations of Haitians by the Dominican government.
9. This has been published in translation as *Divergent Dictions* (Rodríguez, 2010).
10. I am not suggesting an uncomplicated moral dichotomy in which the evil *Similá* is a complete contrast to a "good" *Zulé*. *Zulé* is flawed on many levels and this characterization of

her is consistent with the voodoo worldview in which there is no essential good or evil but rather a complex relational understanding of bound and free flowing spiritual energies. On this issue see Brown (1998).

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