

History at the Crossroads: Vodú and the Modernization of the Dominican Borderland

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To articulate the past historically does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger. The danger threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it. For both, it is one and the same thing: the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer; he comes as the victor over the Antichrist. The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious.

Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History”

In his last known writings, Walter Benjamin argued that forgetting the “later course of history” was the key to discovering the past. Historical events offer multiple interpretations if the hegemonic present does not blind us to them.¹ We have to question the authoritative story, master narratives that naturalize elite perspectives and control as the inevitable outcome of history. Benjamin encouraged critical historians to “brush history against the grain,” subjecting it to alternative readings that question master narratives. The goal of critical interpretation is to break free of the “whore called ‘once upon a time’” in order to “blast open the continuum of history” (Benjamin 2003a (1940): 391-2; 396).

Sharing Benjamin’s suspicion of master narratives, Eric Wolf’s *Europe and the People without History* (1982) suggested that anthropologists reintroduce

history into the discipline as a means of reinvigorating it. The discipline, Wolf argued, was trapped into reifying the “West” and its supposed correlates: Christianity, democracy, Reason, industrialization, etc. The “Western Civilization” discourse overemphasized difference and downplayed how local cultures were globally shaped. The misplaced focus on purity and isolation obscured the dialogic production of culture, ignoring hybridity and the development of networks. Thus, Wolf criticized anthropological studies for reducing “dynamic, interconnected phenomena into static, disconnected things,” mainly by failing to highlight how global processes shaped specific cultures, places, and people (Wolf 1982:4-5). He imagined that critical history could be the way out of this quagmire.

Wolf conceptualized history neither as a straight chronological account, nor as a Greek myth (i.e., an allegorical tale of civilization, superiority, and conquest). Instead, Wolf’s history reflected the relentless search to momentarily capture the faint, multi-vocal echoes of the past. His anthropology recognized the multiple authorship of history because “common people were as much agents as they were victims and silent witnesses” (Wolf 1982: x). Wolf places us firmly on Walter Benjamin’s ground, sifting through the trash of history – those neglected, discarded, or suppressed people, events, ideas, and objects from the past – in order to uncover the multi-vocal history of modernity. Paying close attention to contested historical interpretations illuminates the dialogic nature of culture, complicating the false dichotomies that two-dimensional anthropology rests upon. It also forces us to place contemporary instantiations of global processes within a broader historical context that also considers how late 19th century nationalist modernization campaigns, for example, reflected anxieties about the racial, religious, and economic circulations that were occurring across the territorial and cultural boundaries elites were trying so assiduously to fix.

In the pages that follow, I examine these issues within the context of turn-of-the 20th century Dominican Republic. Many aspects of Dominican culture remain obscured and ignored as a result of the consolidation of Dominican nationalism, *Dominicanidad*. While Afro-Dominicans comprise the largest racial population in the country, and black cultural practices – like Dominican *Vodú* – are important components of national culture, these practices are not recognized within official versions of Dominican uniqueness that affirm the nationalist myth that Dominican culture is exclusively White, Spanish, and

Catholic. Yet despite its unofficial status, *Vodú* remains an important repository of popular Dominican history.

Dominican *Vodú* is a web of Afro-Dominican religious institutions – secret societies, carnival groups, Catholic brotherhoods, and healing cults. Each historical period has left its mark on Dominican *Vodú*, which has incorporated new materials, ideologies, and spirits. Taíno culture and history, slavery, marronage, the Haitian revolution, and military occupations are all reflected in *Vodú* rituals and spirits. *Vodú* spirits – *loas* in Haitian Kreyol and *luases* in Dominican Spanish – Sämi Ludwig points out, are more than spiritual beings, they are signs of history. “Like Bakhtin’s ‘language,’” he writes, “the *loas* are fundamentally rooted in history; they represent the ‘socio-ideological’ points of view of ancestral tradition” (Ludwig 1994:328). As such, the spirits and practices of *Vodú* can be read as what James Scott would call a “hidden transcript:”

If subordinate discourse in the presence of the dominant is a public transcript, I shall use the term *hidden transcript* to characterize discourse that takes place “offstage,” beyond direct observation by the powerholders. The hidden transcript is thus derivative in the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript (Scott 1990:4-5).

As a hidden transcript, *Vodú* constitutes an alternative public sphere where its adherents address their past, present, and future. Therefore, the religion provides an excellent text to chart the march of the “people without history” through Dominican history.

In this essay, I consider the reaction of Afro-Dominican peasants in the San Juan Valley to the Dominican modernization campaign initiated by local elites in the latter half of the 19th century. Elites hoped that modern reforms would stamp out the national habits they considered “primitive,” blocking the promise of “civilization.” Peasants in the San Juan Valley did not simply resist these reforms, they used *Vodú* to articulate an alternative vision of the “modern” future. In 1908, nearly forty years after the start of the modernization campaign, a messianic leader named Olivorio Mateo (often called Liborio) emerged in the San Juan Valley. His emergence and the new rituals generated by his appearance

(*Liborismo*) represented the creation of fresh spirits to capture the “socio-ideological” experiences of the people. My essay begins with an examination of the modernization campaign, exploring the racial and geographic desires embodied in the campaign, and then moves on to an account of Liborio’s appearance and the significance of *Liborismo* as an alternative vision of Dominican modernity. I conclude by highlighting the legacy of the *Liborista* movement and its struggle to guide Dominican futures through the contemporary global moment.

Dominican Modernism

Modernity, Trouillot contends, is an ambiguous term. A universal modernism does not exist; instead, there are countless modernities, even in supposed pre-modern places (Trouillot 2002:220-2; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1997; Mbembe 2001). When contemplating modernity, we are really engaging with a sign, a near empty, fluid signifier that reflects meaning in relation to specific and particular places, cultures, politics, histories, and economies. All these relations rest on a foundation of desire, the dreams of a better tomorrow. But as we know, one person’s dreams are another’s nightmares. Modernity, therefore, should be considered not so much a condition as a project, the mobilization of particular desires as means to achieve a contingent “progress.” The project consists of two parts: modernization and modernity. Modernization seeks to materially change the physical world, signaling the realization of desire. Trouillot writes:

To speak of modernization is to put the accent on the material and organizational features of world capitalism in specific locales. It is to speak of that geography of management, of these aspects of the development of world capitalism that reorganize space for explicitly political and economic purposes (2002:223).

The modernist project combines modernization, a material change, with modernity, an idealist transformation. Modernity is a geography of the imagination, a “map” of collective desires, dreams, and hopes defined against the backdrop of places in time (past, present, and future) and space (here and elsewhere). It is imagined dialogically, in relation to people, events, and places with which particular groups do not want to identify (Trouillot 2002:224-5). It

is the combination of the material and the ideological that comprise the topography of Dominican modernism.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Dominican political and economic elites began to imagine a different future, a tomorrow based in modernism. Dominican modernist desire grew out of the broader Hispanic modernism that had fueled independence movements throughout Latin America in the first half of the 19th century. Employing the language of social Darwinism (e.g., development, progress, and order), Hispanic-American modernism promised an egalitarian and prosperous future for all who followed its doctrine (Zavala 1992:9). The Dominican dreamscape emphasized national autonomy in the face of dwindling Spanish colonialism, continuing Haitian economic and political dominance, and rising American imperialism. Autonomy, the elite reasoned, could only be achieved by establishing a modern nation state defined by stable boundaries and a distinctive Dominican identity coupled with economic liberalization and technological innovation (Zavala 1992:2-4).

The establishment of modern sugar plantations across the country, financed by Cuban and American capitalists in the 1870s, launched Dominican modernization in earnest. Sugar became the engine of Dominican modernism, pushing the country into the new technological age. While the cultivation of sugar on the island began in the 15th century, the 19th century sugar plantation and its *central* (mill) marked a new stage of its evolution, characterized by its massive scale, steam power, scientific planning, time schedules, and advanced agricultural methods (Moya Pons 1981:218). The signs of modernism spread from the plantation into the surrounding landscape. The newly expanded urban centers surrounding the plantations (e.g., San Pedro de Marcóris) became de facto expositions of modernity with their opulent displays of trains, electricity, parks, and grand houses, all heralding the world to come (Baud 1987:140-145). Before long, sugar fostered societal changes in regions outside the southern and eastern plantation belt, even in areas like the San Juan Valley.

Located in the central southwest region of the country bordering Haiti, the San Juan Valley had long been characterized by porous borders, subsistence agriculture, political and economic isolation, and fluid bicultural identities. Although the area was marginal due to its relative isolation, the emerging Dominican State assigned a central, symbolic role to the frontier. Everything about the frontier, the elites despaired, demonstrated the weakness of the Dominican State. The bilingualism of the region, the population's economic

orientation to the then more prestigious Haiti, its political autonomy, and the large Haitian (read Afro-Dominican) population challenged elite dreams of the future. Not surprisingly, the area became a test of Dominican modernism's power to impose firm borders, a modern plantation economy, political and economic subordination to a centralized state, and a stable national identity (a "we" diametrically opposed to "them"). Therefore, the Valley became an important battleground of Dominican modernism, and many intentional and unintentional changes were wrought on the borderlands (Baud 1993:51).

Before the onset of the modernization campaign, and for some time after, cattle-ranching was the principle economic activity of the San Juan Valley. National elites considered cattle-ranching an obstacle to modernization because the cattle economy was based on free roaming animals, unfenced communal lands, and transnational grazing spaces ("Dominican" animals were kept on both sides of the border). The Valley's small-scale ranchers – most of whom placed their products (hides, meats, etc.) into global circulation through Haiti, which denied export duties to the Dominican state – against the modern ideals of "mechanized" production (e.g., the steam driven sugar plantation), private property, and firm national boundaries. Under the modernization campaign, however, sugar began to assert its hegemonic power in the San Juan Valley, remaking the economy.

The rapid development of sugar plantations in the eastern and southern parts of the country created a related displacement of cattle ranching in the San Juan Valley. As southern towns like Azua and Barahona abandoned staple food crop production (manioc, rice, beans, plantains, and potatoes) in favor of the more profitable sugar, cultivation of these staple products shifted north into the San Juan Valley, challenging the cattle economy. These economic shifts prompted other changes, including the privatization of communal lands and the fencing of the Valley (Lundahl and Lundius 1990:219). A culture based on communal access to land for subsistence crops and the right to hunt wild cattle came to an end with the privileging of individual-oriented models of property ownership. As a result, dispossessed campesinos were forced into wage labor on the sugar plantations outside of the San Juan Valley.

Yet the modernization campaign did more than change labor and production in the Valley; it also reoriented Valley trade away from its traditional markets. Dominicans in the borderlands had maintained important trading relationships with their more prosperous neighbor in the west since the creation

of the French colony of Saint Domingue in the 16th century. Contraband Valley trade circumvented the state circuit by exporting untaxed cattle into Haiti while importing consumer goods into the domestic markets without increasing the state coffers. The untaxed flow of goods represented a grave threat to Dominican national consolidation because the government was desperate for funds to repay the costly loans used to finance its modernization campaign. To ensure the repayment of the loans, American banks took control of the country's customhouses, applying the collected duties to the repayment of the debt. By 1905, the U.S. government intervened directly, taking control of the Dominican customhouses from the banking interests, in order to guarantee the repayment of the international loans (Moya Pons 1995:281-291). The contraband trade also stymied the Dominican government's efforts to reorient the economic center of the Valley away from Port-au-Prince and back toward Santo Domingo. Thus, the evolving Dominican state considered the trade a serious financial and political threat. The elimination of unregulated trade became one of the important goals of Dominican modernism.

Despite resistance, the modernization project forged ahead. There would be no return to communal lands, untaxed trade, or wild cattle. Under the cover of Dominican sovereignty, U.S. control deepened as the Dominican government took out more loans to advance its dreams. The more capital American financial institutions risked in the Dominican Republic, the less they were willing to trust Dominican politicians to safeguard their economic interests. In 1916, the U.S. government, using political unrest as a cover, invaded the country, occupying it for the next eight years. The more extensive American military occupation accelerated the modernization project and the formalization of the border (Lundahl and Lundius 1990:215). While the U.S. occupation ended in 1924, the U.S. government only relinquished control of Dominican customs in 1940.

Dominican modernism, then, complicates simplistic claims of "progress" and "development." Nationally, sugar provided the engine for decades of change that reshaped every region of the country. In the Dominican borderlands, the new economic, political, and social realities produced different results in the San Juan Valley. There were no shiny new trains, no advanced sugar plantations, nor tremendous displays of conspicuous wealth. Yet, the physical signs of change were evident. The shift from a wild cattle economy to staple crop production, the transformation of communal lands into privatized

domains, development of the “stateless” borderlands into the state defended border, and the transfer of power from the “local” elites to transnational political formations (e.g., the American borderland officials and their Dominican military forces) marked Dominican modernization in the Valley. But this new physical environment was not enough for the Dominican elite; they also wanted to shape a new national imagination of Dominican modernity.

Racial and Regional Geographies of Dominican Modernity

Dominican modernism was more than a sum of new economic practices, shifting forms of consumption, and increasing scales of production. It was an ideology, a discourse of desire that sought to transform colonial society and its citizens (Zavala 1992:4). The desire to become modern meant completing the transition into the future by breaking completely with a past of colonial subjectivity and reshaping national “habits” into modern practices that signaled progress and order. Elites hoped that a thorough reordering of the national imagination would bridge the gap between modernization and modernity, and the national image that they sought to foster reflected their anxieties about class, gender, racial, and regional differences and inequalities.

Dominican elites coupled their optimism – fanned by vibrant economic growth – with liberal ideas from the political and social revolutions of Europe and the U.S.:

Heavily influenced by European positivism, such Dominican liberals as Américo Lugo argued that due to the “deficiency” of the Dominican racial mixture and low level of mass literacy, the “people” were not prepared for self-governing democracy as in the United States. In this view, the state must be accorded the role both of educator of civic values and of agent of nationhood. The state, lead by the “cultured” aristocracy, must be a civilizing force exercised through “tutelary law,” a force that both collectivized the nation as it separated individuals (Derby 1994:501).

The elite targeted the Dominican social habits that were considered uncivilized, low-class, or unproductive for reform. New state laws would impose, they adamantly believed, bourgeois habits on the population, fostering greater economic growth, social harmony, and individual happiness. State

financed modernization projects (e.g., schools, parks, and sanitation schemes) supplemented the laws. These projects occurred alongside transformations in Dominican racial ideology. Prior to 1870, elites perceived Afro-Dominicans as “immoral” (e.g., shameless and lazy) and “primitive.” The onset of the modernist campaign caused elites to view black Dominicans as a biological threat, capable of derailing the modernist project through miscegenation. A newspaper article written in 1914 warned Dominicans of the relationship between racial make-up and development potential: “The degree of civilization and general culture among the Ibero-American people can be measured by the size of the African population they lodge” (*Listín Diario* quoted in Lundius and Lundahl 2000:573). The large population of Blacks and Mulattoes became the explanation for the major problems (e.g., political instability, economic crisis, and underdevelopment) facing the country. Blackness thus became a stain on the balance sheet of modernity.

Dominican modernists sought to privilege an ideal somatic type (white/European), preferred regions (Cibao and Southeast), dominant gender (male), and supreme status (property owner) – standards that would define the modern Dominican citizen. Regions and national subjects that diverged from these standards were deemed threatening, and would have to be transformed. San Juan and *Sanjuaneros* were targeted for change:

However, the border has concurrently been seen by *capitaleño* elites as the primordial sign and site of barbarism, of a hybrid space of racial and international admixture, and of the dangers of caudillo, or strongman, rule. Inherited from Spain, this imaginary spatial map delimits those included and excluded from the nation and has justified conquest by the Creole elite from the cosmopolitan capital, in which civilization resides, of the savage and uncontrolled backlands, which represent barbarism... The border or skin of the body politic was perceived to be transgressive because it mixed social taxonomies, was a threat to the nation in its very liminality, and was an area as yet undomesticated by the state (Derby 1994:491).

The San Juan Valley, imagined as Black, was therefore seen as a threat to the economic, geographical and racial desires of the modernist project.

In the new order, the San Juan Valley was clearly part of the past. The elite dreamed of rescuing the valley from its isolation and autonomy. In order to achieve its goal, the Valley's purportedly backward tendencies had to be changed, by force if necessary. Elites hoped that an emphasis on privately owned (rather than communally held) property, building fences, the development of vagrancy laws, and a heavily defended border would force *Sanjuaneros* into the nation-state. In turn, these geographically focused efforts would also allow the state to challenge the racially "inferior" types who resided in these regions. Afro-Dominicans had to be broken of their "natural" inclination toward vice and idleness that impeded the advancement of the entire country. Elites declared an open war on the *Sanjuaneros*, only to be met with an aggressive counter-vision of Dominican modernism, *Liborismo*.

Liborismo

The sugar economy created tremendous new wealth for the Dominican elite. Nevertheless, modernity was at best bittersweet for the Dominican majority; economically marginal areas like the San Juan Valley bore the brunt of the changes. Landless and persecuted by new vagrancy laws, male *Sanjuaneros* left the Valley in search of employment on the sugar plantations of the east and south, leaving their families to fend for themselves. Even those fortunate enough to find employment found it hard to cope with the rampant inflation caused by economic speculation. While elites assumed that Afro-Dominican religious practices would naturally die out as a result of modern economic transformations, pervasive unemployment, poverty, and social upheaval made *Vodú* even more vibrant, ultimately giving birth to *Liborismo* (Baud 1987:147). The popular classes in the San Juan Valley, rather than acquiescing to the elite versions of modernity, challenged the elite imposed program by offering alternative visions of the future. Their popular modernism embraced the need for "progress," but rejected any indiscriminate discarding of the "past." Instead, the past itself would provide the road map to the future. *Liborismo* was one embodiment of this vision.

Olivorio (Liborio) Mateo was a fifty-year-old Afro-Dominican campesino from the Valley who, long before his elevation into a *Vodú* prophet, had developed a reputation as a credible clairvoyant. Prior to 1908, Liborio had been a "soldier" of elite modernism. Working for a local political strongman in the Valley, Liborio served as a field hand helping to fence off the newly privatized

lands (Lundius 1995:41-45; Baud 1993:59). Popular history maintains that Liborio unexpectedly disappeared during a tremendous storm in 1908. Relatives and friends presumed that he died during the storm. On the ninth and final day of memorial services being held in his honor, he reappeared and recounted the story of his disappearance to those present: he had traveled far away, he told them, carried to heaven by an angel on a white horse. While in the spiritual realm, God recruited Liborio to be his servant to spread His word, cure illness, and save the world. Like Jesus's life, Liborio's mission was to last for a total of 33 years (Esteban Devie 1978: 187). Liborio revitalized a religion in need of renewal and a society in need of healing:

The blind, the maimed, the crippled, and the tuberculoid sought something more than a remedy for their chronic ailments. The ill appearance of these unfortunates was the symbol of an ailment more serious and general: the [affliction] of a whole society suffering in a situation of crisis. (Esteban Devie 1978:194)

As a novel materialization of divine power, he quickly attracted a faithful band of followers. The sick visited him from all corners of the republic in search of healing. Local newspaper articles reported in 1909 that over 2,500 people arrived weekly to see the messianic leader (Lundius 1995:51).

In the process of healing the sick, *Liborismo* articulated a popular vision of modernity. Elite defined sugar modernism advocated paid labor (rather than reciprocal labor), cash crops, privatized land, unfair distributions of profits, dependency, state law, and the related persecution of "primitive" culture. Liborio, in contrast, established his camp, *Ciudad Santa* (Holy City), based on shared volunteer labor (*convite*), equitable distribution of resources, subsistence agriculture, communal lands, self-sufficiency, spiritual law, and the celebration of Afro-Dominican culture. He also refused to charge for his services: "*Curaba pero no cobraba*" [He cured but did not charge]. Moreover, he and his followers welcomed visitors to *Ciudad Santa*, regardless of their class or background. Elite visitors mixed easily with contraband smugglers, fugitives from justice, and the poor in Liborio's camp (Lundius 1995:63-74).

The elite quickly recognized the threat posed by Liborio to their form of modernism. In 1909, a prominent medical doctor in San Juan accused the peasant healer of illegally practicing medicine. The doctor disapproved of

Liborio curing the sick with *Vodú* methods: herbs, rocks, charms, dreams, the laying of hands, crosses, rum, water, and prayers (Esteban Devie 1978:195). Other critics questioned his skills and honesty because of his class. For example, *La Voz del Sur*, a newspaper from San Cristobal in the South of the country, referred to Liborio as a “dirty vagrant, completely unable to take a headache from anybody” (*La Voz* quoted in Lundahl and Lundius 1990:201; Lundius 1995:51-52).

The Valley bourgeoisie also objected to the religious ceremonies occurring in *Ciudad Santa*, considering them indecent. Their disgust increased as the national press wrote sensationalist accounts of Liborio’s activities. The newspaper accounts depicted the ceremonies as shameful acts, pageants of provocative dancing, nudity, foul language, and sexual orgies. To demonstrate their commitment to elite modernism, the bourgeoisie and its agents stepped up the persecution of Liborio and his followers (Lundius 1995:63-68). The harassment only made Liborio more popular, especially as supernatural wonders, natural disasters, and political upheaval (the appearance of Haley’s Comet in 1910, the earthquake of 1911, and the civil war of 1912) pointed toward the imminent end of the world (Lundahl and Lundius 1989:10-16). His growing popularity did little to change elites’ view of Liborio; they continued to regard the messianic leader as a moral threat to the burgeoning Dominican future.

The *Liboristas*, followers of Liborio, constituted more than a moral threat, they were considered a security threat as well. Liborio and his followers possessed firearms acquired during their service in the civil war of 1912. The arms provided a measure of protection from the continuous harassment from government troops. When the Americans invaded the Dominican Republic in 1916, the armed *Liboristas* resisted the U.S. project of consolidating Dominican state authority and power. Moreover, the armed Valley residents aided the Haitian nationalists (*Cacos*) fighting a guerilla campaign against American forces across the Valley border following the 1915 U.S. invasion of Haiti. Because of labor, trade, and political alliances, as well as familial connections, Haitians and Dominicans who lived along the border also developed a shared sense of struggle and resistance. Many of the Haitian guerrillas had participated in the Dominican civil war of 1912 just as many of the *Liboristas* had taken part in the Haitian civil war of 1914. The later war brought the Haitian borderland caudillo, Oreste Zamora, to the presidency of Haiti for a brief period. The *Caco*

leader, Charlemagne Péralte, was believed to be one of Liborio's numerous Haitian adepts. The persistent Haitian resistance campaign occurring right across the border, made subjugating the San Juan Valley a central goal of American military strategy (Lundius 1995:226-227).

Liborio and his followers quickly came to the attention of the American authorities following the U.S. occupation of the Dominican Republic in 1916, and the American troops forced the *Liboristas* to surrender their weapons in early 1917. However, the disarmament did not ease the distrust or harassment of the *Liboristas*. Tensions continued to rise as members of the Valley elite, seeking to ingratiate themselves with the U.S. authorities, fabricated stories of pending attacks by the *Liboristas*. A force of U.S. marines set out in search of Liborio's mobile *Ciudad Santa* in the spring of 1917. On April 7th, the occupation forces engaged hundreds of *Liboristas* in a battle that lasted several hours. Nine of Liborio's followers were killed in the attack. In the battle's aftermath, the messianic leader reduced his group to only twenty loyal men and women, and they sought refuge in the mountainous forests of the San Juan Valley (Lundius 1995:91-97).

Liborio and his small band eluded the authorities for most of 1917 and 1918, despite the numerous traps set up to capture them. The group continuously moved throughout the Haitian-Dominican borderlands, healing the sick, tending to garden plots hidden deep in the mountains, and smuggling goods to and from Haiti. By 1918, Liborio's group joined Haitian nationalists (*Cacos*) in their fight against the American occupation of Haiti. The *Liboristas* fought against the U.S. troops in Haiti and provided sanctuaries and supplies for Haitian rebels in Dominican territory. *Liborista* participation in the Haitian resistance intensified the desire for occupation forces in both countries to destroy Liborio and his movement (Lundius 1995:97-115).

The American led Dominican National Guard (*GND*) aggressively pursued Liborio, destroyed his known camps, confiscated his food stores and cattle, and persecuted suspected adherents. Even after the death of Péralte in 1919, Liborio still managed to elude authorities for another three years. The *GND* finally caught up with Liborio in 1922, killing him in an early morning ambush. The soldiers dragged Liborio's corpse into the central plaza of San Juan de la Maguana on a litter, where they displayed it prominently as a demonstration of their power. The authorities even photographed his dead corpse, creating a trophy of their success (Lundius 1995:111-123).

Liborio's corporal death only increased his power and popularity; his assassination transformed him from a fleshy saint into a more potent spiritual one. For Liborio's followers, the photo failed to provide proof of his death, and so the authorities unwittingly created another *Liborista* charm. The photo of Liborio's corpse remains an essential icon for Afro-Dominican *Vodú* practice in the San Juan Valley today. It is prominently displayed in altar rooms as well as in living rooms throughout the Dominican borderlands. Containers can be destroyed, but the essences, ideas, and spirits they reflect often transform, multiply, and relocate despite the best-laid "progressive" plans.

The *Liborista* Legacy and The *Palma Sola* Movement

" . . . [T]hey will never be able to kill us, and if they somehow did, no one would believe them. Because others would dream they were us."

Paco Ignacio Taibo II, *Four Hands*

What I have is not mine, it belongs to everyone. It is mine and it is not mine. I cannot say I am Olivorio, but like me he came in order to carry out the force of the Spirit . . . There is only one grace, and it is for everyone, but [the force] comes forth with the help of particular persons who have to show it to others. His name is Olivorio, mine is Enrique, those are only names. Two names, but the same grace.

Enrique Figueroa, Quoted in *The Great Power of God in San Juan Valley*

While other healers emerged to take Liborio's place, healing the social ills of modernism, proponents of elite modernism continued to wage war against *Liborismo* and Dominican *Vodú*, even after the end of the American occupation in 1924. Upon assuming the presidency in 1930, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo increased his consolidation of power, begun during the American occupation. Suppressing popular religion and assassinating regional power figures comprised a central part of his plan for eliminating threats to his power. In 1930, Trujillo's agents killed the most important *Liborista* leader of the day, José Popa, followed by the assassination the aging Frontier *caudillo*, Desiderio Arias,

in 1931. Additionally, Trujillo outlawed the practice of *Vodú*, threatening adherents with imprisonment (Lundius and Lundahl 1989:47; Baud 1993:55-56). Trujillo's reign marked a new phase of elite modernism in the Valley as well.

While the privatization of communal lands increased, the changes were now largely benefiting the personal economic interests of the dictator. Unlike the southern and northern economies of the Dominican Republic, there were few foreign interests in the San Juan Valley; and so Trujillo could claim it for himself (Baud 1987:49). Trujillo pursued his goals in the Valley by monopolizing distribution of the crops produced by commercial agriculture (e.g., rice), dislocating campesinos "squatting" on communal lands, and distributing land to peasants who were willing to follow the dictates of the state. The killing of thousands of Afro-Dominican small landholders during the 1937 "Haitian" massacre freed vast amounts of land on the frontier. By 1961, the year Trujillo was assassinated, his family owned more land in the San Juan Valley than in any other part of the country (Turits 1998:294-296, 316-317; Martinez 1991:100). Many Valley peasants were forced into exile or voluntarily left in the face of religious persecution, state sponsored genocide, land privatization, and political repression. Ultimately, *Trujillista* modernism, despite its extensive coercion and violence, failed to destroy, or even suppress, Afro-Dominican religious practice. *Liborismo* continued to thrive in the San Juan Valley in the shadow of the Trujillo dictatorship.

The disintegration of the Trujillo dictatorship in the late 1950s sparked renewed activity in the *Liborista* communities of the Valley. Around 1960, Leon and Plinio Ventura Rodríguez, Los "*Mellizos*" (the "Twins") of Palma Sola, emerged to extend the *Liborista* legacy to form the *Palma Sola* movement. The "Twins" came from a family that spanned both sides of the Dominican-Haitian border and had been active participants in the various peasant struggles that marked the modernity campaign. Their paternal grandfather, Nicolas Cuevas, served as Liborio's trusted lieutenant and was also a renowned healer (Lundius 1995:106). The extensive American manhunt for Nicolas, the destruction of his house, the persecution of his family, and his ultimate assassination by occupation forces reflects his importance in the *Liborista* movement (Martinez 1991:80). The departure of the Americans in 1924 did not relieve the persecution of the Ventura Rodríguez family. The harassment increased under the Trujillo dictatorship, especially in the 1930s, when Trujillo actively

consolidated his power. Perceiving the family as a threat to his growing power in the Valley, Trujillo persecuted them. In 1935, the dictator assassinated the “*Mellizos*” maternal uncle, Manuel Ventura, another important *Liborista*. Prompted by the assassination, some family members, including the “*Mellizos*,” fled into exile in neighboring Haiti, staying with extended family there (Martinez 1991:126-131).

Like *Liborismo*, the *Palma Sola* movement developed from *Vodú*'s dialogue with the changing political and economic environment (i.e., the terror and chaos of the Trujillo dictatorship and the post-Trujillo period). In 1960, the Holy Spirit commanded the “Twins” to establish a sacred site to await the world to come. Trujillo, the Holy Spirit informed them, would soon die and the Old World would die with him. Campesinos left their fields in the different districts of the Valley to converge in *Palma Sola*, the reincarnation of the earlier Liborio's *Ciudad Santa* (Martinez 1991:133). Leon and Plinio marked the presence of the Holy Spirit by constructing a church, a calvary (a group of three crosses representing the Holy Trinity), and two large wooden crosses, all enclosed in a sacred corral (Martinez 1991:151). Soon, thousands of pilgrims traveled to meet the “*Mellizos*” in search of healing. The “Twins” mobilized the usual tools and techniques from the visible and invisible realms of *Vodú* – the dead, rocks, springs, possession, dreams, herbs, prayers, the forest, Liborio, and the Holy Trinity (Martinez 1991:150). The brothers reenergized *Vodú* by introducing two new personal charms into *Vodú* – the sacred site of *Palma Sola* and the “Twins” themselves. The *Palmasolistas* articulated a populist vision of the post-Trujillo future. “The *Mellizos* worked to obtain the sanctity of the campesinos, eliminate the evils of the earth, and achieve the equality and unity of their followers” (Martinez 1991:133).

Elite protests against the *Palmasolistas* began almost immediately. The objections started locally as Valley professionals, businesses, and churches of all faiths began to alert national authorities to the threat posed by the “Twins” (Martinez 1991:34). The national press soon joined in the defense of elite modernism; a 1961 editorial in *El Caribe*, a newspaper founded by Trujillo, deemed the *Palmasolistas* “a painful anachronism in the middle of the twentieth century.” (*El Caribe* quoted in Ferreras 1983:317-8). The war of words assumed the form of a moral outrage. However, the autonomous organization and articulation of the peasant agency concerned the elite. It reflected the modernist

campaign's failure to maintain elite subjugation of the Valley's campesinos (San Miguel 1994:86).

While the local concern was with peasant agency, the significance of the *Palma Sola* movement changed as it gained national attention. Outside the Valley, many observers read the *Palma Sola* movement against the disconcerting backdrop of the post-Trujillo political scene. As various factions of the elite engaged in a bitter fight to control the spoils of the post-Trujillo state, rumors that *Palma Sola* was a plot to create public disorder were spread by the sensationalist press. The *Palmasolistas* were, the gossip maintained, *Trujillista* agents of suspect nationality trying to return Trujillo's family to power, despite the long history of the Ventura Rodríguez family's opposition to Trujillo. Ironically, *Liborismo* emerged from the shadows of the Trujillo dictatorship only to be confronted by the heirs of the elite modernism professing their newly found opposition to *Trujillismo*. Like the earlier campaign against Liborio, the elite responded to the threat of *Palma Sola* with state violence, sending out the national armed forces to subjugate the rebellious citizens. The confrontation came to a head in 1962 as the Dominican Army massacred 800 *Palmasolistas* and arrested 700 more followers (Martinez 1991:233-243). The show of state violence could not rid the Valley of its new charms and alternative texts of modernity. Like Liborio's sacred sites, *Palma Sola* continues to function as a sacred *Vodú* site of power and practice. Today, in spite of the latest phase of Dominican modernism – neoliberalism – popular religion persists in the San Juan Valley, and the struggle to control the outcome of modernism continues.

Conclusion

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even *past* meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue's subsequent development along the way they are recalled and

invigorated in renewed form (in a new context). Nothing is absolutely dead; every meaning will have its homecoming festival.

M. M. Bakhtin, “Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences”

“History,” the old adage goes, “is written by the victors.” While the “official” record may reflect the victor’s version of history, popular history is never entirely displaced. The “people without history” keep their own books. Their “hidden transcripts” masquerade in plain view, disputing “official” accounts while waiting for their homecoming. Popular history brashly challenges anthropology, daring the discipline to look beyond the “official” records, and inviting us into the folds of history conveniently left out of the books. By embracing the dialogue of history – i.e., competing hidden and public narratives – critical anthropology questions the ideological concepts that create the illusion of elite order and control (Benjamin 2003b[1939]:164). The dialogic approach to history emphasizes the idea that “human beings participate in history both as actors and narrators” (Trouillot 1995:2). Yet the trick is to discover the forms, media, and places in which the non-elite narrators and actors have elaborated their memories and histories. In the San Juan Valley, *Vodú* is one of the stages on which popular interpretations of the local, regional, and national past have been performed.

The Dominican elite dreamed of progress and civilization for more than a century. It is the particulars, the specificities of time and space, which challenge the universality of modernism. No individual, group, or community can lay exclusive claim to modernism. We can only “make sense” of modernism, a fluid sign, through dialogue with other signs (Appadurai 1996:2; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993:xii). Accepting modernism as a sign engaged in semiosis, instead of an objective condition or ending point, we can better understand modernism as a sign of desire utilized to create belonging and order in a changing world (Berman 1988:6). Dominican modernism, as imagined by the country’s elite, was not the American modernism of skyscrapers and regional imperialism. Instead, Dominican modernism focused on economic growth, scientific agriculture, the proliferation of technology, and the expansion of urban centers. Despite the differences between American and Dominican modernities, the two projects were related because the transformation of the Dominican landscape occurred hand in hand with the development of an

increasingly globalized American financial market, and an increasingly militarized American foreign policy agenda. With the merging of economic and political interests, political decisions in the Dominican Republic depended on politicians in Washington as much as those in Santo Domingo. The modernist dream in the Dominican Republic was simultaneously local and global.

Dominican elites' vision of the future was built on the foundation of forgetting a past characterized by economic dependency, political disorder, and cultural hybridity, all considered obstacles to the glorious future that was waiting right around the corner. Shedding the past required more than collective amnesia: it compelled the elite to wage a legal, social, political, and economic war against the fleshy remnants of the "disappeared" past. Elites' determination to become modern heralded a genocidal campaign, yet Dominican popular classes survived the long period of oppression, refusing to entirely yield to elite desires. Yearning for change, they offered their own version of modernism. Beyond the simplistic narrative of resistance, Afro-Dominicans participated as active agents of change in the transformation of the Dominican Republic. The new Dominican economy of the late 19th century demanded new spirits, rituals, and priests to activate the healing powers of *Vodú*, curing the social dis-ease resulting from the economic and political upheaval. The emergence of Liborio and *Liborismo* demonstrates the dynamic nature of Dominican popular religion, which is constantly engaged in a process of renewal, shedding "inactive" saints and adding new and more potent spirits to the pantheon. Through popular religion, the peasants of the San Juan Valley advocated for their own dynamic version of modernity. They mobilized the past as a guide, and kept Liborio and Afro-Dominican culture alive, nurturing a flash of the spirit that could be openly read by all that believed.

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Notes

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