Vudú in the Dominican Republic: Resistance and Healing[1]

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I. Introduction

The Dominican Republic, first inhabited by aboriginal peoples, was later colonized in 1492 and named the Española by Spain, and finally, was founded by Dominican Independence leaders in 1844 in direct response to Haitian occupation. The people of the Dominican Republic represent a combination of many powerful cultural and historical forces including: the struggles, domination and extermination of Tainos, Arawaks and Caribs; the arrival and hybridization of the Congolese, Dahomeyan and other cultures of West and Southwest Africa; and the economic and political dominance of the Spanish of Europe. The reified notion of Dominicans is that they constitute a *mulatto* nation, a blend of the three distinct "races": the *indio* Taino, the negro *Africano* and of course, the white Spanish.

This initial historical context gave rise to many ideological and political constructs that served to strictly control racial, ethnic and national identity among Dominicans in order to enforce colonial economic structures, and following Independence, national economic structures. The institutions of the State and the Church have been critical in developing policies affecting the development of Dominican identities. Two policies in particular that are described in this paper include 1) the establishment of Catholicism as the Dominican national religion during the fight for Independence and 2) the Trujillista policy of *limpieza de sangre*, guided by the ideology of Hispanidad, in the earlier half of the 20th century. Through these institutions, racial and ethnic markers came to signify power relations that were and continue to be mediated by class and national identity. And specifically, **blackness** has come to signify "otherness", "Haitianness" and all forms of "depravity", "pollution" and underclass status (Davis, 1987: 61). As stated in Torres‟ and Whitten‟s Blackness in Latin America, in other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean,

> "Being „signified‟ or „represented‟ as „black‟ in a white-dominated world is to be stigmatized to a position of ethnic disadvantage in a discourse of racial asymmetry. This does not mean, however, that people so stigmatized will accept a position of disadvantage or elect to describe their situation through the dominant discourse." (27)

In fact, through the development and practice of Vudú, Dominicans have resisted the dominant discourses in the symbolic realms of meaning production.

Though Catholicism is the Dominican Republic‟s official religion, Vudú has existed and developed as a religion among populations of African descent throughout the island since the arrival of African slaves, directly from Africa, in

1518 (Moya Pons 32). Vudú is a valid religious system that serves to protect the members who practice and participate in its rituals, ceremonies and beliefs from the ills and illnesses found in the world, and from the oppression of political and social regimes that have sought the elimination of African and Haitian presence in the Dominican Republic. The praxis of Vudú is such that control of the spiritual realms very often translates into the production of cultural meaning, and this cultural meaning becomes a form of symbolic, metaphorical resistance to hegemonic signifiers of blackness, as well as Hispanidad.

This paper examines the context of Vudú practice in the Dominican Republic and how its existence serves as a form of resistance to the hegemonic concept of Hispanidad. As Martha Ellen Davis, a key figure in the study of Vudú in the Dominican Republic, stated "Dominican Vudú is, on the one hand, devotion to the saints and the dead, and on the other hand, a cult devoted to the healing and treatment of the living"[2] (Davis 59). In this paper, the healing and treatment of the living through the practice of Vudú is framed as both literal healings, and the symbolic healings of community building in the face of on-going oppression. I argue that, similar to many contexts throughout Latin America, in the Dominican Republic the practice of Vudú is a "process of religious meaning construction" (Droogers 9) which not only serves to meet the needs of its practitioners and primary actors, but which serves to construct new meanings which in turn have impacted Dominican social reality as a whole, and have contributed to historical shifts in national and ethnic identity. As such, I don"t believe that *servidores*, practitioners of Vudú, are re-interpreting hegemonic signifiers, but rather, creating counter-hegemonic markers of Africanity.

For the purposes of this paper, **cultural meaning production** is defined as the process of constructing meaning out of symbols and acts that, together, form a **culture**. Cultural production is a dynamic process, rather than a static one. At no point in this paper is culture meant to be construed as a static entity, unless otherwise specified. For example, part of the project of constructing a national identity during the Trujillo era was insisting upon a static, monolithic definition of culture that had white Hispanidad as its fundamental premise. Contrary to this, asserting that culture and cultural production are on-going processes with no clear beginning and end points, but rather, multiple points of influence, underscores a theoretical challenge to the concept of a monolithic, essential definition of national, ethnic or racial identities. The fundamental theoretical premise of this paper is that Vudú disrupts the static notions of culture, national identity and instead allows us to see the ways in which its practitioners engage, as subjects in their own history, in cultural meaning production. It is through this dynamic process that they challenge cultural and social hegemony, and resist institutional and social forms of oppression.

II. A Concise History of Dominican Society

Dominican society has historically been constructed and regulated by the laws and policies of the State and by the Catholic Church. This model of social construction goes as far back as the early 1500s, when the Spanish royal administration regulated the lives of *mestizos*, children born of Spanish and Indigenous people (Tolentino Dipp 117). Ideologies related to racial and ethnic identification influenced by and developed by Europeans and Dominicans invested in European values at the establishment of Dominican independence (Torres-Saillant 127) have shaped Dominican"s perceived self-identity and national identity. Because the process of nation building was primarily framed as a political process (Andujar Persinal 2001, 140), rather than a cultural process, the very act of constructing the national identity was intentionally maneuvered to focus on the Hispanidad of the new society. The result is that in the twenty-first century, the Dominican Republic is a society that has yet "to grasp [their] negritude" (Portillo) and that perpetuates on social, political and interpersonal levels rejection and negation of blackness and Haitian-ness, often seen as one and the same, that have led to the continued dehumanization of darker-skinned and Haitian people. This racism is nothing new, and was first generated and created during the earliest days of slavery, when such notions served to justify the enslavement and abuse of thousands of African slaves in the mines and on the plantations.

The Nation State: The Dominican Republic proclaimed its independence from Haiti in 1844. With the pressure of European and North American states (upon whom the Dominican Republic has had economic and political dependence to varying degrees) to "prevent the spread of negro influence in the West Indies" (Torres-Saillant 127), the Dominican leaders were quick to establish the nation as one in which Dominicanness came to signify *Hispanidad* and whiteness, and in which blackness came to signify Haitianness. That this would come to be is ironic, given that the Dominican Independence movement would not have been successful without the support of maroon communities, and the large black populace of the eastern half of the island. These communities insisted that the continued abolition of slavery be part of the premise for the founding of the new nation (Albert Batista 40) as a condition of their participation in the battles for Independence. As part of this process of `*Hispanidad*-ization", cultural production was the form in which the meaning of Dominican identity was generated – through the development of "high" forms of art, music, literature, dance and religion that were consciously distinguished and divorced from their "African" elements. This included Church-sanctioned state laws prohibiting the playing of drums, rhythms, dances and, as such, the practice of Vudú throughout the latter half of the 19th century all the way into the late 20th century (Davis 35).

Where the initial process of nation-building left off, and following a difficult and tenuous period of reconstruction and American occupation, the

Trujillo regime (1930-1961) continued. The Trujillo regime succeeded in expanding the application of *Hispanidad* as an ideology and pretext for wide-spread oppression, repression of dissent, *anti-haitianismo*. Whereas the Independence leaders intentionally embarked on the nation-building process as a political endeavor, supported and clearly articulated through the process of cultural meaning production, the Trujillo state took cultural meaning production as a central tool for the development of a reified Hispanic national identity, and the continued expansion of this ideology in order to benefit state policies of oppression.

As part of integrating the *Hispanidad* ideology into the Dominican psyche, race was re-constructed by the Trujillista regime. [3] In the Dominican Republic, the Trujillo state developed government classifications of race including: *indio*, *claro* or *oscuro* (light or dark-skinned), *trigueño*, *mestizo* or *blanco*.[4] *Negro* refers to Haitians, or Haitian descendents. In contrast, the majority of Dominicans are currently classified as *indio* (Duany 151), no matter how dark their skin. These classifications are coupled with a ferocious anti-Haitian politic that falls along racial lines, and are often coupled with vilification of Haitian or perceived-Haitian people (Torres-Saillant 139). It is clear from these categories that race has been reified in order to maintain, over the course of generations, a concept of ethnic identity that is both confounded with national identity and that served/serves to erase a history of black existence and resistance in Dominican society.

While simultaneously constructing new racial classifications, the Trujillo state "glorified everything Spanish" (Portillo) and generated new cultural markers of national identity based on ethnicity that were in fact appropriations of what had previously been construed as African. For example, merengue – which is clearly a music that has African rhythms, was appropriated and redefined in the Dominican literature and cultural production as a European dance and musical form, based on the polka (Davis 35). Because of its re-construction as a European descended art form, it became a marker of quintessential Dominican identity. This serves as an apt metaphor of the cultural and social signification that forms an underlying tension in the on-going construction of Dominican identity: every art form has underlying African roots, however, in the popular consciousness and mind, is construed as a derivative of European heritage.

The ideology of Hispanidad underscored the Trujillo state policy of *limpieza de sangre* which included: the disappearance of a black category in discourse and official state records, except when used in relation to Haitians, the importation of white populations, and the massacre of the country"s dark-skinned/Haitian laborer population[5] (Tejada 37). Hispanidad planted the seeds in the Dominican population of a disposition towards the "improvement of the race" (*mejorando la raza*) (Portillo) by giving birth to lighter-skinned children through the union of darker skinned people with lighter skinned ones. And most significantly, with regard to the subject of this paper, *Hispanidad* served to

relegate African-based religious practices into secret and hidden spheres of social interaction, that were in the popular consciousness, associated with "darkness", Haitian-ness, pollution and evil, and which practice was punishable by law[6] (Davis 61).

The Church: Beginning with the island‟s colonization, through the independence movement, Trujillo‟s dictatorship and the economic struggles of the late 20th century, the Catholic Church has been the single most consistent institution in Dominican society. It has retained influence in the government, society and education and is central to elite Dominican identity (Martinez-Fernandez 70). Bartolome de las Casas used the church‟s influence to encourage the transport of Christianized blacks (*ladinos*) as slaves from Spain. It was also the Catholic Church that created the justification for bringing Africans directly from Africa (*bozales*) and who oversaw their conversion upon embarking on slave ships destined for La Española (Deive 1996, 50). When the eastern side of the island was occupied by Boyer‟s forces (1822-1844), the Haitian general greatly reduced the power of the Catholic Church by curtailing priests‟ salaries, nationalizing land belonging to the Church and eliminating some of the Church‟s central institutions (Martinez-Fernandez 70). Thus, the Dominican independence movement fighting against Boyer‟s regime, shaped as a specifically anti-Haitian liberation movement, found great allies with the Catholic Church: an institution eager to regain its power (Martinez-Fernandez 70).

The Catholic Church has not only been an instrument of colonization and nationalism, but has been a specific tool of religious and political oppression utilized by various governments in Dominican history. It has served to oppress not just the practice of Vudú among the populace, but also of Protestantism and Freemasonry. This role was maintained up until the last decade of the 20th century. Vudú was an illegal religion until 1977 (Andujar 1996) and its practice prohibited as late as 1989 (Davis 42, Tejada 49) as a direct result of the Catholic Church‟s policies. The influence of Church on the State and national identity can best be summed up by the statement "experience demonstrates that our nationality ends where the [Protestant] „Churches‟ and Vudú begins" (Pepen 15) - a statement made in 1954 which is still relevant today. The influence of the Catholic Church was greatly maintained during Trujillo‟s and later Balaguer‟s regimes, and Catholicism continues to be the national religion of the Dominican Republic.

It is with this social context in mind that we now turn to an analysis how Vudú functions as both a form of healing and resistance.

III. Vudú as Healing

Case: Visit with La Mancha of Nigua Nigua is a small mountain town in the province of San Cristobal, located just west of the capital city of Santo Domingo. It is a historic *cimarron*[7] enclave, and as such, presents a unique social and political Afro-Dominican history. Nigua has two well known *houngans*: La

Mancha, y La Doña.[8] Both of these spiritual leaders, in addition to serving to ensure the spiritual and physical health of their communities, are also important political and economic decision makers in their towns and local regions. La Doña is especially well known throughout the Dominican Republic as she has allowed for the recording of Vudú traditional songs and rituals in an effort to document their place in the Dominican musical and cultural landscape. La Mancha is younger, and inherited his position as *houngan* in the community of San Rafael. He has relationships with all the other *houngans*/*servidores* in the region, including La Doña. La Mancha identifies himself as *moreno*, and simultaneously as *Africano* and of the "*raza Dominicana*". These identities are not in conflict for him, but serve as a way for him to establish his community leadership, his spiritual power and his racial identity with relation to other Dominicans.

La Mancha granted me a visit in July 1995. Though I had not come seeking a consultation, he greeted me possessed by Ogun Balenyo, the *luas* of iron, war and travel. He was dressed in clothes symbolizing Ogun Balenyo, smoked a cigar, and sat with a glass of gin: all symbols of the *luas*. We met in the town church, where the pews were arranged in a square around us. On the walls of the Church were a large wooden cross, and several prints of various Catholic Saints. In the center of the Church was a table with a basin full of flowered holy water which was promptly dispersed throughout the room and then showered on me before proceeding.

After the space had been "cleaned", I was asked to dip my shirt into the basin and then squeeze the water into a small cup, which was then used for diagnosis. Once this was completed, La Mancha took my hand and turned me in several directions, hugging me with both arms and spinning me from his hold. After I had stopped, he approached me and then spoke, in the language of Vudú (*langage*),[9] several recommendations that I could use to deal with my "illness". These included a *limpieza* with flowered waters, a prayer using the rosaries (to *la 7 Potencias Africanas*), and the set up of an altar to a specific *luas*. Upon completion of this diagnosis and prescription, La Mancha began the incantation of a prayer song, at which point several of his assistants (women and men) appeared to aide him in his descent from trance. Once he was out of trance, La Mancha greeted me as a humble *curandero*, and in addition to what was recommended under trance, gave me an herbal remedy that had been prepared as a poultice.

Several aspects of this experience highlight Vudú"s function as a healing art, including the use of herbal remedies passed down through oral and curing traditions over many generations.[10] But in addition to the level of physical healing work, the practice of Vudú serves to reinforce Vudú as a legitimate and formal way of alternative meaning production within symbolic space and through the use of tools that are imbued with symbolic power. *Servidores* not only engage in healing work, but actively participate in the construction of meaning within the realms of popular religion and social identity. The practice of Vudú

healing in public social spaces, and specifically in Churches, helps to reinforce the legitimacy of these practices within these communities. And, the healing rituals are not only deemed powerful because of the invocation of the African *luases*, but because of their occurrence within the realm of Catholic spaces. When I received my consultation, not only was it done in a Catholic Church, it was done with prayers from the Catholic liturgy recited in Spanish, and with incantations in *langage* by a Dominican houngan and community leader. I was simultaneously given a "spiritual" cleansing, a physical remedy, but also participated in the on-going process of being included in the communal story – both through the act of participating in the consultation, but also by being embraced by the houngan, and spoken to by the embodied spirit.

The Practice of Vudú: Vudú is a religion which emerged as a result of the hybridization of Dahomeyan, Congolese, Yoruba cosmologies and Catholicism. Though in the popular Dominican discourse, Vudú is believed to have formally developed in Haiti, African religious practice has existed throughout the entire island since the initial onset of African slavery during colonization, which is evidenced by references made in official accounts of blacks "behaving in amoral ways" (Tolentino Dipp 247), by policies at the onset of African slavery limiting the importation of non-Christian blacks, due to their rebellious nature (Tolentino Dipp 230) and by documented evidence of "idols" and animist practice in the Maniel maroon communities (Larrazabal Blanco 147). The very nature of Vudú is as a religion that continuously incorporates hegemonic and popular religious symbols and imbues them with new meaning. This is significant to understanding Vudú as a religion that is constantly subverting hegemonic concepts of identity and power. For example, the utterance of healing prayers to Catholic saints, who simultaneously represent *luases,* can be interpreted as a Catholic act that brings in the power of African ancestral spirits, and thus is given a meaning beyond the mere Catholic one – a meaning that subverts the Catholic history of each saint.

The Vudú cosmology is made up of *luases* (animist deities/ancestor spirits) falling into two *divisiones* (categories), the *rada* and *petro* denominations. The *rada* are depicted as noble and embodiments of protective magical practices. The *rada luases* are also often portrayed as the true "African" ancestral spirits, directly descendent from Africans before slavery. This portrayal of *rada luases* is in direct opposition to the *petro luases*, who are often referred to as "*comedores de hombres*" (Deive 1996, 189), and are considered perverse spirits who manipulate magic for evil ends. Among the *petro*, we also find *guedes*, or spirits of the dead, that are specific to the island and are generally not considered to be descended from Dahomeyan, Yoruba or Congolese ancestral lineages. The principle elements of Vudú include: priest led ceremonies, a strict hierarchy of priesthood, possession and trance, playing of sacred drums, animal sacrifice, ceremonial food, ritual drawings (*vêvés*) and prayer in the form of song (Andujar Persinal 2001, 202).

Dominican *luases* are similar to Haitian *luases*, with few exceptions resulting from the distinct histories of the populations (e.g. the "*luases de la division india o del agua*" are particular to the Dominican Republic (Deive 1996, 171). In Dominican Vudú there exists not only the historical hybridization of indigenous, African and European practices and symbols, but there exists the specific hybridization of Dominican and Haitian cultural practices that give rise to a very specific form of cultural meaning production, and challenges to reified social categories. Many of the *luases* carry Catholic names, and are represented by Catholic saints such as Santa Barbara (Changó) or Santiago Apostol (Ogun Balenyo), and in addition, many of the Dominican *luases* carry Haitian names (Ti Jean, Metre Silié). In a society that denies both its own negritude, but also actively works to deny the rights and existence of Haitians, that Vudú allows, incorporates and seeks Haitian spirits is in and of itself a resistance to the rigid social structures and state laws. And, in a Catholic nation, where the ideologies of the Catholic Church are integrated into the state"s policy practice and discourse, it is not only that Vudú is based on the Catholic symbols, but that it subverts the symbols of Catholic domination over an African-descended population. And, it speaks to the ways in which African descendent populations have subverted Catholic dominance since the earliest days of slavery.

The vast majority of *servidores* in the Dominican Republic are Catholic (Deive 2003). This is evidenced not only by self-declaration, but by the offerings and practice of rituals that honor Catholic saints, both within Vudú fiestas and healing ceremonies (Deive 2003). In the Dominican Republic, Vudú is practiced largely in rural communities, border towns and plantations usually with large Dominican-Haitian[11] (Barahona, La Romana), Afro-Dominican populations (La Vega, San Juan de la Maguana) and among communities largely influenced by migrations from neighboring Caribbean islands (San Pedro de Macorix)[12] (Deive 1996, 160; Andujar 2001, 108). Therefore, it is not ironic, nor unusual that my healing consultation was presented and centered in San Rafael"s Catholic Church. Because, as most *servidores* would argue, the practice of these healing ceremonies does not conflict with the Catholic faith, nor with Catholic identity. Having a healing ceremony within the walls of the Church serves to consolidate the power of the *luases*, who, on the walls of the Church are represented by the faces of European Catholic Saints, but who are understood to be fundamentally African. In essence, it is a fitting metaphor for the understanding of Dominican racial and ethnic identity.

In light of my experience with La Mancha, I think it important to consider the spaces in which Vudú is articulated. Unlike Haiti, with its *lagans* and public Vudú temples, the Dominican Republic has no solid constructions or temples for the practice of Vudú. Therefore, Vudú spaces are created in the form of altars in bedrooms, small rooms at the back of rural churches, and through ritual (as we will see later on, Gagá, a subculture of Vudú practice, extends Vudú space onto the streets of the Dominican Republic). In addition to the physical delimitation of

Vudú spaces, the *servidores* "construct their mystical space through mental mapping. It is seen as a sacred space with its topography and the places where the spirits live. This mystical space encompasses both ritual and territorial space (Laguerre 530). Therefore, it stems that from this understanding of the process by which space is made sacred, and of Vudú, being consulted in a Church would only strengthen the power of a healing remedy and prayers and would also serve to establish the Church as a realm of the spirits.

Vudú as healing within the context of Dominican society: Within Vudú there exist various healing and magical traditions including, *hechiceria* and *contrabrujeria*. *Hechiceria,* or *brujeria*, is considered the magic of evil, complete with *atamientos* (tying spells), spells for zombies, illness and death. *Brujos* or *hechiceros*, as practitioners of *hechiceria* are called, can change shape, can become animals or *bakás* (magical creatures that stalk fields and kill people) and can fly (Deive 1996, 245). In contrast, *contrabrujeria* functions as protective magic. *Contrabrujeria* does not fall under the power of one particular practitioner, though many practitioners are *servidores de misterios*. It generally involves the use of amulets, talismans, protective rocks and divination. It also includes such powers as weather-making (rainmakers) and divination through dreams, candles, ashes, coffee grounds and salt (Deive 1996, 276). *Curanderia* as such is the manipulation of herbs for medicinal purposes. Many *curanderos* are also *servidores*, though the practice of *curanderia* is based much more in the practical knowledge acquired through the use of herbal remedies (Deive 1996, 328) than through the learning of magic.

The hegemonic majority in the Dominican Republic view Vudú as *brujeria*, or "black magic", a witchcraft that goes against the tenets of the Catholic faith, and most recently, Pentacostal and Evangelical teachings (Torres-Saillant 132). Many Dominicans espouse that simply viewing Vudú in practice is to come face to face with the devil (Portorreal 1995) and most people, though practicing elements of Vudú that have been absorbed and syncretized with the Catholic faith, will disclaim Vudú as a Dominican element. The norm is to perceive Vudú as evidence of Haitian attempts at domination, as an element of primitive African history and blackness: both of which are viewed with contempt by the majority of Dominicans, who define themselves as a white or *mestizo* race, mixed primarily with Indian (Taino) and Spanish. As one commentator wrote in the national newspaper Última Hora,

> *Para vergüenza del país de cara al cuerpo diplomático que nos visita, pues dicho "despojo" no es más que un acto de brujería, de superchería, que nos presenta a los ojos del mundo como un pueblo de estúpidos e ignorantes...la superchería esta condenada en varios libros de la Biblia, tanto del Viejo como el Nuevo Testamento… No solo lastiman las creencias cristianas de católicos y evangélicos, sino que son instrumentos peligrosos*

> *en manos de gobernantes como Papa Doc Duvalier, Mobuto Sese Seko y Bocassa Primero, que los usaron para meter terror en sus pueblos* (Urbáez).

Despite these proclamations by the conservative, hegemonic Catholic majority of Vudú as a Satanic, anti-Catholic cult, Vudú is perceived by those in Vudú communities as a source of strength, healing and self-affirmation (Lara 1995). As such, it is a site of great resistance to subtle and obtuse forms of oppression, and in addition, it is also a healing art. Despite racial stigmas attached to *curanderia* and *medicina popular* (Gordon 324), people in the rural areas and on plantations, as well as in some urban areas of the Dominican Republic, use *curanderos* and *medicina popular* for healing. Specifically among the indigent (usually black, Haitian or Dominican-Haitian), use of *medicina popular* as a source of care is much higher for common acute illnesses such as *gripe* (flu or cold), *resfriado* (flu-like symptoms), *apreto del pecho* (asthma) and the like. In one study approximately 30% of a rural community‟s population sought out *curanderos* for a wide range of issues including kidney and stomach ailments, anemia and arthritis (*resfriado*) (Gordon 324). *Medicina popular* is derived from an African healing tradition, and its rituals are tightly linked to the cosmology and the magic-religious belief system of Vudú. As such, it is an important site of healing for a population that is largely descended of African peoples.

Vudú also carries knowledge and roles designated for healing work. This is evidenced in the practice of *medicina popular*, which combines prophesizing with herbal remedies, and which in its foundation combines cosmological concepts of good and evil with herbs and rituals (spells). The *servidor de misterios* is commonly sought for a range of illnesses ranging from spiritual *mal de ojo*, to social problems (husband‟s adultery) to physical ailments (headaches, etc). The healing not only happens on a magical-religious level, but also occurs on a physical level with the use of herbal remedies and on occasion, these mixed with bio-medical drugs (Tejada 57).

The first element in the consultation is that the *servidor* is already possessed by the *luas* prior to the client‟s entrance. When a person seeks out a *servidor*, they are diagnosed using a candle, a cup of water, or with the use of bodily fluids (saliva, urine). This process helps to identify whether the illness is spiritual or physical in its source. Once the source has been identified, the *servidor* serves to orient the person to their problem. It is at this point that both persons engage in a process of agreement in which the *servidor* is given the permission by the person to engage in the healing process.

The most common healing remedies for physical ailments found among Dominican *servidores* include *jarabes* (syrups), poultices, powders, *brebajes* (liquid potions of herbs and alcohols applied to the skin or taken internally) and all of these used in combination with prayers. There exist many preventative

measures prescribed for spiritual problems: the use of water in cups, or containers, to capture wandering spirits; *limpiezas* of the home or work environment, the use of the rosary, and the planting of herbs are but a few examples. In addition, many spiritual illnesses can be related back to the person"s own relationship to their dead (ancestral dead). In these cases, remedies are often prescribed for altars and rituals meant to appease the desires of the deceased ancestor (Tejada 56).

The prominent role that healing work plays in Dominican society cannot be understated. *Servidores* are consulted for a vast range of problems, and play a central part in Dominican society. As documented in Davis"s extensive ethnography, La Otra Ciencia, not only will people go to a doctor for help, they will go to the *curandero* or the *servidor* for a little more help. This, of course, includes Dominican doctors who not only practice Western medicine, but sometimes also carry their own spirits (Davis 253) and are assisted by the *luases* in their work. Therefore, not only does Vudú as a system of healing play a significant role within Vudú communities, it is evident as a central part of Dominican society. Despite the state policies limiting the practice of Vudú, and the social ideology of Hispanidad, Vudú occupies a large space of alternative forms of healing and therefore meaning production within the larger society. In essence, it explodes notions of *Hispanidad*. Vudú healing has transformative power and is a factor in the on-going construction of Dominican identity and the practice of that identity because power relations are continuously being shifted. Dominicans, regardless of class and racial identity (*indio, blanco, moreno*), are driven or decide to seek *curanderos* outside of the structure of Western medicine and participate in a healing that involves "spiritual" matters and gives power to the practitioners of Vudú. Therefore the symbolic and social power given to *curanderos* and the *luases* inserts practices and meanings into the construction of Dominican identity that run counter to the hegemonic description of Dominicans as *Hispanos* and white.

IV. Vudú as Resistance

It is imperative to first point out that resistance to racial, ethnic and religious oppression has taken many forms throughout Dominican history: beginning with a black populace"s insistence on maintaining the abolishment of slavery as the new nation established itself, the on-going presence of African elements in Dominican culture (dance, food, music, storytelling, art and language), and the persistence of Dominican intellectuals in documenting and researching African presence and influences in the country. In addition, Vudú is a valid religious system that functions a) despite oppression and b) to challenge the oppression faced by black communities throughout the country. *Servidores* play an active role in the on-going construction of social identity and cultural meaning.

In the practice of Vudú, most public ceremonies are "of thanks" and form an obligation and privilege for the participating community. It is a time to support the priests (*mambos* and *houngans*) and to compensate them for their work (Tejada 56). Vudú is not formalized in the Dominican Republic in the way that it is in Haiti. This, of course, is due not only to its illegality, but also to the hegemonic notion of Hispanidad, which relegates the practice Vudú into the realm of "otherness" and blackness. Therefore, the public fiestas, ceremonies and articulations of Vudú practice take on a symbolic significance – they are an articulation of communities" resistance to their own obliteration and form a space of practice.

The Gagás in particular are a public demonstration of political views and are derived from the Haitian Rará: carnivalesque political parades usually performed during Lent. The practices are centered on *luases petros*, and as such, Gagás form a sub-culture in Dominican Vudú. Most Gagás originated in the plantations throughout the Dominican Republic and the practice is very much connected to Haitian and Haitian-Dominican identities. Unlike in Haiti, where Raras function in a larger context of Vudú religious practices and beliefs, Gagá in the Dominican Republic is a primary location of Vudú practice and of the articulation of counter-hegemonic identities. Gagá is a site where Dominicans, Haitian-Dominicans and Haitians subvert national policies of segregation and dominance by coming together to construct an "army" of African-based deities, cosmology and identities. These Gagás show strength not only by their sheer numbers, but by how far they manage to march/dance from their original point of exit from the original ritual space. Their success and power is solidified in their symbolic and spiritual confrontations with other Gagás, but also with the larger Dominican society and state – and most directly, in confrontation with the state"s actors: policemen and the Catholic clergy and laymen. A Gagá that has succeeded has done so, most importantly to proclaim "we exist, and we have a right and an obligation to the *luases*."(Lara 1995) – despite state policies that forbid the existence of dances and "Haitian" influences.

The Gagá (a group that performs the dances and rituals of the Gagá tradition)[13] is run by a *dueño*, who is responsible for maintaining the traditions of the Gagá, and for financially supporting the *Gagá* celebrations for seven years (Andujar 1996). The Gagá performs the majority of its rituals during the Catholic Holy Week (*Semana Santa*), with the most intense rituals beginning on Holy Thursday (*Jueves Santo*) and ending on the Easter Sunday (*Domingo de Pascua*) (Rosenberg 50). The *Semana Santa* incorporates a series of rituals within the site of ceremony, usually on a plantation, that serve to not only mirror the Catholic Resurrection, but also to tell the story of the Middle Passage, slavery and survival. It is, in essence, a historical resurrection of the African self, echoed by the apparition and call to the whole array of ancestral spirits that occupy the mythical domain of Vudú practice.

The Gagá first consecrates the mythical/mystical and physical territory of the Vudú community: 1) The central leadership of the Gagá, consisting of a *dueño* and the hierarchy of *presidentes*, *generales*, *reinas* and *mayores*, visits the sacred tree (*el arbol "blanco"*), the tree that represents the secrets of, and an entrance to, the other world. The tree is fed and prayed upon (no one must know where the tree is other than the *dueño* and the intimate group members for it carries the community‟s magic). 2) The group bring embers started at the *arbol blanco*, to the *enramada*, the ceremonial center where it must be kept burning for all four days of ceremony. 3) The music begins. 4) Vêvés are drawn on the floor of the *enramada*, encircling the center pole (a symbol of the path between the physical and spiritual world). These rituals concretize the boundaries of the sacred space, and create very literally, a space for occupation by the *luases*. They also serve as metaphor for a world prior to enslavement.

After the consecration of the space, there are a series of rituals and prayers that are performed in order to prepare the space for the arrival of the African ancestral spirits, before they descend into the physical bodies of the *servidores* (through trance and possession). This includes 1) the raising of new initiates into *la silla* – a consecrated chair – that symbolizes their entrance into the Gagá and 2) the baptism (*el bautismo*) of clothes, musical instruments, Gagá flags, and dance tools (*bastones*) are blessed with holy water and candle light. These items will be used during the four days of dance. This baptism resembles Catholic baptisms, and serves to protect the dancers for when they leave the *enramada*, and eventually, the plantation (*el batey*). Prayers are sung first by the *mambo* or *houngan* in creole, followed by corresponding Catholic prayers sung in Latin, French and Spanish by an official paid prayer reader. Not only does this imbue the ceremony with Catholic ritual and prayer, but it is metaphorically a passage into the temporal world of Gagá through the vehicle of the "ship/chair" and the subsequent baptism of Africans upon their arrival into the colonial context.

Taking the story of the Resurrection, as portrayed in the Catholic liturgy, the Gagá performs the Resurrection as a cloistering, a period of time in which all of the dancers, musicians and spiritual leaders retire from the sacred space prior to exiting as transformed entities. Close to dawn on Good Friday, the priest brings the dancers‟ clothes out into the open, and they then begin to dress. As part of the resurrection, the *dueño* is possessed by a *guede*, and he ritualistically visits the house of the first dancer, where secret rituals are performed inside. As the *mayor* and the *dueño* emerge, the musicians play a dirge, symbolizing the dancer‟s possession by a *luas,* by the spirits of the dead. This is repeated at the house of every dancer until all have been brought out into the open, and the community has been resurrected. It is at this point that guided by the *luases*, the dancers and the *dueño* proceed to dance out of the consecrated spaces (*la salida*) on the plantations and out into the streets. The *dueño* leads the procession, cracking his bullwhip to clear the path of evil spirits. This happens

simultaneously throughout the country, and dancers continue until they encounter other Gagás emerging from their plantations. These encounters are competitions, and if the *Gagás* are not friends, they will "fight" to see who can continue along the road. Fighting consists of the casting of magic spells to immobilize the other Gagá, or in dancing until the other Gagá"s weakness is discovered, at which point a spell is released to immobilize them. The Gagás continue dancing until late Saturday night. This resurrection and the *salida* are a reference to the call to arms among slaves against European dominance in the Western part of the island. It is at this moment, that the Gagá generates strong references to the Haitian history that, through its repeated performance, is incorporated into Dominican memory and identity. This point in the ritual also serves to illuminate socio-political tensions within the plantation that spill out into the larger Dominican society, creating a counter-dialogue about the official histories and realities of slaves and modern day plantation laborers.

Lastly, the Gagá would not be complete without the shedding and clearing that is marked by the destruction of all clothing, musical instruments and dancing tools used during the prior four days. On Easter Sunday, the great fire is extinguished, and the community gives thanks to the *luases* for their safe re-entrance into the life of the living from their long and treacherous journey (Rosenberg 112) into the lands of the spirits and into the history that shapes their present.

Case: The Gagá of El Soco, La Romana, Dominican Republic The Gagá of El Soco is one of the longest practicing Gagás in the Dominican Republic, and one of the largest. El Soco is a sugar plantation located just outside of La Romana in the Southeastern edge of the island. The community is largely Haitian-Dominican (~2,000 people), with a migrant Haitian laborer population approximating 1,100 people (Andujar 1996). Within the *batey*, the community articulates its social hierarchy by the designation of housing: the Haitian-Dominicans and Dominicans live in concrete homes, while the migrant Haitian laborers live in wooden shacks or mud structures at the periphery of the *batey*.

In March 1996, I conducted participatory-observational research at El Soco during the *Semana Santa* festivities. It is no coincidence that the largest Vudú based festivals in the Dominican Republic take place during the holiest week in Catholicism. Elizabeth McAlister, in her analysis of Rara in Haiti"s social and cultural landscape states, "Rara parades come to their climactic finish on Easter Week precisely because Holy Week was mandated (in 1685, under the Code Noir) to provide a respite from labor for enslaved Africans of the colony." (McAllister 2004, 62) Gagá, can thus be interpreted as an insertion of Haitian political history and consciousness into the Dominican social landscape, and as an insertion that disrupts Dominican Catholicism and the underlying concepts of Hispanidad.

During my research, the rituals, described above, began on Thursday afternoon, and continued until Sunday. During this time, none of the dancers, all of whom are workers on the plantation, slept and many rarely rested: a phenomenon they described as a result of being possessed by a *luas*. In addition to the act of establishing a physical space on the plantation, the plantation workers also consecrated space through ritual, song, dance and magic. This space was extended beyond the boundaries of the *enramada* (the ritual dance space) to encompass other places on the plantation, and then out from the plantation onto the highway, where the Gagá danced, invoked protective spells and "battled" with the other Gagás. This extended sacred space, in addition to embodying *luases* and other African and Haitian manifestations of spiritual power, also included symbols of political power and resistance. None was as powerful as the carrying of the Dominican flag at the front of the procession, which served to identify the Dominican national identity of the Gagá, but also, in an alternative meaning, to symbolize the call of the people to war.[14] The *Gagá,* with flag out front and its generals and queens at the ready, was able to dance as far as the capital city of Santo Domingo, approximately 180 km away.

While the *dueño* spoke to me of occurrences in past years where the *Gagá* had not been permitted to pass through certain areas, and were forced by police to return to the batey or reroute, this did not occur during the time of my observation. The most striking features of the El Soco Gagá are the high numbers of Dominicans and Dominican-Haitians who were involved, particularly among the *mayores* and *reinas*. The *dueño* was Dominican-Haitian, and many of the musicians were Haitian. However, there was a sizeable Dominican presence in comparison to what is usually reported. The Dominicans present not only participated actively in the Gagá, including as *mayores* and *reinas*, but also followed the Haitian and Haitian-Dominican leadership. This acquiescence of social power in the face of those who are perceived to have greater knowledge and spiritual power is one of the ways in which Dominican social categories are inverted and disrupted. For while the Gagá occurs on Dominican territory, it is primarily, and in the case of the Gagá El Soco, definitely, under the leadership of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans.

The Gagá in all its hierarchy and ritual is an important marker of social resistance in the Dominican Republic. The people who practice their beliefs may be subjected to police repression, social stigmatization, and loss of home and work.[15] Despite this, Gagás continue to dance in honor of the *luases*, and continue to preserve African cultural markers in a society where African presence is so often denied. That the Gagá from El Soco was able to march from their *batey* to the capital city was a symbolically significant act, as well as a socially transformative act, and an act that serves to reinforce the community"s power throughout the Southeast region. Not only were they powerful enough to confront the various Gagás along their route, and "defeat" them, they were also

able to get past the limits of the *batey*, numerous police authorities and Dominican neighborhoods. This is significant given the fact that there were Haitians and Dominican-Haitians who do not hold Dominican citizenship and whose movement is limited to the *bateyes*. It is, however, not possible to dismiss the large number of Dominicans, whose presence may have made it more feasible for this Gagá to move forward through the nation.

The symbolic power of a Gagá traversing the nation of the Dominican Republic in a symbolic act of battle is not lost on Dominican society. The response of Dominican society to the Gagás has been two-fold: 1) that the Gagás are again a symbol of the Haitian desire to dominate Dominican society and of the perversity of this endeavor and 2) that the Gagás are simply a manifestation of Dominican folklore, therefore dismissing its full political and socially transformative power.

The first response is characteristic as a nationalist, reactionary response to the articulated and performed presence of Africanity – which is signified as `blackness". In other words, it is the argument that is consistently invoked whenever Vudú transgresses private spaces and enters into Dominican public spaces - whenever Vudú exits the poor, black communities and other enclaves and engages with the rest of Dominican society. The second response is newer in form, and subtler in tone, but it nonetheless negates the implications of an articulated African-descended presence on the development and re-construction of Dominican national and ethnic identity. Relegating Gagás and other public performances of Vudú as examples of "Dominican folklore", places Vudú in the context of myth and imaginary, stripping it of its power for forming communities, for constructing meaning within communities, for changing consciousness and inverting social hierarchies, and for pushing the limits of political ideologies and state policies. It negates the conscious acts by Dominican intellectuals who have worked for the past 30 years to re-insert the history of an African presence in the Dominican Republic, not just as something of folklore, but as an actual historical fact. And, it maintains the signifiers of blackness and Africanity as static and embodied in "simple" and "simplistic" dances, songs and costumes rather than assuming and accepting that by virtue of its existence and praxis, Vudú, and as its most public face, Gagá, completely disrupt notions of Hispanidad, and of Dominicans as a monolithic "raza Hispana" that is devoid of a complex ethnic and cultural heritage.

V. Conclusion

In this paper I have explored some of the more rudimentary aspects of Vudú as a mechanism for social and political resistance to oppression and as a system of healing. However, as the Dominican Republic begins to confront the effects of the concept of Hispanidad and racism perpetrated by centuries of colonial government and racist political leaders on new and deeper levels, there is an imperative to uncover the more salient features of African presence in

Dominican society. Vudú not only presents a religion, but a way of life that has preserved communities, and has been preserved by communities, in an effort to explain the world"s contradictions, and to create new possibilities for the articulation of meaning within a society whose institutions and policies are the primary mechanism of oppression.

In her analysis of Rará, McAllister states:

> It is for this "unofficial culture," the culture of the majority, the popular culture, that Rara became the public mouthpiece. If the enfranchised, Duvalierist classes performed the cultural work of maintaining the image of normalcy during repression, then the disenfranchised classes performed cultural work as well, work that took place in poor neighborhoods, Vodou temples, soccer teams, and other locations where the less powerful congregate. Much of this activity can be seen as making up the `hidden transcript": discourse that takes place offstage, beyond direct observation by power holders." (McAllister 2002, 166)

Taking this analysis and applying it to the Dominican social, political and historical context, it is the *servidores* and the *curanderos*, the Gagás and all of their participants who become the subjects in developing a "hidden transcript", an alternative set of cultural signifiers of Dominican identity through the practice of Vudú in all its forms. Whether it is holding a healing ceremony in a Church, or marching in a symbolic call to battle, Vudú has demonstrated its presence in Dominican society, and has corrupted essentialist notions of Dominican national identity, and specifically *Hispanidad*. It has inverted power relations, disrupted state and Church sanctioned discourses and policies, giving shape to an alternate history where those who reference Africanity are at the centre of cultural meaning production and symbolic resistance to oppression.

End Notes

1. Many thanks to Carlos Andujar Personal, Fatima Portorreal, Tomás Callendar for their significant contributions to this research. Additional thanks to „La Mancha" and the many other people with whom I spoke throughout the course of my research.

2. "el Vudú dominicano es, por una parte una devoción a los santos y a los muertos, y por otra parte un culto de curación y asesoramiento de los vivos."

3. For the purpose of this paper, race is best defined as a social construct based on phenotypical markers (skin color, hair texture, etc) which serves to maintain lines of power and domination, and which is challenged and shaped by social movements (Winant 25).

4. In addition to the development of the new categories *india, mestizo* and *blanco* were redefined from their original colonial connotations.

5. El masacre de 1937.

6. Further on, I will elaborate how the public demonstration of Vudú practices has led to the acceptance of Vudú art forms as part of Dominican folklore.

7. Cimarrones are maroons, or escaped black slaves. They formed cimarronajes throughout the island, a few of which have preserved linguistic and cultural traditions dating back several hundred years.
8. Pseudonym.
9. Similar to the concept of speaking in tongues…langage is "the sacred African language of the spirits" (Murphy 24).
10. For further insight into the transmisión of healing knowledge, refer to Michel Laguerre"s *Afro Caribbean Folk Medicine*, Massachussets: Bergin & Garvey, 1987.
11. In the Dominican Republic, children born of Haitain parents are not granted Dominican citizenship. Children born of one Dominican parent and one Haitian parent are designated as Haitian-Dominican by the state. These groups of people are different from dark-skinned Dominicans, who may identify as *moreno* or Afro, but who definitely carry Dominican citizenship. And these groups are differentiated from West Indian-Dominican populations, socially designated as *cocolos* (which can at times carry a derogatory meaning), but according to the state, are also Dominican.
12. There is evidence of Vudú practice in urban areas, which takes on a different form given the confinements of space, the nature of urban habitation during the process of urbanization and the state forms of control that are particular to the urban environment. This paper will not focus on the urban context, but let it suffice to say that Vudú is present in the urban centers of the Dominican Republic, and it does incorporate different methods of meaning production and practice, the analysis of which is outside the scope of this essay.
13. Gagá groups form strict hierarchies, with the dueño at the top, followed by the dancers: El Presidente, el jefe de las Fuerzas Armadas, el ministro de guerra, el coronel, los mayores, las reinas, el secretario, los supervisores and el mayordomo. This hierarchical structure serves to re-enact the troops" hierachy among those who fought against the French colonists, as well as subsequent battle arrangements (Rosenberg 69).
14. Officially, the Dominican government raises the flag in the inverse to symbolize a call to war, where the blue square is in the upper left hand corner. The flag the Gagá carried was not in this position at all, but the act of carrying it first carried the message that the Gagá was prepared for war, if necessary.
15. In the year 2000, up to 36,000 Haitians were deported (San Martin). The Gagás presented a particular risk as they exposed "Haitian" presence among the participants.

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