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Afro-descendant Trajectories: A Methodological Reflection

Trayectorias afrodescendientes. Una reflexión metodológica

Trajetórias dos afrodescendentes. Uma reflexão metodológica

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Resumen

Este artículo ofrece una reflexión acerca de cómo pensamos a la gente y pueblos Afro-descendientes como objetos o sujetos de estudio. Esto se hace a partir de la pregunta: ¿Cómo cambia el estudio de la gente afro-descendiente cuando la tal llamada "unidad de análisis" no es un esclavo, sino un ancestro esclavizado que es parte de tu cosmología contemporánea? La manera de llegar a esta pregunta y el análisis presentado de allí en adelante intentan ilustrar aspectos claves para avanzar la erudición afro-descendiente: el papel del pensamiento y la práctica del feminismo en la consciencia ancestral; y el impacto subsecuente en la interpretación y producción de fuentes históricas y socio-políticas.

Palabras clave: Teoría Feminista Negra, geopolíticas de raza, cimarronaje.

Abstract

This article offers a reflection about how we think of Afro-descendant people as objects or subjects of study. To do this, it reflects on the question: How does the study of Afro-descendant peoples change when the so-called "unit of analysis" is not a slave, but an enslaved ancestor who is part of your contemporary cosmology? The way of arriving at this question, and the analysis presented henceforth attempts to highlight key aspects for advancing Afro-descendant scholarship: specifically the role of black feminist thought and practices on ancestral consciousness; and its subsequent impact on the interpretation and production of historical and socio-political sources.

Keywords: Black Feminist Theory, Geopolitics of Race, Maroonage.

Resumo

Este artigo tem o intuito de contribuir para uma reflexão com relação à abordagem dos indíviduos e grupos afro-descendente quanto objeto ou temas de estudo. Tal reflexão gira em torno da questão: "Quanto varia o estudo dos afro-descendentes, quando meditarmos que a "unidade de análise" não é um escravo, porém um ascendente escravizado que faz parte da nossa cosmovisão contemporânea"? A resposta à pergunta, bem como a análise posterior apresentada, tem a intenção de ilustrar aspectos fundamentais que comportem para progredir no conhecimento do tópico afrodescendente. Os aspectos incluem: o papel do pensamento e da prática do feminismo na consciência ancestral; o impacto ulterior a respeito da interpretação e produção de fontes históricas e sócio-políticas.

Palavras-chave: Teoria feminista negra, geopolíticas da raça, cimarrão.

Your silence will not protect you. (Lorde, 1984:41)

Theirs [Black Women Writers] was the project I wanted to be part of. And they gave me the map that I, a poor Dominican immigrant boy of African descent from New Jersey, could follow. (Díaz, 2012)

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and Afro-descendant Methodologies

The self-identified "warrior poet" Audre Lorde is one of the pillars of black feminist thought. Going far beyond Fanon's "Oh my body, make me always a man who questions", Black Feminist Thought (BFT) relies on a methodology constructed by the insights gleaned from engaging that which we keep silent about our social realities. The first of the two quotes presented above: "Your silence will not protect you" (Lorde, 1984:40) is one of the key aspects for reflecting on a methodology of Afro-descendant scholarship.

The silence that Lorde —and BFT in general— refers to stems from the patriarchy that shapes modern society. It is the product of the violence through which racial, sexual, and gender ideologies and practices are enforced. This silence keeps the subject from participating in transformative social-political action through a fear of the internal and external repercussions of challenging patriarchy. In this way, patriarchy is internalized and becomes an almost unquestionable norm. Taking into account the multiple positions of any social group or individual (racialized, sexualized, genderized), BFT elaborates a methodology of social analysis premised on the practice of "learning to put the fear in perspective" (Lorde, 1984:41). Because both the fear and the silence it engenders have their origin in patriarchal oppression, BFT is explicit in confronting the patriarchy that gives modern societies their form. The aforementioned act of putting "the fear in perspective" means that the scholar must engage with how patriarchy manifests within his/her own being. Herein lies one of the biggest challenges to advancing Afro-descendant scholarship. The scholar must engage with ways that patri-

archy has, and which continue to shape, the production and interpretation of the historical and socio-political sources she works with and produces. BFT offers a clear response to this challenge: scholars must look both within and without, and have the courage to elaborate, practice, and defend methodologies that necessarily challenge the very foundations of western knowledge production and the institutional structures and actors that reproduce them.

My positionality as a heterosexual black man implies that the paradigms through which I read, interpret, process data, and express my understanding is conditioned by the privileges and oppressions –and their corresponding silences – of the patriarchal systems that I intend to resist. My observations about gendered constructs in the section titled "Maroon Communities and State Violence" offer but a preamble to the possibilities for gender analysis brought forth by ancestral consciousness. Traditional readings of Dominican history would rarely give notice to these concerns. Rather, they cement gender constructs, which reinforce the white-male-supremacist hegemony of colonial and national identity. Moreover, I recognize that my positionality implies another point supremely pertinent for this article. In an academic environment, the knowledge historical subjects that reinforce male supremacy produce are influenced by gendered interpretations and constructions. Within said environment, it would be admissible for me simply to engage with the questions I raise about Dominican historiography without publicly recognising the intellectual sources that led me to raise them in the first place. It is, precisely, the personal act of recognizing that such an act would constitute gendered violence against black women scholars, and upon myself, which exemplifies yet another way that I interpret Lorde's call. To silence the foundational role of BFT in my ongoing liberatory struggle is not to engage in my own liberation at all. BFT is much more than theory applied to academic subjects, its main arena, is the self. It is, therefore, imperative that black male scholars be more than proactive in "recognizing" the immense contributions black women scholars continue to make to the social sciences and the humanities. We must be explicit in breaking the silence that denies the leadership of black women, and incorporate the methodologies of BFT and practice into our academic and non-academic endeavors. As I attempt to elaborate a meth-

odological reflection of Afro-descendant scholarship, I reference the second quote by writer Junot Díaz: "Theirs [Black Women Writers] was the project I wanted to be part of. And they gave me the map that I, a poor Dominican immigrant boy of African descent from New Jersey, could follow" (Díaz, 2012).

Junot Díaz's novels and short stories are often derided for their integration of Spanglish (the mix of English and Spanish language), liberal use of swears, and graphic portrayal of sexualized, gendered, and racialized violence. Those who focus on this aspect of his literature miss the intellectual depth behind his literary style. Far from a marketing gimmick, Díaz's writing style is a deliberate exercise of BFT. Rather than silence the mix of Spanish and English language characteristic of diasporic communities in the United States, or the vulgarity and violence of patriarchal oppression, Díaz brings these characteristics to the forefront. In so doing, he offers his audience what he terms a "mirror" through which they can reflect on the ways the colonial legacy of racial and sexual violence manifest themselves in their own lives. The way he writes, and the content of his writing has earned him great recognition within the Dominican and broader Latino community in the United States, especially among those of us who are first generation or second generation immigrants. His writing speaks to the unspeakable: nationalism and Dominican blackness, sexual violence to *both* girls *and* boys, and the ways patriarchal violence affect men and women, all stemming from his own personal experiences. However, not only does he craft his literary representation by engaging with his own personal experience, he also engages with the so-called scholarly production of knowledge. Díaz declares that the methodologies that have garnered him so much popular success, as well as a Pulitzer prize and the McArthur Foundation's Genius Award, are the result of his engagement with BFT:

> To me (and many other young artists and readers) the fiction of these foundational sisters represented a quantum leap in what is called the post-colonial-slash-subaltern-slash-neocolonial; their work completed, extended, complicated the work of the earlier generation (Fanon) in profound ways and also created for this young writer a set of strategies and warrior-grammars that would become the basis of my art. That these women are being forgotten, and their historical importance elided, says a lot about

> our particular moment and how real a threat these foundational sisters posed to the order of things (Díaz, 2012).

I have seen my own gendered-racial dynamics reflected in my writing for over 15 years. Thus, I find Díaz's work to be of particular relevance to the present task for at least three reasons. 1) Along with other sources of popular culture –i.e. rap, and hip-hop music- his work was one of the few venues through which I could engage explicitly with questions of the racial dynamics of my own family. 2) Recent interviews and lectures have made me reflect more explicitly on sexual and gender oppression within my own family and history. 3) His open acknowledgement of the foundational importance of BFT, which converges with the urge to engage with questions of my family's legacy of racial, gendered, and sexual violence. This paves the way for me to express my own positionality regarding the socio-political dimensions of patriarchal oppression in the context of afro-diasporic scholarship.

Díaz's writings and reflections make plain the necessity to exalt the legacy of internal and external struggle that black women continue to face both within and outside of the academy. His writing, made possible by black women writers, is living evidence that the exaltation of black women intellectuals can and must go beyond mere linguistic recognition. Such exaltation must consist of putting black feminist theory into action. The present article attempts to do just that by "breaking the silence" implicit in my own afro-diasporic experiences. Thereby, it uses the accumulated voices of BFT to speak of a past that is also constantly present. It is by no means exhaustive, and it does not break all of my own silences. As Lorde reminds us, "there are so many silences to break" (Lorde, 1984:44).

In this way, the central thesis of this paper goes beyond simply stating that the lessons of BFT must be put into action. Rather, it manifests how these lessons spur an attempt to present the ways in which I came to recognize the liberatory character of BFT. It prompts research questions and ways of interpreting sources of analysis that expose and confront patriarchal knowledge production, within the author and from the sources. Thus, each example I present, has been reached by employing the black feminist practice of breaking the deepest silences of patriarchal oppression. As I mention

later in the text, BFT is by no means the only way of arriving at the question of how ancestral consciousness impacts the creation and interpretation of sources. My hope is to express that the creation of this text originates from the lived experience of both recognizing and implementing some of the lessons of black feminist through, chiefly, Lorde's call to break the silences of patriarchy: everywhere; including academic social science research.

Black Feminist Methodology and Ancestral Consciousness

My interest in learning and discussing ways of thinking and analyzing the sociopolitical and socioeconomic situations of people of African descent developed from an omnipresent, albeit passive, curiosity about the African roots of my family's customs and histories. Like that of many Afro-descendant students, my curiosity was passive; to succeed in the biomedical research career, I felt a need to distance myself from any serious investment in learning about my African roots. My case is far from uncommon. Educational research (among other academic fields) has examined some of the ways that this phenomenon is endemic in Afro-descendant, and Latino student populations, and especially among women. To reflect on this literature is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, gleaning academic insight from critical narratives of racial and gender oppression is a prominent component of academic research of higher education, which is worth noting (Solórzano, 2002). Like countless others, I struggled to keep my ancestral consciousness from impacting my academic career. However, the racially stratified inequality I witnessed as a cardiac rehab intern in an urban medical center had the consequence of preventing my career as a biomedical researcher from advancing, without engaging a plethora of questions about my African ancestry, particularly the socio-political and socio-economic aspects of this legacy.

Interested in observing the potential clinical application of my biomedical research, I set up an internship in a racially/ethnically diverse urban medical center. Despite the fact that about a third of all patients who were referred to cardiac rehabilitation were black or Latino, not one attended cardiac rehabilitation during my 5 month internship. Faced with this blatant inequality on a day to day basis, I began to question whether or not, and to what extent,

racial histories were much more than stories whose most significant impacts were part of a distant past.

Unable to continue ignoring the social and political manifestations of race and racism, I explored the extensive medical literature on racial health disparities. Some of the literature has examined the impact of economic policies, and/or overt racial discrimination as the source of racial health disparities. Nevertheless, the histories that shape racial health disparities were, and continue to be, generally silenced. This silence is near absolute when it comes to examining a historicized socio-political analysis of the formations, transformations, and manifestations of patriarchy in health. This silence spoke to me: the fact that I had no rehab patients who were black and/or Latino seemed more like a contemporary expression of the *historical* articulations of race and racism than social dynamics based on recent economic policies or contemporary understandings of racial discrimination.

My interest in my own African roots and the racial histories that I was taught has since developed as my primary subject of inquiry. The black-Latino patients I treated at the hospital, but never saw at the cardiac rehabilitation center came from all over the Americas and the African Continent. My own experience, growing up as a black Hispanic from Haiti, had already made me very aware that I was one of millions of descendants and migrants of the African continent. My position within my own family, within my sugar-plantation hometown in Barahona and the United States linked my blackness to inferiorities in a variety of forms and social dimensions. Although I had remained silent, I had been aware of these realities since childhood. There was no moment of discovery about my racial oppression. I did not become conscious of my blackness as a result of living in the United States. Living unjust racial norms incited the most basic question that was silenced, and never raised: why? It was not until my experience at the rehabilitation center and coaxed by Díaz's writing that I began to speak what was previously silent.

My engagement with questions of afro-descendent histories and trajectories stems from the lived experience of my blackness in various spaces and dimensions. That black peoples from various spaces that I operated in were simultaneously living their own experience of blackness. This grounded my conceptualization of afro-diasporic life in very organic ways. I do not

approach the question of Afro-descendant trajectories and how to go about studying afro-descendent populations from academic constructs of race and racial dynamics. My questions are grounded in the histories and trajectories of my African roots: what has happened to the people that were brought in chains to the island where I was born? What happened to their relatives? What happened to those brought elsewhere? The notions of ancestral consciousness and familial lineage are implicit in these questions. They herald a search for a past that the social realities of a present made of accumulated silences and affirmations bring forth. BFT holds that it is possible to understand the links between the past and present. To do this, it is necessary to study the vast amount of knowledge and methods of interpreting it that we have often silenced by reproducing the various manifestations of oppression that we live. The academy must prepare to engage with the fact that, for many, the study of Afro-descendant peoples implies a radically different methodology than the norms that it has traditionally espoused: a methodology achieved by living the insights gleaned from interpreting sources heretofore unaccounted.

It is necessary to recognize that the study of Afro-descendant peoples attempts to recognize the historical roots of contemporary black life through its own experience. As such, it demands three things. 1) To pay particular attention to the social and political impacts the actions of Afro-descendant peoples have on each other, across colonial and/or modern political boundaries. 2) To recognize that these actions are not limited to the disciplinary definitions, social actors, ethics or norms currently identified by western, and traditionally white, academic institutions. 3) To draw objects of study from one's own lived experiences of integrated racial, gendered, class, and sexual silences and enunciations. These practices entail a nuanced sensibility for identifying and interpreting sources of analytical value. Catherine John's piece "Neo-coloniality, literary representation, and the problem of disciplinary solutions" (John, 2003) serves as a useful example of the methodological sensibilities I believe lead to profound advancements in research about Afro-descendant peoples. Among other things, John highlights some of the ways that literary characters and settings of black women writers can inform socio-political analysis of colonial relations of power "with more sophistication than conventional social science categorizations often make possible" (John,

2003). Her critique of Carl Stone's traditional disciplinary analysis of race and economic social mobility serves as an important starting point. It highlights the ways that ancestral consciousness can lead to significant and necessary changes in how academic scholars engage the study of Afro-descendant peoples. She draws on a juxtaposition between Stone's traditional racial categorizations (in the disciplinary sense) and the black literary tradition of examining racial and gendered dynamics. It demonstrates that, to analyze empirical data through paradigms that the silences of colonial epistemic violence have created, result in flawed interpretations. They fail to explain the nuances of the racial dynamics upon which socioeconomic variables shift and change.

While I do not reference any particular literary character or setting to present my analysis, I nonetheless draw upon the knowledge passed on through black feminist literature to raise pertinent questions about the way historical political sociology addresses Afro-descendant subjects. As stated earlier, Junot Díaz's writing was the catalyst that heightened; maintained; and drove me finally to engage with my own roots and ancestry. He speaks from a positionality that most resembles my own, in a manner and tone shaped and molded by black women whose writings have long presented invaluable insight into the world of Afro-descendant peoples. It is no surprise then that Díaz's writing empowered my own ancestral consciousness, for it has long been one of the main teachings of BFT; from Zora Neale Hurston (Pouchet Paquet, 1990) to James Baldwin and Toni Morrison. In this article, this "poor Dominican immigrant boy of African descent from New (York)" can follow the "rootedness" (Morrison, 1984) of the ancestor to trace new paths in the field of historical political sociology.

Ancestral Consciousness and the African-Afrodescendant Subject

As expressed earlier, black feminist methodologies can lead the scholar to questions of ancestral consciousness. Perhaps one of the most influential presentations of the concept of ancestral consciousness is Toni Morrison's "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" In this seminal text, Morrison elaborates not just a lesson for understanding key works of African American literature, but a principle to follow in order to engage successfully with black

subjects and black settings:

> What struck me in looking at some contemporary fiction was that whether the novel took place in the city or in the country, the presence or absence of that figure (the ancestor) determined the success or the happiness of the character. It was the absence of an ancestor that was frightening, that was threatening, and it caused huge destruction and disarray in the work itself (Morrison, 1984: 343).

Here, Morrison exalts the value of an ancestral presence or awareness for the successful lives of black peoples, *and* for strength and cohesiveness of literary work. Morrison identifies the presence and implementation of ancestral consciousness as an imperative methodological tool for crafting works about black subjects. She goes so far as to declare "When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself" (Morrison, 1984: 344). It may be tempting to dismiss this insight from academic scholarship beyond literary analysis. I will not dwell into the extensive literature that examines the pertinence of literary analysis to historical socio-political scholarship (Patterson, 2005; Nigro, 2000; John, 2003). However, I urge the reader to consider the silences I expose in the following pages as evidence of the epistemic violence of coloniality. This violence takes various "intersecting" forms and collectively results in the "death" of the ancestral figure from historical and socio-political analysis. In the context of academic research, to exclude an ancestral consciousness is to continue "killing" the ancestor and will have destructive effects on the integrity of the work itself.

Clearly, what this article is about is much more than a merely presenting an example of how to apply BFT to Afro-descendant trajectories. As Patricia Hills Collins states "[r]ather than adding to existing theories by inserting previously excluded variables, black feminists aim to develop new theoretical interpretations of the interaction itself" (Collins, 1990: S20). Living ancestral consciousness by reflecting on the interactions of systems of oppression serves as one example of the process through which BFT opens new methodological perspectives. This is not to suggest that BFT is the only way of arriving at questions of ancestral consciousness, rather it drives us to understand that one of the challenges of Afro-descendant scholarship is

that we must examine and compare the various ways of thinking about afro-descendent peoples, their sources, and their methodological implications. What follows is a reflection on how ancestral consciousness may impact the methodology and interpretation of Afro-descendant scholarship.

In the context of this paper, ancestral consciousness means considering that the lives of the millions of African peoples who were brought to the western hemisphere under conditions of enslavement constitute a transhistorical socio-political and cultural lineage relevant to one's contemporary realities. My interest lies in reflecting on how ancestral consciousness impacts historical analysis in the fields that are conventionally thought to be the realm of western academic theory: colonial politics and the transition to so-called "modern" nation-states of the early 19th century. I begin by reflecting on how ancestral consciousness shapes how one thinks of the African peoples of the colonial period. Next, I offer brief examples of how this affects the interpretation of the colonial past in the fields of geopolitics, political economy, warfare, and national identity.

The colonial era is a key backdrop to the Afro-descendant experience in the Americas. To engage with the existing academic literature on the customs and histories of the diaspora it provoked requires that one consider how the literature is situated in relation to the 500+ years of representations, objectifications and subjection of African and Afro-descendant peoples. While there is a lot to consider within such a long period of patriarchal oppression and resistance, the principal silences that I address deal primarily with the impact of considering these historical trajectories from a perspective that differs significantly from the historical narratives and political assumptions born through nationalist constructions and interpretations of socio-historical figures and events. In so doing, it challenges the colonial epistemologies upon which both nationalist and globalist- methodologies were formed and continue to exist.

Scholars are challenged, above all, to think about how to reconcile the various ways of understanding the social and political repercussions of enslavement when the premise of ancestral consciousness offers a radically different understanding of its practice and its definition as a subject, and to

the very nature of the scholar itself. To millions of Afro-descendant peoples the very concept of slavery, as opposed to *enslavement* is indicative of an epistemic and even ontological difference of profound methodological and analytical repercussions: what methodological issues arise when the so-called "unit of analysis" is not a slave, but an enslaved ancestor who is part of your contemporary cosmology? Similarly, how does one reconcile the maroon, or "runaway slave" constructed by western historiography and social analysis with the maroon constructed by Afro-descendant peoples who, far from considering maroons as objects subjected to colonial authority, consider them ancestors and points of reference for contemporary negotiations with the politics of the nation-state? What are the interventions in the academic genealogy of black peoples that emerge by examining historical sources through this lens? Given that my analysis is largely premised on my own family's customs and histories, I elaborate this body of thought to the histories of African and Afro-descendant people in the island of Haiti.

Admittedly, I do not reference explicit black feminist sociopolitical theory in the analysis of the examples themselves. This is mainly because that question is part of a larger project currently in development. Instead, I present the results that living the black feminist principle of ancestral consciousness has had on my academic thought up to this point.

An Introduction to a Political Sociology of Maroonage

My reflexions focus on Haiti, the island, not the nation-state. This is an important distinction because maroon communities, their links, and their political and social impacts traversed the utterly imaginary boundaries imposed on the island by western colonialism. To encase the analysis of maroonage in the logic of how the colonial state handled them is to reproduce a colonial practice that Afro-descendant studies must necessarily avoid. My readings on the "colonial era" and the initial attempt to establish the Dominican nation-state point to a common factor both in sociopolitical and socioeconomic analyses. Indeed, there is a trend to undermine or flatly ignore the existence of maroons in the formation of the nation-state (Amaro, 1982; Bosch, 1970; Balaguer, 1983; Henríquez, 1938; Pérez, 1984; Morla, 2011; Morla, 2010; Núñez, 1990; Moya P.F., 1998; Torres-Saillant, 1999). Rather than engaging

the textual evidence and the broad body of work on colonial racial relations, studies grotesquely understate the pertinence of the existence of maroon communities on racial formations, national identity, gender and sexual normativity, and capitalist accumulation. While there is a considerable body of work on "the maroons", "the blacks", and "the slaves," such works often reproduce both racist and male-supremacist assumptions and objectifications described by the source documents (Franco, 1970; Sáez, 1994; Deive, 1980; Deive, 1985; Andújar, 1997; Albert B., 1993; Albert B., 2001; Pérez, 1984). At best, when maroons are considered significant socio-political actors, it is too often done within the confines of nationalist narratives. These practices silence other interpretations that I attempt to highlight in the following pages.

Maroon Communities and State Violence

Colonial documents are intimately concerned with the power of maroon communities and the threat they pose to the state's authority and economic vitality. While subsequent analysis may recognize maroon communities' power, these typically employ a historiography and socio-political analysis invested in reproducing colonial justification of the brutal violence imposed on maroon communities when they refused to submit to the colonial state's civilizing mission. To illustrate this, I consider the example of the maroon communities in the mountains of Azua, a southern province of what is now the Dominican Republic in 1667. In his work "La Iglesia y el negro esclavo en Santo Domingo" (The church and the black slave in Santo Domingo) José Sáez (1994) provides evidence of "mass baptisms": "on the 13th of April, 1667 […] the first 24 children rescued from the Maniel of Azua […] were solemnly baptized in the Cathedral by the Archbishop himself" (Sáez, 1994: 44). A footnote states that less than 6 weeks later, a priest would baptize another seven children "rescued" from the same *maniel* (*Palenque*/maroon community). He adds that just two years earlier, "although the work of the archbishop had no other purpose other than to look after the maroons, his report to the king accelerated the elimination by force of [a community of …], and the reduction to slavery of 600 families that lived near San Jose de Ocoa" (Sáez, 1994: 75).

The so-called "objective" stance of this academic work reflects the epistemological framework of the colonial project and focuses on explaining the actions of the clergy and the crown. The actors are 1) "the blacks" who form settlements and attack colonial trade routes, plantations and towns. They do so because of some natural propensity for thievery. Thus, they steal *negras* (blacks female) to satisfy their insatiable sexual appetite, flee the rigid discipline of the plantation, and as "vengeance" against their owner. 2) A benevolent church attempting to save maroon communities from themselves. 3) A colonial state left with no option but to rescue children and black females from black settlements. It can be seen that the accounts are not of towns being massacred. Nor are they of children, whose parents and relatives were butchered, who were then forced to live under the social and political regime that attacked their home. It is worth asking if the academy is ready to accept accounts and interpretations that reflect the epistemological framework of those who see in these accounts the murder and displacements of their ancestors, and the ancestors of other communities with whom they share a plethora of social and cultural norms, not to mention socio-political histories. Moreover, it is worth asking whether the academy is capable of examining the linkages between colonial violence against maroon communities and contemporary state-sanctioned violence against Afro-descendant communities. The context of these linkages is that these communities often exist as a successful defense strategy from colonial and post-independence state violence.

The silences about the catastrophe that befell these communities speak to an important challenge to Afro-descendant scholarship: the epistemic violence that reproduces African women through the eyes of colonial authority as objects of sexual and parental labor and parochial ownership. Dominican colonial historiography and political analysis are replete with references to black women as a primary object of contestation between "the blacks" and the venerable church authority. As mentioned above, "The blacks" launch attacks on plantations, trade routes, and colonial towns, not from thoughtful political and ideological purposes, but rather to take *negras*:

> Agrupados en bandas y comunidades más o menos grandes, a esos esclavos no les quedo otro remedia que dedicarse al pillaje, para lo

> cual caían periódicamente sobre las haciendas y demás unidades productivas cercanas a sus refugios para obtener comida, vestimenta, mujeres y cuantos artículos y utensilios requerían y no podían elaborar por sí mismo (Deive,1997: 259).

Black men are constructed as violent corrupting forces. Black women are denied recognition as willful social actors in creating and defending communities outside of colonial control: none of the maroons leaders identified in Dominican historiography are women. They are, however, recognized as key actors of colonial society insofar as they perform their prescribed role in the capital accumulation and male-supremacy. Sáez (1994) illustrates this. He recounts "A solution to the sustained economic crisis of the convent was the removal of some female slaves […] this appeared to be insufficient, for they and others lent themselves to go out each night to exercise prostitution, complementing a system already employed, in compulsory fashion, by some landowners" (Sáez, 1994: 38). The two representations of black men and women construct Maroon communities as spaces controlled by the violence of black men, and not a place of family making. Meanwhile, colonial towns are places where the parochial and civilizing logic of the colonial project justifies violence to women. Civilization outside the colony is not civilization; rather, it is the antithesis to the colonial project. Its assaults must be explained through the logic of the colony, and this task is dutifully attended to in contemporary Afro-descendant studies. To what extent do these perceptions about Afro-descendant subjects are based on gender constructs calls for more attention. For this, it is useful to draw on the insights gleaned by reflecting on the various manifestations of gender and sexual oppression. Ultimately, African and Afro-descendant peoples are thought of as subjects of colonial, and later, national state power. What is in play is not only the way sources are interpreted, but the way that they are created for future analysis.

Maroon Communities and Early Capital Accumulation

The violence of colonial and national historical narratives and analyses relates to the development of capitalism and creates silences. To highlight these silences may help to interpret the socio-political significance of maroon com-

munities through ancestral consciousness. In addition, ancestral consciousness makes sense out of examining the interactions between racial identity, national identity and global struggles of power. These become not only palatable but necessary. It is difficult to argue against the fundamental role of enslavement in the development of capitalism (Williams, 1961). However, when the significance of maroon communities is taken into account, one must recognize that primitive capital accumulation is predicated on not only enslavement but the dialectic of colonial enslavement with African maroonage and other forms of resistance.

The Spanish colonial project in Santo Domingo was not as economically vibrant as other colonies in the region. Its economic anomie is attributed to either Spain's "abandonment" of the colony, and/or to the shift in global production markets. Scholarly accounts are replete with open laments about the flailing Spanish Colonial economy of the early 16th and mid-17th century. Antonio Valverde's work (Sánchez, 1785), "An idea of the value of the Spanish Island," written in Caracas, is heralded as an emblematic example of the desperation colonial officials felt right through the late 18th century. These are often accompanied by envious accounts of the wealth of other colonies, and comparisons to the number and treatment of enslaved Africans and Afro-descendants within them. The authors base their work on colonial sources, which refer to the constant concern about the ongoing threat of maroon communities. They also speak of the need to develop strategies to integrate them into the early capitalist structure of the colonial economy. These trends show clear evidence that the basis of the colonial economy is the ability to extract as much labor from the African and Afro-descendant populace as possible. Despite this, thanks to the reproduction of colonial epistemic frameworks, it is unthinkable that the Spanish colonial enterprise did not prosper precisely because African and Afro-descendant resistance to colonial authority did not allow it. Rather, the ferocity of the warfare between free Africans and Afro-descendants and Spanish colonial authority is disregarded as a possible explanatory factor in the social realities that made Spain's colonial project in Haiti economically insolvent.

However, the argument traditionally used, which states that global markets simply shifted to other production sites, lacks sophistication. Much like today,

the ability to develop profitable markets is largely dependent (among other things) on the ability to obtain profitable labor. That sugar market did not maintain solid footing in Spain's colonial project of Santo Domingo, must account for the costs of "pacifying" the African and Afro-descendant populations and the amount of labor that the various techniques were able to obtain. To my knowledge, detailed economic analysis of maroonage and other forms of African and Afro-descendant resistance does not yet exist, at least within what is considered mainstream academia. This kind of study would provide a significant reference for contemporary Afro-descendant communities struggling to defend their territories from contemporary capitalist exploitation. Moreover, it would provide a strong backdrop for examining capitalist investment in land dispossession and other forms of obtaining access to territories and resources claimed by Afro-descendant peoples. In short, this calls for trans-historical analysis of capitalist development and projections that recognize the active role of violence as a tool of market creation and manipulation across various interrelated industries.

Maroon Resistance and the Myth of Racial Democracy

The complex racial, gender, and sexual dynamics of the colonial projects had profound impacts on "local" socio-political developments. The European colonial enterprise was dependent on highly integrated political and economic relations. African/Afro-descendant resistances to these relations were a prominent reality across its diaspora. As such, it is important consider the ways in which Afro-descendant socio-political actions had an impact on global developments— for example, the so-called "shift" in global sugar industry from "the Spanish to Caribbean" to Brazilian markets. Processes of colonization intricately relate to acts of resistance across the Americas and the Caribbean. Racial formations, migrations of colonial officials, clergy and Afro-descendants that led to the development of national identities are not only all interrelated but also inextricable from African and Afro-descendant resistance.

Dominican historiography draws attention to a number of mass exoduses from colonial settlements, which are traditionally attributed to the colony's economic woes and the Haitian revolution. These exoduses were primarily

clergy and small "entrepreneurs" who found the conditions on the island much less favorable than those in other localities of Spanish colonial expansion. What is often left unsaid, or superficially explained by the logic of colonial epistemology, is that these people left the island with as much of their property as possible, including the Africans they had enslaved. If one considers the propensity and intensity of African resistance in Haiti, and its impact on plantation society one may better understand why the economic vitality of the colonial project and even the racial hierarchy of plantation society were significantly decimated. This analysis for the mass exodus is much more satisfying than the one-dimensional excuse of a "poor economy," and opens up new areas for analysis: It calls, for example, attention to the need to examine the ways the migration of enslaved African and Afro-descendant peoples affected colonial projects in their new locations.

The migrations out of Santo Domingo had profound consequences in the trajectories of racial relations and national identities. Although not often considered, the need of colonial authorities to negotiate various forms of cohabitation with Africans led to so-called more "relaxed" system of enslavement relative to the rest of the Caribbean. Whereas Dominican historiography and socio-political analysis consistently cites the impact of depopulation on racial relations; this typically silences the legal and practical implementation of "black codes" (*códigos negros*) and the various ways that colonial society remained premised on white-supremacy. They also silence the ongoing warfare against maroon communities, as local officials never abandoned the process of establishing and expanding colonial governmentality. In fact, colonial authorities continued to devise ways of expanding colonial authority by navigating the complex racial dynamics of the island. Understanding these silenced dynamics is key, because they challenge the core of the myth of "racial democracy" in Santo Domingo and I would argue, throughout the diaspora.

Maroonage, Racial Relations and National Identity

The hacienda system and its forms of racial domination remained significant precisely because African rebellions attenuated the maintenance of sugar plantation society. As a result, the economic vitality of the Spanish colonial project in Haiti was far inferior to its French counterpart. Furthermore, given

that national identities were built upon creole colonial relations of power, it is unacceptable to continue ignoring the role of maroonage in shaping creole consciousness and ideology. At a grander scale, what some would call "Dominican" Maroonage is insipid in the construction of the historical and socio-political narratives of the Haitian Revolution, and consequently shaped racial constructs throughout out the period of national independence.

In his examination of the origin of Dominican national identity, the 1821 founding of the Dominican Republic of Haiti, Patrick Bryan hits the nail on the head in stating "the *independencia efímera* is in many respects shrouded in nationalist myth and Dominican historiography has focused far more on the Haitian invasion which followed" (Bryan, 1995:16). However, he echoes an apparent academic consensus in considering this revolutionary period to be the culmination of events that took place in the latter half of the 18th century. This analysis focuses on the geopolitics of colonial powers and the creoles engaged in implementing colonial relations on the ground. However, while the context of intra-European geopolitics of the period is not entirely the same as throughout the previous centuries, race and racism remains a central component of Spanish-settler political projects that developed throughout the long history of warfare with the people upon whom the economic vitality of the colonial project was predicated. The Spanish colonial project engaged in wars with African *palenques* and *manieles* and this was directly tied to the internal racial and gender politics that played themselves out throughout the diaspora. As such, the political sociology of maroonage is a key component to understanding the geopolitics that are often considered the exclusive domain of European empires and their creole counterparts. Ancestral consciousness leads one to consider the prominence of the geopolitics of gender-race throughout the colonial period, and specially its role in the development and implementation of national identities. It argues that the geopolitics of race cannot be understood without properly engaging the racial, gender and sexual dynamics related to African maroonage, and how these shaped socio-political identities throughout the diaspora.

For example, French and Spanish authorities (re)produced and contested their socio-political identities through negotiations pertaining to African maroonage. This had a profound impact on what would become "Dominican"

national identity, and the narrative of racial history upon which it is premised. In fact, African escape from French oppression to "Spanish Territory" is often cited as an example of —the myth of— racial democracy at the heart of the "nationalist myth" that "shrouds" (i.e. silences) key aspects of sociopolitical analysis of the island. Dominican historiography is replete with accounts of Spanish authorities giving "freedom" to escaped "French slaves" to create a negative impact on the much larger French economic system. However, this practice also served to undermine the brutal realities of racial oppression inherent to the Spanish colonial project. In addition, it is a key precursor to the development of the nationalist identity of the Spanish elite.

In a contemporary appropriation of the political significance of maroonage, Rafael Morla refers to Carlos Larrazábal Blanco's work in "The blacks and slavery in Santo Domingo" to exemplify nationalist bias in the socio-political analysis of maroonage. He cites Blanco's work as descriptive evidence of the role that maroons and black rebellions had in "germinating, along with Indians and creoles, the idea of independence in America" (Morla, 2010: 16). Morla relies on Blanco's analysis to explain his own assessment of the maroon contribution to the "idea of independence":

> These rebellions caused by the escape of slaves, maintained not just diplomatic but also social restlessness on both colonies […] nevertheless had a positive side for the Spanish colony and its heirloom the Dominican Republic. Those struggles that were at once accompanied by territorial purges kept the western border in a state of alertness that contributed to Dominicans developing an interest that would necessarily be of national character, a sentiment of unity manifested by a certain dislike and mistrust towards the French colony (quoten in Morla 2009: 16).

Thus, maroonage was a positive aspect of colonial and Dominican politics insofar as it strengthened the anti-French sentiments that were essential components for national independence. It contributed to silence the extent of colonial violence upon the population it claimed to protect. It is also part of a system of self-consistent interpretations and creations of sociohistorical events and actors that unabashedly inherits its epistemic and ontological

foundations from the colonial project. In this way, they carry the tradition of creating and interpreting the actions of Afro-descendant peoples according to the logic advancing the colonial project into the ongoing project of nation-state rule. Thus, key events of African and Afro-descendant subversive power are removed from the composite of self-identification and segregated to the political confines of national political and social boundaries. Thus, the analyses of the Haitian revolution do not consider the maroon struggles against Spanish colonial enslavement. Since sources are interpreted within the confines of colonial boundaries, the continuing practice of waging war against *palenques*, of heavily repressing the attempt of the enslaved to liberate themselves, are all subsumed by the so-called tragedy that was the Haitian "invasion". The pre-eminence of the colonial and emerging national narratives silence the analyses of the links between *palenques*, other African and Afro-descendant territories negotiated with the crown and even the *mulato* population with the liberatory cause of the Haitian revolution. Hence, "Dominicans" could not possibly be interpreted as being an integral part of the Haitian revolution because the constructs of Dominican socio-political identity are rooted in the epistemic and ontological philosophy of the French and Spanish colonial project. Hence, the Haitians "invaded" the Dominicans in 1801, and 1822. The literature again makes reference to a mass exodus corresponding to these "invasions", but what remains unsaid is that the population that left was that whose very subsistence was predicated on the integrated systems of racial, gender and sexual violence of the colonial project. These are the "Dominicans" around whom historical narratives are built; from the colonial era right through the period of national independence, and present-day analysis of openly white supremacist, and even Black Nationalist, and Pan-Africanist creeds. The weight of the colonial epistemologies that live at the expense of the death of this ancestral figure buries the history and socio-political significance of "Dominican" maroonage.

Many Africans and Afro-descendant peoples sought refuge and support from their counterparts in other colonial domains. This speaks to the need of examining the transnational silences of African and Afro-descendant spaces. To this point, Dominican historiography makes numerous references to the efforts of Jose Nuñez Cáceres to convince Simón Bolívar and other members

of the Gran Colombia/Nueva Granada elite to include a Dominican state independent from Spain, and Haiti, into Gran Colombia. Whereas the collaborations between Petión and Bolívar are broadly recognized, Dominican literature is mostly silent on this point and virtually mute on its implications for the racial politics of the Spanish colonial and national independence projects.

Bolívar did not support Cáceres and his allies in their bid to enter into the protection of Gran Colombia. Was Bolívar's decision influenced by the fact that the Dominican state that Caceres established continued the practice of enslavement and legal codification of white-supremacy? What role did Bolívar's alliance with Petión regarding this first attempt to establish a Dominican nation state have on "Dominican" racial politics? How was this alliance received by the various actors involved in the Colombian independence movement? Furthermore, what was the relationship between Boyer, the Haitian leader who crushed José Núñez Cáceres' national aspirations, and the various actors of Gran Colombia's independence movement? What was the role of maroon communities in the independence projects of both nations? What was the extent and nature of dialogues and negotiations between African and Afro-descendant leaders on both territories?

Advancing Afro-descendant Scholarship

It is important to examine these questions and many other questions that arise from an ancestral consciousness of African and Afro-descendant peoples carefully. We must pay special attention to the methods that are employed to answer these questions. Furthermore, it is important to examine the role of gender constructs, not as an additional variable in a correlation matrix, but as an irreducible social construct inherent to the development of sociohistorical events. Moreover, it is important for male scholars to engage the silences of their own privileges and oppression for insights into how to craft relevant methodologies.

These questions come from considering the most basic silences of my own life: the silence and negation of the existence and savagery of enslavement; the accompanying silences about the extent and significance of resistance to the logic of enslavement; and the consequent silence about the ongoing articulations of

the racial, class, gendered, sexual ideologies of violence that predicated the enslavement of my ancestors. It is a step towards understanding not just contemporary challenges, but the various ways of resistance. I expect these efforts to lead to radically different conceptual mappings of Afro-descendant peoples. Moreover, there remains the great task of engaging this analysis with the other foundational experience of Afro-descendant peoples in the Americas: the capture and resistance of continental Africa. There is much to say, for example, of the fact that European colonization of African territories and peoples did not come through until Euro-descendant national independence projects flourished in the Americas. The various ways that Afro-descendant peoples in the Americas are linked to the histories of colonial domination and resistance in the African countries need to be enunciated. Moreover, it is important to consider the transhistorical aspect of these relations; for example, the fact that Anglo-Gold Ashanti, a mining company founded by white British capital accumulated throughout the long years of colonial domination in both the African continent and throughout the Americas, is an active actor in the displacement of ancestral Afro-Colombian communities speaks to the complexity of the silences that must be broken. Moreover, that Afro-descendant community leaders from ancestral communities throughout the diaspora are actively engaged in creating transnational solidarity networks prompts us to examine the long trajectories of afro-diasporic sociopolitical connections and their contemporary articulations.

I would like to end by bringing attention to the main focus of this paper: the potential of ancestral consciousness in creating new ways of identifying and interpreting historical and sociopolitical processes; their actresses and actors; and their (re)interpretations. The various sections of this article serve only to illustrate some of the questions that may arise when one considers the role of ancestral consciousness on Afro-descendant research. If the readers found themselves intrigued by the potential of each section, it should serve as a reminder that the heart of employing black feminist thought into Afro-descendant research lies in its practice; that its theory comes from having the courage to live its lessons, not merely discuss them. Finally, given that the academy still struggles to contain the voices of black women, black men have a foundational role to play in liberating themselves from their privileges premised on the oppressions of others. This implies, most of all, living the lessons that our sisters have long struggled to pass on to us.

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