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With Respect to Califé: Carnival, Theater, and Dominican Blackness

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Abstract: Dominican plays that rely on carnival build bridges to Africanness and blackness through literary and perfomative techniques of evasion: masking, humor, irony, satire. This essay examines F. Disla's 1985 play, *Ramón Arepa*, for its incorporation of the movements—both figurative and literal—associated with Afro-creolized carnival traditions. Disla's play routes its carnivalesque humor and masking specifically through Califé, Dominican carnival's social critic *par excellence*. Situating *Ramón Arepa* within a wider Caribbean theater and performance tradition, the paper turns to Disla's use of Califé to argue for the need to approach Dominican blackness with a different set of eyes and ears, to attempt to notice the way Dominican blackness manifests in literal, aesthetic, and performative movement.

Keywords: Dominican Republic, black diaspora, theater, carnival.

Con respeto a Califé: carnaval, teatro y negritud dominicana

Resumen: El teatro dominicano que se basa en el carnaval construye puentes hacia la africanidad y negritud a través de técnicas de evasión literarias y performativas: el enmascaramiento, el humor, la ironía, la sátira. Este ensayo examina la obra de teatro *Ramón Arepa* (1985) de F. Disla, por su incorporación de movimientos, tanto figurativos como literales, asociados a tradiciones afrocriollizadas del

carnaval. Específicamente, la obra de Disla dirige su humor y enmascaramiento carnavalescos a través del personaje de Califé, el crítico social por excelencia del carnaval dominicano. Al situar a *Ramón Arepa* dentro de una tradición más amplia de teatro caribeño, el artículo se centra en la utilización de Califé para argumentar la necesidad de abordar la negritud dominicana con otros ojos y oídos e intentar darse cuenta de cómo esta se manifiesta en el movimiento literal, estético y performativo.

Palabras clave: República Dominicana, diáspora negra, teatro, carnaval.

Dominican playwright Reynaldo Disla has been at the forefront of the development of *teatro callejero* in the Dominican Republic, arguing for the necessity of a publicly engaged, participatory theater. This publicly-oriented theater can begin to address the cultural and political erasure spread by Dominican elites through social institutions, an erasure of the history of enslavement, and the concomitant minimizing or outright erasure of black and African cultural contributions to Dominican society. Disla draws upon Dominican-specific carnival traditions to combat this erasure. In a 1987 performance-lecture at Casa de las Américas in Cuba, he irreverently and satirically narrates a history of the emergence of Dominican street theater:

> Los negros esclavos africanos vinieron de turistas a disfrutar del trabajo en los cañaverales y las minas, y tanto les gustó su nuevo empleo que quemaron los cañaverales de puro entusiasmo y salían huyendo y se volvían cimarrones… Cuatro siglos más tarde el teatro callejero (1976-1979) mostraba a la ciudad de Santo Domingo los dramáticos suicidios, los ayes, quejidos y alaridos indígenas y africanos, señalaba los explotadores antiguos y actuales, los héroes que se rebelaron contra el yugo, el yunque y la opresión; los patriotas y los vende patria. El teatro vengaba a los mártires.
> La chusma, la plebe, el vulgo, la canalla, los descamisados, los hijos de machepa, el populacho pudo ver teatro, por primera vez en su vida, divertirse y disfrutar ("Poner el dedo" 188).

Disla performs an argument about the need to show "a la ciudad de Santo Domingo" its history of shared indigenous *and* African origins, a corrective to dominant Dominican racial thinking invested in actively forgetting, or at least obscuring, African origins and black cultural markers.

Against this national narrative, historically buttressed by the state, by U.S. influence, and global anti-blackness, Disla offers a performance, part of a wider tradition in Dominican theater that relies on carnival to build bridges to Africanness and blackness through literary and perfomative techniques of evasion: masking, humor, irony, satire.

These literary and performance techniques of evasion link with what Dominican literary critic Odalís Pérez has theorized as "cultura movimiento," or the "construcción de identidades locales que han sido, de alguna manera, negadas por cierta intelectualidad oligárquica y racista, pero a la vez, por cierta pedagogía propiciada por el oficialismo en el contexto cultural y educativo dominicano" (177). Pérez invokes "cultura movimiento" as a way to oppose that "intelectualidad oligárquica y racista" that actively negates Dominican blackness and Africanness. Crucially, this "cultura movimiento" is the basis for constructing—not merely asserting—an alternative identity that neither denies nor obscures African origins, but instead turns to the creative capacities of the enslaved, the formerly enslaved, free people of African descent, and black revolutionaries from both Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

Pérez develops the concept of "cultura movimiento" as an aesthetic: "en la alteridad histórica y racial encontramos también una estética de la transgresión y del sarcasmo" (165). In other words, Pérez is able to uncover an aesthetic of movement: transgression, sarcasm, and irony are literary techniques that involve a sort of figurative motion, often a movement of evasion. This literary evasion echoes the carnival traditions that Reynaldo Disla and his brother, Frank Disla, invoke in their plays, along with the black cultural practices within Dominican carnival that have had to move, hide, and evade in a context of the literal and discursive violence enacted by the agents of white supremacy on the island. In this essay, I examine Frank Disla's 1985 play, *Ramón Arepa*, for its incorporation of the movements—both figurative and literal—associated with Afro-creolized carnival traditions. *Ramón Arepa* routes its carnivalesque humor and masking specifically through Califé, Dominican carnival's social critic *par excellence*.

Dominican Carnivalesque Theater as Caribbean Theater

The way both Disla brothers route race and blackness through performance fits within a wider Caribbean theater and performance tradition. In fact, theatricality and performance have been central to Caribbean writers and thinkers' work since at least the anticolonial and anti-racist movements of the early twentieth century, and Caribbean theater has a long tradition of using the stage to bring popular cultural practices to the fore, from the use of what Kamau Brathwaite has called "nation language," to syncretic religious practices, to deep social rituals like carnival.[1] That the predominant literary form is drama for Caribbean writers engaging with the Haitian Revolution underscores how important performance is for thinking about popular revolution, race, and the Caribbean. In other words, from the Trinidadian C. L. R. James's *Toussaint Louverture* (1934) to the St. Lucian Walcott's Haitian Trilogy of plays[2] to the Martinicans Édouard Glissant's *Monsieur Toussaint* (1961) and Aimé Césaire's *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* (1963), major Caribbean writers almost without exception choose to depict the touchstone event in the history of black revolution in the Caribbean using a form dependent on public performance.

In *The Pleasures of Exile*, Barbadian George Lamming emphasizes the dramatic function of a Haitian peasant religious ceremony of the Souls, connecting it to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Here, and throughout his essays, Lamming repeatedly invokes *The Tempest*, drama, ceremony, and performance—primarily located in peasant life—as a way to approach writing about the Caribbean. *The Pleasures of Exile* makes abundantly clear Lamming's keen interest in turning, in the first instance, to ritual and ceremony as dramatic forms, and, in the second, to drama as a form to represent Caribbean peasants' lived experience. In *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant similarly reflects on theater's place in Martinique and in the wider Caribbean:

> there is a deficiency in "our" theater. […] The reasons for the deficiency are cumulative: the traumatic conditions under which the Caribbean was settled, structures (based on taboos) of the slave's

[1] Brathwaite develops the concept of "nation language" most famously in his 1979 essay, "History of the Voice."

[2] The three plays are *Henri Christophe* (1949), *Drums and Colours* (1958), and *The Haitian Earth* (1984).

> world, self-repression provoked by depersonalization, etc. But the fact that the Martinican is incapable of representing himself only makes the need more intense for the opportunity offered by the theater, through which he could be made to come to terms with himself (197).

Glissant stresses what so many Caribbean writers have found: there is a link between the theater and the people, theater providing a venue through which the Caribbean subject can "come to terms with himself." Césaire, his compatriot, offers a more formal argument about theater's importance for Caribbean societies: "Pour moi, le théâtre est un art complet, total. Dans le théâtre, il faut intégrer la poésie, la danse, le chant, le folklore, le conte; c'est un art de synthèse et d'intégration" (qtd. in Bailey 11).[3] In his definition of theater, Césaire synthesizes the more "textual" elements of theater—poetry and narrative—with theater's more performative, embodied, popular elements, including folklore, song, and dance, underscoring the way Caribbean theater preserves and communicates knowledge not just through the oral or the textual but also through the embodied and the performed. In tying performance specifically to blackness and race, in this essay I rest on these writers' investment in theater both as an expressive art form and as a powerful site for articulating with lower-class, peasant, and popular black cultural practices.

Errol Hill has been among the strongest proponents that Caribbean theater as a national form must emerge from a particular black cultural practice: carnival. Focused on Trinidadian carnival, he has argued, "For many years the focus of expression for the variegated cultures in the island, carnival remains the principal cultural repository and contains indigenous materials from which a national drama and theatre can be fashioned" (4). The Hispanophone Caribbean has been no stranger to this marriage between carnival and a national theater, perhaps most strikingly in Francisco Arriví's *Vejigantes* (1956) and René Marqués's *Carnaval afuera, carnaval adentro* (1960). In a study of "lo carnavalesco" in these two Puerto Rican plays and the Dominican playwright Haffe Serulle's *El gran carnaval* (2000), Louis Quackenbush asserts the direct link between carnival and theater: "El Carnaval se asocia directamente con la teatralidad y, por ende, sus conceptos se adaptan al drama y al escenario" (138).

[3] My translation: "For me, theater is a complete art, total. In theater, one must integrate poetry, dance, song, folklore, story; it's an art of synthesis and integration."

To be sure, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White put it, "there is no a priori revolutionary vector to carnival and transgression" (16). In other words, there is no immanent racial critique in Caribbean carnival masquerade, and such masking can be linked to national whitening projects. In Dominican carnival, indigenous masking appears to be consonant with the Dominican national-historical falsification that emphasizes indigenous origins to stress Spanish-indigenous mixture while obscuring African origins.[4] Thus, the humor and playfulness of Dominican carnival masking in no way papers over an anti-black racism that seeks to use an indigenous mask at the expense of acknowledging African descent. Nonetheless, there is something in the technical usefulness of identity masking—racial masquerade as a dramatic technique—that is more important than simply indicting it as false. Distinct from asserting indigenous *origins*, indigenous carnival *masking* both perpetuates the national myth and reveals the limits of such identitarian constructions: the mask is removable, changeable, in a word, anti-essentialist.

This has important implications for the way black masquerade operates in Dominican carnival and street theater. In his 1987 performance piece, cited above, Reynaldo Disla masks in satire a history of enslaved Africans in the Dominican Republic. The use of humor neither trivializes the Middle Passage and New World slave labor nor minimizes the importance of slave resistance. Instead, humor bridges the history of enslavement in the Dominican Republic with carnival and the performance politics of street theater. Carnival is in the ecstatic excess of what Disla satirically dubs, "puro entusiasmo," in the movement of fleeing, and in the identity transformation that happens when enslaved blacks become "cimarrones."[5] Carnival masking and the satire that attends it thus become a crucial way to re-articulate Dominican culture with its African past and creolized present.[6]

Dagoberto Tejeda Ortíz, a leading authority on Dominican carnival, has distinguished two different, if overlapping, carnival traditions: "the carnival that arrives with Spanish colonization and […] the process of transformation in popular, street carnival, where the African presence is fundamental in the creolization process" (56). Tejeda Ortíz's focus on the street-based creolization

4 For perhaps the most widely known analysis of this Dominican historico-literary project, see Sommer.

5 For a discussion of the contributions *cimarrones* made to both Dominican culture and specific forms of Dominican carnival, see Tejeda Ortíz 489-525.

6 For a brief visual introduction to Dominican *carnaval*, see the documentary, *Colores del carnaval dominicano*.

of carnival reveals a national identity in constant transformation, precisely because of contacts with people on the street who are at a substantial remove from the seats of political power. Even though Tejeda Ortíz overstates carnival's democratic force, he registers perhaps the most radical sense of Dominican racial identity, an identity paradoxically rooted in carnival and its attendant racial masquerade. The implications of this paradox are crucial to understanding the most important figure in Dominican black masquerade: Califé.

Califé on Trial: *Ramón Arepa* and the Ambiguity of Carnival Masking

Dominicans recognize Califé as the social critic *par excellence* of their carnival. His origins are characterized by multiple and ambiguous narratives, fitting squarely within what Glissant theorized first as the submarine roots, and later re-articulated as the rhizomatic nature of Caribbean creolization.[7] Tejeda Ortíz locates Califé's precursor in Champol, who took to the streets to denounce in loud verse the country's problems during the first U.S. occupation from 1916-1924. The spirit of Champol's social criticism re-emerged in the 1940s, in the midst of the *trujillato*, via Califé, the creation of a tin-worker named Inocencio Martínez (213). Martínez's Califé uses a cane, evoking Champol, but added a carnivalesque dimension through costuming: "la cara pintada de negro y la boca de blanco, vestía de frac negro con camisa blanca, sombrero de copa exagerado, polainas blancas y lacito negro" (Tejeda Ortíz 214). Reynaldo Disla has disavowed any connection between Califé and the racism in U.S. blackface traditions, citing a series of lectures by Dominican folklorist Fradique Lizardo in which he outlined a version of Califé painted with a white face and black lips (personal interview). Similarly, Tejeda Ortíz makes no mention of any blackface tradition, offering instead two other possible origins beyond Champol, one a satiric appropriation of the dress coat and tails worn by the intellectual and artistic elite who gathered in Parque Colón for literary *tertulias*, and the other inspired by the Barón del Cementario, the head of the *guedé* division of *lúas* in Dominican *vudú* and Haitian-Dominican *gagá* religious traditions.[8]

[7] On the first formulation, see Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* (66-67). On the second, see Glissant, *Poetics* (11-15).

[8] El Barón de Cementerio is analogous to Haitian Vodou's Baron Cimetière, and linked to the pervasive trickster figure in African diasporic New World belief systems. For more on Dominican *vudú* and *gagá*, see Rosenberg, and Davis.

It is difficult to imagine a Califé completely divorced from the racist uses of blackface that by the middle of the twentieth century would have been widely familiar in the Caribbean. It is even more improbable considering the other Spanish-language islands' history of blackface caricature, from Cuba's *teatro bufo* to the popularity of Ramón Rivero's televised blackface in mid-century Puerto Rico.[9] Nonetheless, the rhizomatic origins for Califé suggest that it is also critically inadequate to reduce this Dominican carnival character to the racist black caricature of Cuban, Puerto Rican, and U.S. blackface.[10] At the very least, Califé's potential predecessor in Barón del Cementerio, with his skeleton-like visage that is rendered by white face painting, offers a different sense of what the face painted black may signify. Furthermore, Dominican playwright and actor Juan María Almonte emphasizes that Inocencio Martínez himself was black, so painting his own face black can be read in terms similar to black Dominicans' and Haitians' use of burnt oil to blacken their bodies in carnivalesque costuming.[11]

The ways Almonte and the Disla brothers understand Califé's origins, as emphatically not rooted in anti-black racism, but in carnival social critique and inversion, directly inform the way they depict Califé on stage as directors and actors. This is crucial to understanding Frank Disla's "drama carnavalesco," *Ramón Arepa*.[12] *Ramón Arepa* represents a shift away from the Dominican street theater of the mid- to late-1970s that moved with carnival *comparsas,* as the play was produced in a theater hall.[13] Nonetheless, the play invokes the humor, irreverence, and social inversion that are the hallmarks of carnival and that resonate with Pérez's aesthetic of "cultura movimiento." In a real sense, *Ramón Arepa* represents the carnivalization of the theater hall.

The play is a monologue in which the protagonist is on trial for the murder of a white German man whom he mistakenly believed was an American. Throughout the trial, Ramón Arepa is costumed as Califé, giving

[9] On Cuba's *teatro bufo*, see Lane. On Puerto Rican television, see Rivero.

[10] For an analogous comment on the use of blackface/brownface in a Dominican performance piece, see Jaime (91-92).

[11] For a similar practice in Trinidadian carnival traditions—black people "blacking" their own faces and bodies—see Hill (24-25).

[12] Many thanks to Reynaldo Disla for supplying an unpublished typescript of the play. Citations in the text correspond with page numbers on the typescript.

[13] For more on this 1970s blending of street theater and Dominican carnival, see Chetty.

the clear sense that Califé is on trial. And, because Califé functions as synecdoche for carnival as a subversive social practice, carnival's potential to subvert the light-skinned, Hispanophile elite through a racial performance of alterity is also on trial. Ramón Arepa provides both his own defense and a defense of Califé, his carnival alter ego. Furthermore, this character doubling—the fictional Ramón Arepa himself dons a costume to transform into Califé at his trial—draws out the irony running throughout the play, since irony's ability to destabilize normative meanings rests on a formal doubling of meaning. In fact, in his elaboration of the theory of "cultura movimiento," Pérez points out that alterity itself emerges from ironic doubling: "Desde una alteridad que tampoco evita la sorna, el sarcasmo, la ironía como figura, se produce el desdoblamiento, la desdramatización del yo que por un lado emite su ficción y por el otro su denegación espacio temporal" (132).

The entire one-act play is set in a Santo Domingo courtroom and features caricatures of a judge, district attorney, and defense attorney.[14] As the play's theme song fades, a purple ceiling light falls onto Ramón Arepa, who is dressed as Califé, "de frac, zapatos y sombreros negros, tiene su mentón y ambas manos apoyadas en su bastón" (F. Disla 4). The purple lighting overlay emphasizes the somber mood represented in the stage direction, indicating that Ramón Arepa should open the play sad, seated, with his head down. Although the stage directions announce that this "es el clásico Califé de nuestro Carnaval," the opening image is in no way the classic image of the standing, vocal, performing Califé, a Califé in motion (4). This initial image also closes the play, thus framing the trial. This frame, focused on Ramón Arepa's and thus Califé's immobility, destabilizes Califé's image as an inherently subversive social and political poet-critic in motion who walks the streets of Santo Domingo, revealing instead a tension that reverberates across carnival's social inversion.

Ramón Arepa's initial comments reveal that part of his defense has to do with belonging to the Dominican nation. He wonders aloud to the judge:

> … yo soy de aquí… yo soy dominicano. […] Sí, yo soy de este país. Es que a uno a veces se le olvida, pero uno es de esta tierra; y pensándolo bien todo esto le pertenece a uno […]. De la Cueva de

[14] According to Reynaldo Disla, in different productions the secondary characters have been represented through both puppets and live actors (personal interview).

> Cevicos […] porque si uno nace en un sitio y respira el aire de ese sitio, mirando el verde de la mata de almendra que ha ido creciendo con uno mismo, ¿es justo que un buen día le pase lo que me pasó a mí, subiendo las escaleras de una de las tantas oficinas donde he ido a solicitar empleo? (5).

Ramón Arepa says he has been forgotten, and because he is addressing a state institution in the form of the court, it is clear he feels he has been forgotten by the state. Ramón Arepa is from Cevicos, a poorer municipality in what is called, often derisively, "lo interior," because it is not part of the capital, Santo Domingo, nor the second city, Santiago de los Caballeros, nor the tourist destinations dotting the coast. Thus, Ramón Arepa has various reasons for feeling forgotten by the state: he is from a rural part of the nation, he is poor, and he is unemployed.

However, there is a much less obvious but no less compelling reason for being forgotten: he is black. Dark-skinned Dominicans have historically been left out of the dominant sense of national identity, at times because of their sometimes true, sometimes imputed foreign ancestry as *haitianos* or *cocolos* (black West Indian immigrants), and at other times simply because dark-skinned Dominicans are swallowed up in and thereby excluded from projections of the nation as mestizo, universally mulatto, and/or racially democratic.[15] While Dominican scholars who assert that the Dominican Republic is majority mulatto acknowledge the mixture of Spanish and African identities, even such a pronouncement can obscure the way skin shade follows class standing, prestige, and privilege: just as the more economically disadvantaged one is, the more likely one is forgotten, so it goes with the darker one's skin is.

In dressing as Califé, Ramón Arepa underscores his lower-class position, but not without implicitly underscoring the way his blackness maps onto that class position. In the play, the power of Ramón Arepa as Califé is the way a discourse of blackness is there even though it can only present itself in Dominican society through indirection, or the aesthetic technique Pérez dubs "cultura movimiento," here turned into a performance technique. Nonetheless, this kind of evasion signals an important element of how racial blackness operates, or can operate, in the Dominican Republic. Ramón

[15] On *mestizaje*, see Veloz Maggiolo; on mulatto identity, see Pérez Cabral; and on racial democracy, see Bosch (118). On racism against *cocolos*, see García Muñiz and Giovannetti.

Arepa's personal narrative includes his life during Rafael Trujillo's three-decade regime in the middle of the century, during which time explicit overtures to blackness simply could not surface. Thus, it is important to read these evasive methods of invoking blackness as a social practice that continues to be both necessary and effective even in the decades after Trujillo's *ajusticiamiento* in 1961.

Two particularly effective uses of evasion in the play employ irony as a way to satirize both white supremacy and anti-black racism in Dominican society. Throughout the play, Ramón Arepa defends his love for Germans as arising from his relationship with one Señor Ranzau, a German immigrant who during "la era de Trujillo" gave Ramón Arepa a job working in his yard, promoted him quickly, and was even able to intercede to have Ramón Arepa freed from Trujillo's notorious prison, *La Cuarenta*. Ramón Arepa thus asserts that his love for Ranzau, and for Germans more broadly, stems from gratitude, invoking this gratitude as a rejoinder to his psychiatrist's diagnosis that he suffers from "*germanofilia aguda*," defined by his psychiatrist—whom he quotes—as "un amor exagerado por los alemanes" (21). However, as Ranzau's implicit and intimate connections with Trujillo's military state apparatus make clear, there is the not too subtle suggestion that Ranzau's ability to free Ramón Arepa means that he supports or has the support of the very police force that imprisoned and tortured Ramón Arepa in the first place. The Dominican audience would undoubtedly see the irony of Ramón Arepa's love for such a well-connected German in Trujillo's Dominican Republic.

This same Dominican audience would also register the charge of "Hispanophilia" that "Germanophilia" indirectly evokes. Dominican society has been universally criticized for being excessively Hispanophilic and Hispanocentric at the expense of African origins, blackness, and Haitians. In fact, only one year before *Ramón Arepa*'s premiere in 1985, former (and future) president Joaquín Balaguer, part of the team of ideological architects sustaining Trujillo's regime, published his infamous *La Isla al Revés: Haití y el Destino Dominicano*, a devastatingly racist polemic against all things black, African, and Haitian and in favor of all things white, European, and Spanish.[16] Ramón Arepa's "Germanophilia" is only one white European nation removed from the Hispanophilic racism of Dominican élites like Balaguer. Ramón Arepa himself unwittingly acknowledges this when he

[16] For more on Balaguer's *La isla al revés* and its relation to a longer tradition of anti-Haitian Hispanophilia in elite Dominican letters, see Rodríguez.

throws the Germanophilia diagnosis back at the psychiatrist: "¡Pero sería bueno saber de qué sufre el siquiatra! […] A lo mejor sufre de 'hispanofilia aguda', de un amor exagerado por los españoles" (31). Fittingly, both Spain and Germany were sources for Dominican political elites' attempts to whiten the nation, the former in early nineteenth-century preference for Canary Island immigration, the latter in Trujillo's encouragement of German immigration in the middle of the twentieth century.

Relying on a similarly ironic technique of evasion, the play gives voice to the contradictions of Dominican protestations against racism, again through the voice of Ramón Arepa as Califé. In addition to upholding Germans as the epitome of intelligence, goodness, even elegance, Ramón Arepa disparages Chinese people in the Dominican Republic. At first, he begins by comparing German beauty with Chinese beauty: "Que yo recuerde nunca he visto un alemán feo, no son como los chinos" (14). Responding to the outrage this comment raises, he quickly adds, "Yo no he dicho que los chinos sean feos…simplemente que no son como los alemanes…y tienen ojos así… *(Se prolonga la comisura de los ojos.)* La nariz chata… *(Se presiona la nariz.)* Y el andar tirado, no recto como el de los alemanes…" (14). The physical racism here is doubly significant, as racist descriptions of both ethnic Chinese and black Africans overlap in the latter two descriptors. Furthermore, the description that Chinese walk bent or hunched over evokes the dehumanizing racism connecting blacks to pre-human, ape-like species.

At this point in the trial, Ramón Arepa is narrating an instance in which a young boy confused him for a Chinese man, a confusion that led to his first prison stint for assaulting the boy. However, the play again employs ironic humor to bridge the distance between, in this case, anti-Chinese racism and anti-Black racism. In response to an implied taunt by the prosecutor that he is in fact Chinese, Ramón Arepa retorts, "¿Qué dijo? Usted es más chino que yo… Fiscal… La gente de la capital y zonas aledañas, me refiero a Bonao, tienen un chino detrás de la oreja" (15). The last phrase, "un chino detrás de la oreja," is a clever riff on the well-known Dominican saying that satirizes the denial of black or African ancestry, "el negro detrás de la oreja."[17] To distance himself from accusations of being Chinese, he dismisses any similarity to Chinese physiognomy as mere coincidence, leaving open a connection to African ancestry. Then, to cement the link between this anti-Chinese racism and the merging of anti-Haitian and anti-black racism,

[17] For a discussion of the origins of the phrase, see Candelario.

he answers the unspoken charge of racism: "No, ningún racismo, para que lo sepa yo tengo amigos haitianos" (15). The humorous slip here is that in defending against his anti-Chinese racism, Ramón Arepa's only recourse is to cite Haitian friends, suggesting that racism in the Dominican Republic can only be read as anti-black or (and) anti-Haitian. This is because of a pervasive anti-black racism internal to the Dominican Republic, but also because external observers of the Dominican Republic can only see racial strife there bichromatically. Anti-Chinese racism cannot even register as racism, even if Ramón Arepa's comments subtly link the discourse of Chinese inferiority with that of both Haitian and black inferiority.

So what does it mean that the man dressed as Califé, Dominican carnival's preeminent social critic, harbors a Eurocentric/Europhilic attitude not too far removed from the Hispanophilia of which the Dominican Republic's elite can justifiably be accused? It suggests that neither Califé nor Dominican carnival is automatically subversive of the white supremacy that predominates in Dominican society. And what does it mean that this same Califé can harbor an anti-Chinese racism only slightly removed from an anti-black racism? It means that racism does not simply manifest as obviously and explicitly anti-black discourse, nor even that blackness is the fundamental category of racism. Of course, this does not mean that anti-black racism disappears in anti-Chinese racism, as evidenced by the way Ramón Arepa's comments blur the distinctions between these two categories of racism. In fact, the critique in the play is that a program exclusively targeting anti-black and anti-Haitian racism, while assuredly an important and progressive measure, might have the unintended consequence of obscuring xenophobic racism against those Dominicans without black African ancestry, Dominicans who are also read as perpetually foreign: "No, ningún racismo…tengo amigos haitianos."

I've devoted substantial time to Ramón Arepa's racism not to paint him as an inherently racist figure but to account for contradictions that attend any performance as Califé, one of the most socially critical of Dominican popular practices/figures. This accounting is important to remember as I shift into the way the play stages the subversive potential that Califé also represents.

Again, the play relies on the figurative movement of aesthetic evasion to present Califé's potential for racial subversion in the same way that it poses the limits of that potential. The alternative, indirect invocations of blackness and Africanness emerge through the carnivalization of the courtroom. As with other popular cultural and religious forms, such as music, religion, and

dance, Dominican carnival registers, if unevenly, African-derived cultural practices that predominate across the nation but specifically emerge from black and mulatto Dominicans. The opening theme song to *Ramón Arepa* links the politics of the play with social projects of the 1970s aimed at registering the important political and cultural functions of Dominican popular music—and specifically African-derived music—to the formation of Dominican national identities.[18] In addition to music, the play features a courtroom audience that is exclusively composed of Dominican carnival characters: Se me muere Rebeca, La Muerte en Yipe, Los Diablos Cojuelos, Los Africanos or Tiznaos, Los Indios, and Marimantas. Their inclusion in the play cements the way street performance has moved into the courtroom, invading and rendering state institutional space as a place of play, subversion, and masquerade as much as the carnival processions outside.

The carnival characters comprising the courtroom audience participate actively in the court proceedings, rallying behind Ramón Arepa. It is clear they see in his double defense of himself and of Califé a defense of themselves as carnival characters. Their participation does not register primarily through verbal means but through silent performance—staring—and also through noisy performance involving the movement of all parts of the body: gesturing, throwing objects, shouting, clapping, stomping, drumming. However, these bodies are not black or African in any essential sense. As carnival characters, they perform the way Dominicans and other New World blacks engage with Africa from a distance, a constructed Africa based on reimagined, re-created links. Far from diminishing the importance of these creative links, the performed link with Africa these Dominican carnival characters evoke is of a piece with those Caribbean writers who refuse to see Africa as a continental essence and homeland, focusing instead on the energies African-descended blacks in the New World deploy to create new cultural formations in the Caribbean. In other words, Dominican carnival becomes a generative site for creating specifically Dominican Afro-diasporic identities, challenging the singularity of the African diaspora, or even of *afrodominicanidad* as itself singular and coherent.[19] Carnival performance and masquerade disrupt this coherence in favor of performed creations and re-creations, the ontologies of which productively resist any singular genesis story.[20]

[18] On these 1970s projects, see Pacini Hernández.

[19] For recent work on Afro-Diasporic Dominican culture, see Ricourt.

[20] For what continues to be one of the most powerful reflections on the dialogue between unity/essence and difference/play in conceptions of black diaspora, see Hall.

Although the ontogenetic coherence of a singular African diaspora is rendered suspect, the play nonetheless relies on a strategic political coherence to black performance. The play is the trial of Ramón Arepa for killing a white man, a not-too-subtle indictment of dominant racial fears that the nation's *hispanidad* is always in danger of dissipating. In other words, it is an indictment of the persistent fear among certain sectors that, predominantly because of immigration from Haiti, the Dominican nation is in danger of becoming less white and more black. Historically, one way these fears of encroaching or increasing blackness have been addressed politically has been through encouraging immigration from European countries, linking this Dominican state practice with similar immigration policies throughout the Americas. Another method to control against blackness has been through physical and legislative violence, for example, in the 1937 massacre of Dominicans, Dominicans of Haitian origin, and Haitians under Trujillo's orders, and in the September 23, 2013 *sentencia* of the Tribunal Constitucional of the Dominican Republic, through a ruling that retroactively stripped citizenship from upwards of 200,000 Dominicans of Haitian origin (i.e., born in the Dominican Republic) who had what were deemed "irregularities" in the documentation of their immigrant ancestors, dating back to 1929.[21] Of course, as Lorgia García-Peña points out, "to understand present-day dominicanidad and the borders that have produced it, we must look at the historical and rhetorical narratives of the early nineteenth century that sustain racism in the Dominican Republic" (15). This is because the white supremacist, anti-black, and anti-Haitian policies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are not merely of recent origin nor exclusively attributable to the Dominican nation-state, but "the result of a [Spanish] colonial bequeath that was in turn upheld and sustained by the United States to preserve its own imperial ventures" (15).

To be sure, foregrounding the triangular nature of this transnational relation—between the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and an imperial United States—provides no cover for those who invoke Dominican national sovereignty to mask anti-Haitian policies as some kind of anti-imperialist stance. In fact, the play's indictment of elite racial fears, and their corresponding permeation throughout the nation, underscores how Dominicans can be anti-U.S. imperialism without necessarily extending

[21] For recent work on the 1937 work, see Paulino. For a juridicial argument against La sentencia 168/13, see Rodríguez and Pujals.

to anti-black racism, allowing for a denunciation of the U.S. as imperial force in the Americas while welcoming the whitening influence of German immigration. Thus, while Ramón Arepa believes his killing of the white man is self-defense against the tourism, imperialism, and condescension of U.S. gringos, he actually kills the German he supposedly loves and welcomes. But white supremacy is embodied by both the apathetic gringo tourist from the U.S. and the sympathetic capitalist from Germany. So when the victim's identity is unmasked as the son in the family he loves, Ramón Arepa is confused. However, what the play registers above this confusion is the way white supremacy does not leave simply by removing the U.S. This helps to explain a central paradox in Dominican progressive politics: how a vehemently anti-imperialist agenda can nonetheless embrace or at least tacitly accept anti-black racism.[22] The play suggests that an attack against white supremacy cannot be an attack exclusively against U.S. imperialism and its specific forms of racism. These attacks always already target European white supremacy, even if European white supremacy—Germany in the play, Spain in Dominican elitist history—is more "benevolent" than the U.S. variety. Ramón Arepa's melancholy at the close of the play is the realization that Califé's carnivalesque critique cannot indict U.S. racist imperialism without addressing global white supremacy.

This melancholy, however, is not counterproductive. It is important to recall that Ramón Arepa is on trial for killing a German man, and, by extension, all forms of white supremacy in the Dominican Republic. Ramón Arepa's trial, then, is the trial of carnival's ability to upend white supremacist social norms. Carnival, like religion, music, and other African-derived Dominican social practices, is a potential antidote to anti-black racism in the Dominican Republic. Ramón Arepa's melancholy is not a realization that carnival cannot disrupt white supremacy in the Dominican Republic, but a realization that his social critique as Califé implies a wider target than he has imagined. The implication is that both Califé and Dominican carnival, like other black creative cultural forms, can take a political and cultural stance against racism in the Dominican Republic. In other words, the seeds of racial progress are contained within the Dominican nation; a transnational approach that imports black cultural politics into the Dominican Republic would do well to respect that fact. Or, as Ramón Arepa asserts, "¡A Califé, no me le falte el respeto!"

[22] For one instance, see Rodríguez's account of Manuel Arturo Peña Batlle's "ideological trajectory" from anti-U.S. imperialist/radical nationalist during the first U.S. occupation to socialist to Trujillista ideologue (479).

The respect Ramón Arepa demands for Califé is not simply the obverse of the disrespect registered by the white gringo tourist. Califé also demands respect as a character native to the Dominican Republic whose social criticism can function as a method for transforming Dominican racial relations from within. Ramón Arepa as Califé is on trial for killing the dominant ideology structuring Dominican racial identity, an ideology that privileges whiteness and *hispanidad* over blackness and *africanidad*. But the play affirms that an oppositional strategy against that dominant ideology can also emerge from Dominican culture. This potential for racial restructuring from within is attentive to the contradictions of Dominican race relations, contradictions that cannot adequately be addressed by relying exclusively on U.S. racial projects.[23]

When the play opens with Ramón Arepa asserting his Dominicanness, the implication is that he is outside the nation. In other words, the court is putting on trial the putatively foreign forces contained in carnival. Since Dominican carnival is marked as black through its links with Africa and African diasporic practices across the Caribbean, including Haiti, the charge of foreignness to Ramón Arepa, Califé, and the "African" parts of carnival implied in the court proceedings is a charge that equates blackness with foreignness. But the categorically Dominican carnival characters, with Califé at the center, refute this charge, assert their *dominicanidad*, and thus reinsert blackness and Africanness as crucial components of Dominican social life. Even though Ramón Arepa's hometown, Cevicos, might be disparaged as being in "lo interior," away from cultural, political, and economic centers, it is literally the geographic center of the nation, suggesting that Ramón Arepa as Califé emerges from the heart of the country, not from its margins, even less so from outside. In this way, the play revalorizes "lo interior" via Califé's carnival performance, and through a cartographic reimagining that puts Califé and black cultural forms at the nation's center.

Unfortunately, as Ramón Arepa laments toward the end of the play, "lo más probable es que muchos de mis amigos de infancia desconozcan la existencia de Califé" (28). *Desconocer* is inadequately translated in English as "to be ignorant or unaware about," a translation that misses the etymological connection with *reconocer*, the Spanish word for recognize. Thus, Ramón Arepa's lament is tied up with a politics of recognition. This politics of recognition, however, is rooted in Califé's performance, with a pedagogic edge: Ramón

[23] On "contradiction" as a structuring element of Dominican race and nation, see García-Peña.

Arepa implicitly makes a case for introducing Califé's social practice and critique throughout the nation. Ramón Arepa argues for recognizing the social, even sacred, importance of Califé, a recognition that entails accepting black cultural contributions as central to Dominican identities. However, there also is an implicit argument against misrecognizing Califé as simply racist blackface caricature: "¡A Califé no me le falte el respeto!"

In fact, what Ramón Arepa gestures toward is a methodology of Califé, a methodology that I'm arguing is rarely recognized for its satiric ridicule of anti-black racism and its elevation of black culture, both of which rely on the aesthetic, spatial, and performative movements of carnival (Pérez's "cultura movimiento"). Califé's humor is necessarily indirect, evasive, and able to escape detection, much like the way mobile carnival *comparsas* in the 1970s initially provided a cover for those artists invested in criticizing dominant political powers. The failure to see this as a part of black cultural politics, in a context of politically stifling conditions, is precisely a failure of recognition. For this reason, Ramón Arepa emphasizes the cognitive act necessary not simply to understand but, more importantly, to respect Califé's performance. Through Califé, the play relies on a specifically Dominican set of epistemologies and practices that are crucial to understanding both the operation and function of race, racism, and anti-racist critique in the Dominican Republic.[24]

I read the respect Califé demands as a call to re-conceptualize black diaspora itself, because as long as the paradigms of Black Diaspora Studies that exist lead to insistence on Dominican race denial and self-hatred, they are inadequate to examining the way that anti-racist critique and black cultural politics emerge in the Dominican Republic. In the case of Califé, what matters less is whether he represents the donning of a black African mask or the utilization of a creolized Dominican form. Califé makes specific demands that his Dominican audience recognize the blackness of his performance, and that foreign audiences approach Dominican race relations with a dose of humility,[25] to hear and watch Dominican performances of race with a different set of eyes and ears, to attempt to notice the way Dominican blackness manifests in literal, aesthetic, and performative movement.

[24] For a comprehensive overview of scholarship on Dominican blackness from 1970-2014, see Torres-Saillant's introduction to the English-language translation of Franklin Franco Pichardo's classic work, *Los negros, mulatos y la nación dominicana* (1969).

[25] This idea of humility comes from Torres-Saillant, "Blackness and Meaning" (188).

Otherwise, these audiences will fail to recognize the black cultural politics in Califé's irony, dissimulation, satire, and song.

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