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**Race, Culture and the Making of the Brujo Revolucionario:
Representations of Haitian Migrants in Early Republican Cuba**

*San Martín puso una ley que debiéramos llevar.
Recoger todos los haitianos y mandarlos pa' su país enyugados como buey.
Arriba con la ley de San Martín.
Arriba con la ley de San Martín.
Enyugados como buey pa' su país.
Arriba con la ley de San Martín.
- Cuban son of the 1930s¹*

*J'ai laissé des milles et des milles d'Haitiens du côté d'Antilla. Ils vivent et ils meurent
comme des chiens. Matar a un Haitiano o a un perro : tuer un Haïtien ou un chien, c'est
la même chose, disent les hommes de la police rurale : des vrai bêtes féroces.
- Manuel, Gouverneurs de la Rosée²*

In 1933, Cuba's nationalist government of Ramón Grau San Martín passed the Ley de Nacionalización del Trabajo, requiring at least 50% of employees and laborers to be native Cubans. Over the next six years the law was used to justify the subsequent expulsion of nearly 38,000 Haitians working or residing in Cuba; 1937 marked the peak of such activity when deportations reached 25,000³. According to Roumain's classic fiction, Manuel was among them. While Cubans were dancing to a tune that advocated his return to Haiti as a "yoked ox", Manuel recalls his compatriots living and being killed "like dogs". In the end, however, Manuel implies that the "real ferocious beasts" are those in Rural Guard charged with rounding up the migrants.

Beyond juxtaposing two opposing perspectives on Haitian migrants, the *son* and the novel are of interest because they foreground the issues of identity and representation

¹ Joel James, José Millet and Alexis Alarcón. *El Vodú en Cuba*. Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 1998, 65-6.

² Jacques Roumain. *Gouverneur de la Rosee*. Paris : Les Temps de Cerises, 2004, 45.

³ Marc Mcleod. "Undesirable Aliens: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism in the Comparison of Haitian and British West Indian Immigrant Workers in Cuba, 1912-1939." *Journal of Social History* (Spring 1998), 599.

central to the immigration debate in the early republican period. Faced with a dominant discourse that would dehumanize him, Manuel turns the formulation on its head and questions the humanity of those who enact it. Nevertheless, Roumain structures the sentence in such a way that the epithet of “real ferocious beasts” could equally be an additional insult uttered by the Rural Guard. It is this uncertainty, this multivalence of identity that allows for its diverse representations. It is in turn these divergences and convergences that allow modes of representation to become instruments in a given political, economic or cultural project. Ultimately identity is contested space, and representation becomes the means through which it is negotiated.

Accordingly, this essay examines representations of Haitian immigrants to Cuba during the first third of the 20th Century. It argues that the Haitian case illustrates an intimate relationship between race and culture in which the slippage between the two reiterates their connection. In different ways, both “white” and “black” elite discourses of the period alternately used culture as a signifier for race and race as signifier for culture while representing Haitian migrants. Though the subtleties of this construction will be drawn out later, it is clear that members of both groups depicted Haitians as a cultural Other that would taint the Cuban nation. During the immigration debate Haitians came to embody a particular type of blackness – a blackness that was innately primitive, diseased and insurrectionary. These traits were paradoxically presented as evidence of their inassimilability and as a menace of contamination. Rather than careless inconsistencies, this analysis posits that such contradictions offer a window onto the contested meaning of race and its place within the nation.

A Brief Introduction to Haitian Migration

In order to understand how Haitian immigration came to participate in such a discussion, one must begin well before the epigraphs of this chapter. In fact, the best starting point is probably the Haitian Revolution, which began as a slave revolt in 1791 and ended in 1804 with the former French colony of Saint Domingue's transformation into Haiti, the first Black republic. The revolution prompted an early wave of emigration to Cuba as planters fleeing the violence established coffee plantations in Cuba's Oriente province. For the purposes of this analysis, however, the tangible consequences of the Haitian Revolution are less important than its place in the Caribbean imaginary. In colonial Cuba the Haitian example gave rise to the conviction that the island would either be Spanish or African; it was necessary to keep the Afro-Cuban population in check to avoid racial conflict degenerating into bloodshed or black rule. Aline Helg explains, the fear of another Haiti:

had legitimated the annihilation of slave rebellions and of the Conspiracy of La Escalera⁴ in the first half of the nineteenth century. One hundred years later it was still strong enough among some sectors of Cuba's white population to be revived by governing elites in times of tension in the order to justify the repression of any Afro-Cuban challenge to the political and socioeconomic structure.⁵

Helg refers to this strategic manipulation of Caribbean history as the Haitian scarecrow.

In the century following the revolution, arable land became increasingly scarce in Haiti. With the breakup of the plantation economy, land was divided into small holdings and with time demographic growth further reduced them to subsistence plots. Thus, by 1900 the majority of emigrants to Cuba were landless peasants with few economic alternatives in their home country.⁶ The 1915-1934 U.S. occupation of Haiti further

⁴ Here Helg refers to the alleged plotting by thousands of slaves and free people of color to end slavery and Spanish rule. See *Our Rightful Share*, 4.

⁵ Aline Helg. *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995, 17.

⁶ Mats Lundahl. "A Note on Haitian Migration to Cuba, 1890-1934." *Cuban Studies/Estudios Cubanos*, 12:2 (July 1982), 25.

aggravated the situation since U.S. efforts to introduce large-scale agriculture resulted in the eviction of some 50,000 peasants.⁷ In 1923, the average daily wage in Haiti was around \$.30, whereas Haitian laborers in Cuba's cane fields made \$1.00-\$1.50 per day.⁸ Emigration, at least in theory, was a way to improve one's fate.

From the Cuban perspective, several factors created the demand for Haitian labor. As Mats Lundhal has argued, the loss of 200,000-300,000 people in the War of Independence (1895-1899) may have caused a legitimate shortage of workers, at least in the early years of Haitian immigration.⁹ Reynaldo Cruz Ruíz supports this interpretation, pointing to the growing needs of the sugar industry.¹⁰ Indeed, a massive influx of U.S. capital "resulted in the rapid expansion of the Cuban sugar economy, with production increasing nearly tenfold between 1900 and 1913".¹¹ Nevertheless, the importation of non-white workers was impeded during these years by Order 155 of 1902, formalized in 1910 as the Ley de Inmigración y Colonización.¹² In 1912, the violent repression of the Partido Independiente de Color led to the massacre of four to seven thousand Afro-Cubans and the imprisonment of three thousand more.¹³ This in turn provoked a labor shortage that provided justified the United Fruit Company's request to import West Indian workers. At this point, government policy was modified to allow for the use of Antillean *braceros*; according to Cuban statistics some 150,000-190,000 Haitians legally migrated to Cuba from 1913-1931. Haitian data implies the figure may even be higher.¹⁴

⁷ Suzy Castor. "El impacto de la ocupación norteamericana en Haití (1915-1934) y en la República Dominicana (1916-1934)," in *Política y sociología en Haití y la República dominicana*. Ed. Gérard Pierre-Charles. México D.F.: Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, 1975, 56.

⁸ Lundhal, 27.

⁹ *Ibid* 25

¹⁰ Reynaldo Cruz Ruíz. "Research Note: En busca de un espacio". *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, 12:1 (July 2006), 83.

¹¹ McLeod. "Undesirable Aliens", 600.

¹² Perusek, Glenn. "Haitian Emigration in the Early Twentieth Century." *International Migration Review*, 18:1 (Spring 1984), 8.

¹³ Aviva Chomsky. "Barbados or Canada?" Race, Immigration, and Nation in Early Twentieth-Century Cuba." *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 80:3 (2000), 436.

¹⁴ Lundhal 29.

The need for this level of immigration has been questioned, however. Rather than reflecting a lack of workers, the sugar industry may have been attempting to flood the labor market and thus circumvent the unwillingness of native Cubans to submit to harsh conditions and low pay.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the size of the labor pool soon became a problem. In 1920 the sugar boom peaked and crashed, with prices dropping from 22.5 cents to 2 cents by the end of the year and prompting an early wave of deportations. For those that remained, wages dropped to pre-1890 levels.¹⁶ The sugar market never fully recovered from the post-war competition posed by European beet sugar, and prices crashed again in 1932. Throughout this period, however, Haitian migrants continued to arrive. As the Cuban economy spiraled downward, anti-immigrant sentiments increased. The so-called 50% law and subsequent deportations described at the beginning of this paper were merely governmental reactions to popular sentiment.

Haitian Migrants as Other

While much more detailed studies have been done¹⁷, the causes, statistics and legislation of Haitian migration are only peripherally relevant to this essay. For our purposes, it is much more important to unpack this notion of “popular sentiment” as an actor in the immigration debate. Specifically, who constructed these sentiments and how? Where do identity and representation coincide? Where do they deviate? What do these convergences and divergences say about the relationship between race and culture in the Haitian example?

¹⁵ De la Fuente, Alejandro. “With All and for All: Race, Inequality and Politics in Cuba: 1900-1930. PhD Dissertation, University of Pittsburg, 1996.

¹⁶ Perusek 11.

¹⁷ In particular see Juan Pérez de la Riva. “Cuba y la migración antillana, 1900-1931.” *La República neocolonial*, vol. 2, *Anuario de estudios cubanos*, ed. Pérez de la Riva et al. La Habana (1979), 1-73 and Rolando Alvarez Estevez. *Azúcar e inmigración, 1900-1940*. La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1988.

In *Our Rightful Share*, Aline Helg posits three “icons of fear” embodied by Afro-Cubans in the white imaginary¹⁸. Significantly, these three perceived threats correspond, along with a fourth, to representations of Haitians in early republican Cuba. Partially on the basis of this correlation, this analysis will argue that Haitians were not perceived as undesirable because of their foreignness in terms of national identification but rather a “foreignness” of racial-cum-cultural factors. Understanding the Euro-Cuban elite vision of the country as a nation of whites¹⁹ (despite significant evidence to the contrary) is crucial to comprehending the logic of contamination at play in their articulations of fear.

One source of anxiety identified by Helg is that of African religions and culture. In the case of Haitian migrants, this is the most salient expression of the menace behind their blackness. As *El Heraldo de Cuba* announced in 1922, “In the province of Oriente, Haitians are devotees of witchcraft (brujería), contaminating black Cubans in an atavistic leap backwards in time. They practice the superstitious “vodú” cult which is full of black magic and [are] led by a priest known as ‘papa Bocú’.”²⁰ During these years, popular fear of black *brujos* was extensive. Tales of Haitian anthropophagy, (of small children in particular) were not uncommon.²¹ In 1922, the headline of *El País* proclaimed that “la ferocidad macabra de los brujos arranca el corazón de la niña Cuca.” The paper went on to suggest that “el corazón de la niña infeliz debió ser un manjar predilecto en el festín horrendo de los execrables y feroces caníbales.”²² Though the girl’s white mother was later implicated in her death, a Haitian named Arístides Fils was originally accused.

¹⁸ Helg 17.

¹⁹ Here the ideology of *blanqueamiento* plays a significant role.

²⁰ Oscar Zanetti and Alejandro Garcia, eds. *United Fruit Company: un caso del dominio imperialista en Cuba*. La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1976, 248.

²¹ Helg 18.

²² Pérez de la Riva 65-6.

As in the case of la niña Cuca, allegations of primitivism were frequently accompanied by dehumanizing rhetoric. Thus even a highly sympathetic account of the 1934 deportation of Haitian cane workers describes how “these unfortunates for whom ‘civilization’ is a meaningless word, are being returned by violent force to their country, like tired beasts.”²³ Recalling the *son* from the same period, this author depicts Haitians as uncivilized animals. This dehumanization was reinforced by frequent references to Haitians as “buey” and by the practice of naming on the sugar estates. Upon arrival *braceros* were issued identity cards with “sarcastic, grandiloquent, and ridiculous names...like Pedro el Grande Aleíbiades el Magnífico, Judas Crocante, and Cerveza Tropical.”²⁴ Additionally, the low educational level of Haitian migrants compared to their Jamaican counterparts served as evidence of their cultural inferiority in elite discourse.

According to Helg, a second fear associated with Afro-Cubans was an animalistic sexuality. While this depiction was less frequent among Haitian migrants, they were associated with “promiscuity and immorality in general.”²⁵ In 1923 a Havana women’s organization charged that “prostitution, especially among the Jamaican and Haitian women, [had] increased considerably and with inconceivable loathsomeness.”²⁶ Where representations of Haitian migrants did converge with depictions of Afro-Cuban sexuality was in their propensity to regress to base instincts. The previously cited account of Haitian expulsion describes how, “pursued by hunger, by prejudice, and by the Rural

²³ Leví Marrero. “Migrant Workers in the Sugar Industry.” *The Cuba Reader*. Ed. Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, & Pamela Maria Smorkaloff. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 238. Excerpted from “Cazando haitianos: Los Horrores de los feudos azucareros” *Bohemia* 25(1934), 16-17, 59-62.

²⁴ Carr 84.

²⁵ McLeod 601.

²⁶ Hortensia Lamar. “La Lucha contra la prostitucion y la trata de blancas,” *Revista Bimestre Cubana* 18 (March-April 1923), 134. Cited in McLeod, 601. The allegation was perhaps linked to the practice of luring Haitian women to Cuba with promises of employment as seamstresses in the *ingenios*, when in fact no such position was available and the women were left to fend for themselves. See James, Millet and Alarcón 67.

Guard, they quickly turn into primitive cavemen. They live among the cane fields, they only come out at night, and their raids frequently have bloody results.”²⁷

In the evocation of bloody raids, this portrayal draws upon the third icon of fear, namely the specter of the Haitian Revolution. Even a century later Haitian migrants were characterized by their predisposition to insurrection and thus were perceived as a potentially volatile force in both emerging labor movements²⁸ and theoretical uprisings of Cuban blacks. As the U.S. consul in Santiago de Cuba complained, “The Haitian immigrants, I am informed, are invariably dirty and ignorant and possessed with revolutionary tendencies which forebode evil.”²⁹ In light of such depictions, this analysis is inclined to reject Barry Carr’s argument about Cuban ignorance of Haitian circumstances. According to Carr, “That some Haitian workers, descendants of the Caribbean peasantry with the longest tradition of autonomy, might have participated in political and guerilla struggles in Haiti never occurred to opinion makers and planters.”³⁰ Yet the aforementioned consul is writing in 1916, one year after the U.S. began its occupation of Haiti, which was met by violent resistance by caco rebels. In fact, representations of Haitians reveal an acute awareness of their “tradition of autonomy”.

Disease was not among the icons of fear associated with Afro-Cubans, but it figured prominently in representations of Haitian immigrants. Indeed Dr. Jorge Le-Roy y Cassá warned the Academy of Science that West Indian migrants had introduced smallpox, measles, and typhoid fever to eastern Cuba.³¹ Other accounts blamed them for malaria, though as the U.S. consul in Santiago astutely observed:

²⁷ Marrero. “Migrant Workers in the Sugar Industry”, 237.

²⁸ See Carr on the participation of Haitian migrants in labor strikes.

²⁹ Merrill Griffith to Assistant Secretary of State, 18 Jan. 1916 USNA 837-5538, microcopy 488, roll 84. Cited in Chomsky 440.

³⁰ Carr. “Identity, Class and Nation,” 85.

³¹ Jorge Le-Roy y Cassá. “Inmigracion anti-sanitaria,” paper presented at the Academia de Ciencias Medicas, Fisicas y Naturales de la Habana, December 14, 1923 (Havana 1929), 32. Cited in McLeod, 601.

Neither the health authorities here nor in Habana nor elsewhere on the Island entertain any serious apprehension with regard to the introduction of malaria... There are practically no objections to them at all, physically, but chiefly on account of their color. They are almost all as black as coal, and the authorities here view with alarm this constant augmentation of the already high percentages of negroes in this vicinity.³²

Nevertheless, “President Zayas described the ‘Antillean immigrants of the colored race’ as ‘devoid of even the most elementary notions of hygiene’ and portrayed the island as a besieged territory ‘surrounded by intense focuses of epidemics and quarantinable diseases’.”³³ The fear of disease, as this quotation illustrates, was intimately linked to other representations of Haitians; as a primitive and uncivilized people, Haitians did not practice good sanitation. Moreover, by providing a concrete referent, the threat of contagious illness legitimated the symbolic discourse of contamination through cultural transmission.

Constructing the Afro-Cuban Response

Unsurprisingly, the thinly veiled racism of “white” elite representations of Haitian migrants did not pass without comment by Afro-Cubans. While it is impossible to speak of either “white” or “black” responses as though they constituted a homogenous groups, Afro-Cuban voices in the immigration debate are particularly diverse. Part of this complication derives from the way in which Afro-Cuban elites rejected certain aspects of Euro-Cuban discourse even as they embraced related expressions. As Aviva Chomsky explains in “Barbados or Canada?”:

Afro-Cuban interactions with and responses to West Indian immigration were intertwined at many levels with white Cuban responses. White Cubans were quick to try to attribute racial tensions in Cuba to the presence of immigrants, while blacks saw this tendency as a way whites tried to cover up the subordinate position of blacks in Cuban society

³² Merrill Griffith to Assistant Secretary of State, 18 Jan. 1916 USNA 837-5538, microcopy 488, roll 84. Cited in Chomsky 439.

³³ De la Fuente 73.

which was so fundamental a part of their everyday lives.³⁴

During the first third of the 20th century, Cuba was a still fledgling republic and the contested place of black Cubans became a central issue in the construction of *Cubanidad*. Thus “[The immigration] debate became the context through which Cubans of all colors struggled to interpret the relationship of the present to the past [and] the meaning of race, nation and sovereignty.”³⁵ Nevertheless, Chomsky argues, Afro-Cuban commentary largely remained “invisible”. While Afro-Cuban elites were clearly engaging white representations of Haitian immigrants, these same white elites generally ignored their responses.

Significantly, many black responses to Haitian immigration reflected their own racialized subjectivity, even as they legitimated their authority by pointing to their national status as Cubans. The assimilationist black journal *Labor Nueva*, for instance, specifically objected to race as a basis for prejudice against West Indian migrants. Its editors protested, “It hurts us that a publication like the popular magazine the *Gráfico*, which is directed and written by Cubans of today, has attacked Haitian and Jamaican immigration not because it is Haitian and Jamaican but because it is black.” The article goes on to emphasize black Cuban patriotism, marginalize black participation in the events of 1912 as an “Estenocist³⁶ revolt”, and ultimately advocate the combat of Haitian and Jamaican immigration “for sociological or other reasons”³⁷.

La Prensa affords another example. In 1916 black columnist Ramón Vasconcelos specifically objected to white representations of West Indian migrants as sources of disease while ignoring this threat among Spanish immigrants. “Health,” he wrote in an

³⁴ Chomsky 438.

³⁵ Ibid 439.

³⁶ Evaristo Estenoz, a leader of the Partido Independiente de Color, was frequently depicted in popular cartoons and songs as a Haitian general. See Helg 234 and Miguel Barnet’s *Rachel’s Song*. Willimantic, CN: Curbstone Press, 1991, 9-13, 55-59.

³⁷ *Labor Nueva*, 20 February 1916, p. 4-5. Cited in Chomsky, 447.

article laced with irony, “is the product of racial balance.”³⁸ In general, Vasconcelos opposed all immigration (rather than specifically Antillean immigration) as a policy that lowered wages and turned Cuban blacks into second-class citizens. Yet other black commentators differentiated between white and black migrants. As Marcel Levargie argued, Haitians were “honorable and good people...They do not come to take work from Cubans, but on the contrary, to carry out work that not even those who live here, not even those whom immigrate from other countries like to do.”³⁹

Perhaps concerned that negative stereotypes of black migrants would be conflated with views of Afro-Cubans in the popular imagination, other black columnists often took pains to emphasize their difference. Vasconcelos maintained that Cuba was “super civilized” when compared to “convulsive Haitians expelled by their own bloodthirsty generals”⁴⁰. Lino Dou added that “there is not one single point of contact between us and them, and it is obvious that we should never mix.” While such formulations certainly ran counter to the contamination-based fear argument, Dou’s characterization of Haitian and Jamaican migrants as “less prepared for Republican life”⁴¹ clearly reiterates white views of cultural preparedness for citizenship.

The one participant in the debate to actually advocate Antillean immigration was Armando Plá. Plá’s stance was decidedly against the discourse of inassimilability he observed in Cubans across the color spectrum:

They say that Haitians and Jamaicans cannot feel love for this land, that they are pernicious elements with depraved customs, that they come to create a ruinous competition in their work with the Cuban black, they come, in sum, to create a profound division in Cuban society by implanting the frightful racial problem. If we did not know that the propagators of these theories were ignorant, we would know them to be ill-intentioned;

³⁸ *La Prensa*. 19 August 1915, p. 5. Cited in Chomsky 441.

³⁹ *La Prensa*. 7 February 1916. Cited in Chomsky 442.

⁴⁰ *La Prensa*. 21 April 1916, p. 4. Cited in Chomsky, 450.

⁴¹ *La Prensa*. 11 April 1916, p. 4. Cited in Chomsky, 450.

these assertions are very far from the truth.⁴²

Despite the culture-based attacks on Haitian and Jamaican migrants, Plá correctly perceived the racial character of such discrimination and alleged that “to prohibit some immigration as noxious because it is black is an act of such transcendental injustice that it could not be carried out by a Government that calls itself Cuban.”⁴³ Plá’s formulation is particularly interesting because it essentially turns white discourse on the incompatibility of *Cubanidad* and racism on its head. Thus the same language that compelled other commentators to couch their racial arguments in cultural terms prompts Plá to take racism as a premise and challenge the patriotism of those who propagate it.

Reconstructing the Haitian Response

The first epigraph of this chapter constitutes one of the few examples of non-elite discourse uncovered by scholars of Haitian immigration during the period in question. Nonetheless, it too refers to a “Cuban” perspective on events. Cuban immigration statistics indicate that between 1912 and 1929 84.4 % of all Haitians entering Cuba were illiterate in their native tongue.⁴⁴ Inevitably, this complicates scholastic efforts to access migrant’s reactions and responses to the elite discourse extracted from the archival documents cited in the previous two sections. Manuel, Jacques Roumain’s fictional *viejo* offers an interesting jumping-off point as he recalls his encounter with Cuba’s Rural Guard:

Quand, sous le matraquages des Gardes Ruraux il sentait ses os craquer, une voix inflexible lui soufflait : tu es vivant, tu es vivant, mords la langue et tes cris car tu es un homme pour de vrai. Si tu tombes, tu seras semé pour une récolte invincible. « *Haitiano maldito, negro de mierda* », hurlaient les Gardes. Les coups ne faisaient meme plus mal. A travers un brouillard parcouru de chocs fulgurants, Manuel entendait, comme une

⁴² *La Prensa*. 21 April 1916, p. 7. Cited in Chomsky, 450.

⁴³ *Ibid.* Cited in Chomsky, 449.

⁴⁴ McLeod 607.

source de sang, la rumeur inepuisable de la vie.⁴⁵

While the perspective of Jacques Roumain can hardly be conflated with that of a Haitian cane worker, the text is significant because it suggests a prominent role for the Revolution in the Haitian imaginary. Part of Manuel's ability to resist the bone-cracking blows of the Rural Guard is derived from the knowledge that if he falls he will be "scattered for an invincible harvest". This is an indirect allusion to the last words of Toussaint L'Ouverture, committed to memory by every Haitian schoolchild: "In overthrowing me, you have cut down in San Domingo only the trunk of the tree of black liberty. It will spring up again by the roots for they are numerous and deep."⁴⁶ Through Manuel, Roumain constructs (or possibly reiterates) an identity based on collective resistance, which he portrays as transmitted historically. Though its connotations here are positive, the parallel to Cuban elite representations of Haitians should not escape our attention. At the very least, it merits further exploration.

Turning now to non-literary sources, we observed that related ideas have been examined by scholars interested in transculturation. In the following passage James, Millet and Alarcón describe how Haitians in Cuba used Voodun to command respect:

Todas estas discriminaciones sucesivas y concurrentes, en cierta forma vestían al haitiano de un halo de misterio; es un brujo, es una entidad capaz de cualquier cosa. El haitiano cobra conciencia de esto y utiliza este misterio – que es un misterio producido por la reacción contra él – a favor suyo, a favor de su reafirmación social; lo utiliza en su propio provecho. Lo utilizará en esa dirección valiéndose de los mecanismos derivados de las prácticas mágico-religiosas para hacerse sentir como un sujeto respetado; con el haitiano nadie se puede meter, porque el que se mete con el haitiano es hombre muerto.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Jacques Roumain. *Gouverneur de la Rosee*. Paris : Les Temps de Cerises, 2004, 36.

⁴⁶ Noam Chomsky, Paul Farmer & Amy Goodman. *Getting Haiti Right This Time: The U.S. and the Coup*. Common Courage Press, 2004, 12.

⁴⁷ James, Millet and Alarcón 74.

This is the flip side of the fear recalled by cane worker Ursinio Rojas, whose his mother would lock him in the house when Haitian workers passed.⁴⁸ If Haitians have long understood Voodoo as a way of exercising control against the arbitrary suffering of this world, its practice in Cuba seems to have become a mode of challenging elite contempt for Haitian spirituality. Nevertheless, this is a form of resistance that served to reinforce many aspects of the dominant stereotype even as it questioned others. Thus Barry Carr argues that:

Haitian workers were clearly not engaging in respectable forms of class struggle or exhibiting respectable forms of masculinity. Instead, they were responding to the derision and hostility of Cuban economic and cultural elites by defending their worth through ostentatious displays of the traits for which they were condemned by their critics.⁴⁹

On some level, this resonates with Marc McLeod's characterization of the response of Haitian migrants to Cuban prejudice as a withdrawal into isolated communities. Contrasting Haitian *braceros* to their Jamaican counterparts, McLeod emphasizes their tendency to remain in the remote sugar-producing regions rather than migrating to cities. Moreover, "their communities tended to be situated away from the habitations of native Cubans".⁵⁰ Education was largely informal, in Creole, and conducted within the community. A 1935 U.S. study also concluded that "the Haitians are usually unmarried. They live by themselves, without much participation in the few social activities of the countryside."⁵¹ Though one wonders how such an isolated group could simultaneously pose a threat of contamination, in such accounts the general trend of the Haitian response seems to be a retreat into their own culture rather than a challenge to the dominant

⁴⁸ Ursinio Rojas. *Las Luchas obreras en el central Tacajó*. La Habana: Editora Política, 1979, 52. Cited in Carr 85.

⁴⁹ Barry Carr. "Identity, Class and Nation: Black Immigrant Workers, Cuban Communism, and the Sugar Insurgency, 1925-1934." Shalini Puri ed. in *Marginal Migrations: the Circulation of Cultures within the Caribbean*. Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean, 2003, 86.

⁵⁰ McLeod 609.

⁵¹ Foreign Policy Association, *Problems of the New Cuba*. New York, 1935, 285.

(Cuban) one. This reading prompts McLeod to describe them as “modern-day maroons.”⁵²

This question of integration is an important one because it speaks directly to the elite discourse that represented Haitians as inassimilable migrants, plagued by their “inadaptability to any progress or cultural or sanitary betterment”.⁵³ While the decision to isolate does not by any means imply inassimilability, the Haitian behavior does bear upon their representation in elite discourse. Nevertheless, the extent to which Haitians did form closed communities remains unclear. In contrast but not contradiction to McLeod’s analysis, a study written in Creole suggests a generational difference in the degree of assimilation:

Los viejos seguían apegados a las formas culturales de la sociedad matriz haitiana, a su sistema de valores del pasado, los pichones⁵⁴, en cambio, que hablan más o menos bien el creole y para quienes la patria de sus padres es algo lejano, casi mítico, se distinguen cada vez menos de los otros cubanos.⁵⁵

In juxtaposing these two interpretations, this essay makes no claim that one is more “authentic” or “correct”. Quite simply, the shift between them reveals that by accentuating or deemphasizing different elements of the same conduct, contemporary scholarship on the migration may inadvertently align itself with or against dominant representations of Haitianness. Ultimately, this is why identity is a space of negotiation and why culture becomes so readily politicized.

Continuities in Representations of Haitianness

Within the historiography of Haitian migration to Cuba, there remains a third approach yet unengaged. As the previous section implied, not all Haitians returned to

⁵² McLeod 614.

⁵³ Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring “El Problema, gravísimo para Cuba, de las inmigraciones indeseables” *Carteles* 10, no. 49 (4 Dec. 1927), 27. Cited in Chomsky 458.

⁵⁴ This term refers to the descendants of Haitian immigrants born in Cuba.

⁵⁵ *Niméro épésail Ayisyin alétranjé*. Paris, 1974, 38-9. Cited in Pérez de la Riva, 73.

Haiti. The communities of Barranca, Buena Vista, Caidije, La Caridad, Guanamaca, Loma Azul, Pílon de Cauto and La Serafina – located in the provinces of Oriente and Camagüey – all boast significant populations of Haitian ancestry.⁵⁶ Ethnographic studies of these communities have produced vivid descriptions of Haitian dance, religion, and language retention. This final section will interrogate the rhetorical stance of such writings and their potential contribution to a reification of Haitian culture that is curiously static, continuous and intimately linked to its past.

One example that loosely fits within this category is *Montecafé*, a *testimonio* gathered from Dalia Timitoc, a *pichona* born in Guantánamo in 1932, and published by Luís Surdiaz in 2004. As in the construction of any *testimonio*, the compiler's edits play a significant role in representation, as do the retrospective revisions of memory on the part of the *testimoniante*. For these reasons *Montecafé* is not discussed as an example of Haitian self-representation from the period. What is of interest here is how Luís Surdiaz represents the testimony offered in *Montecafé*. In addition to references to the roundup of Haitians and the difficulties of life on a *central*, *Montecafé* is filled with quotidian details of rural life that could have been articulated by any Cuban peasant from the period. Nevertheless, such overlaps are not the focus of Surdiaz's summary of the work. Rather, he writes, “estas páginas describen las peripecias de algunas familias en nuestro campo insular y también la inserción de los haitianos con sus dioses, sus danzas, su poesía, su música, su tristeza ancestral y sus sueños tantas veces rotos y sin embargo persistentes.”⁵⁷ Thus Timitoc's story is not sold to readers as an illustration of shared Caribbean cultural practices or a common experience of poverty in pre-revolutionary Cuba. Rather, the testimony is of interest because of its African spirituality and culture. Specifically,

⁵⁶ McLeod 606

⁵⁷ Dalia Timitoc. *Montecafé*. Ed. Luís Surdiaz. La Habana: Ediciones Extramuros, 2004, 11.

Surdíaz characterizes the sadness articulated within its pages as “ancestral” and refers to the persistence of broken dreams. In ethnographic discourse such suggestions of immutability regularly appear in representations of *pichones*, despite their direct contradiction of academic characterizations of culture as non-static.

A 1984 article in *Del Caribe* magazine illustrates this convention more clearly. Julio Corbea’s “La Comunidad cubano-haitiana de la Caridad” concludes with the recounting of a rehearsal in which an elderly Haitian migrant (Nicolás) leads the song and dance of a group of *pichones*. In light of the previous analysis of early 20th century elite representations of Haitians, Corbea’s rhetorical stance is particularly striking. Corbea begins by describing how Nicolás “agit[aba] los brazos como si quisiera desasirse de dos serpientes que se los hubieran ceñido”.⁵⁸ In fact Nicolás is directing a dance, but the simile chosen by Corbea to express these movements is one that suggests possession by snakes, which non-coincidentally play an important role in Vodun. Corbea goes on, depicting the dancers as:

cuerpos que existían por el tambor y para el tambor. Eran los torsos erguidos e inmóviles desafiando las caderas cimbreadas, agitando los sexos, unos tan cerca de los otros, que cualquiera diría van a juntarse en un coito suave, deseado, rítmico. Fue una noche de mazón, gaga, vodú, y merengue; de cantos retenidos desde siglos en la memoria.⁵⁹

Here Corbea reiterates the hypersexualization of black bodies identified by Helg, and essentializes their existence as “by and for the drum”. Finally, his characterization of Haitian songs represents them as unadulterated collective memories passed down through the ages. Corbea’s article ironically concludes with a reference to “el intercambio cultural entre dos pueblos del área del Caribe”, which suggests an alternate reading that could have been derived from Corbea’s observations. Ultimately, however, this is not

⁵⁸Julio Corbea. “La comunidad cubano-haitiana de la Caridad.” *Del Caribe* 1: 3-4 (1984), 64.

⁵⁹ Ibid

what the text argues for. Instead Corbea portrays a distinctly Haitian cultural expression that remains intimately linked to its exotic (read African) past. As in Surdiaz's synopsis of *Montecafé*, analysis of Corbea's ethnographic discourse reveals perturbing continuities between contemporary representations that see Haitians as cultural artifacts and the elite discourse of the Cuban immigration debate that used culture as a signifier for race.

Conclusions

As Aviva Chomsky has observed, in Cuban representations of Haitian migrants “race became a cultural and historical attribute, rather than a biological one.”⁶⁰ At the same time, culture and history were often portrayed as biological (read racial) attributes, sometimes latent, but always liable to surface if granted the opportunity. Hence Alejandro de la Fuente points out that “although explicit racial arguments were not the most frequently voiced, the deeply racist character of this campaign [against Antilleans] was barely hidden.”⁶¹ In early republican Cuba the symbolism of race was not widely agreed upon such that its referent could be removed from the equation without having to dispute its meaning. Thus analysis of the immigration debate reveals the simultaneous invocation of race as red flag for “African” manifestations of culture and the explicit construction of culture as a signifier for a primitive, diseased and insurrectionary race.

As the final section of this essay has demonstrated, a version of this discourse is still prevalent in ethnographic depictions of *pichones* that partially suspend academic taboos on static representations of culture to portray Haitian communities as intimately connected to an African past. Unfortunately, the early 20th century Haitian reaction to their representation in elite discourse is largely inaccessible through written texts.

⁶⁰ Chomsky 435.

⁶¹ De la Fuente 72.

Drawing exclusively upon the interpretations of other scholars, it has been suggested that one response developed by Haitian migrants was deliberate exhibition of behaviors for which they were condemned by Cuban society. The use of Voodoo to instill respect is the best-studied example of this tactic, though it seems that the internalization of a national identity based on collective resistance might be another. While no definitive conclusions have been offered, by juxtaposing academic accounts of Haitian withdrawal with those that emphasize integration, this analysis has endeavored to highlight the contested nature of representation and cast doubt on the minimal role assigned to assimilation in interpretations of *pichón* identity. This section implicitly asks how such scholarship contributes to the continuity between contemporary representations of Haitians and the trends of dominant discourse in early republican Cuba.

More generally this paper understands the host country's stance toward immigration not only as a reflection of geopolitical or economic factors but also as a screen onto which the society projects its more intimate preoccupations. In Cuba, elite discourse regarding Haitian immigration became a political space in which Euro-Cuban and Afro-Cuban elites struggled to define the place of race in the nation. Thus the Haitian case illustrates how race, as a social construct, can function as a floating signifier for cultural expressions of identity, even as it continues to be understood as a representation of phenotypical differences. Not only does this suggest that we lack adequate language to talk about race, but also the slippage between race and culture reveals their intimate connection in popular understandings of racial identity.