



## Vive la Différence

By Eduardo Díaz, director Smithsonian Latino Center  
April 2012

In November 2009 I checked into my hotel room in Santiago, Dominican Republic, and, as is my habit, I switched on the radio to get a feel for the place. This was my first trip there. While station surfing I was stopped in my tracks by a talk program, whose host was going off on the "Haitian Problem." "*Queridos radioescuchas,*" he screamed, "*aquellos haitianos, aquellos negros, son los que dañan a la economía y cultura dominicana!...*" (Dear listeners, those Haitians, those Blacks, they are the ones who harm the Dominican economy and culture!...). I switched the channel and thankfully landed on a station playing *Juanita Morel*, one of my favorite *ripitão* menengues.



The next morning, I went for a walk, and along the way I saw what to my Chicano eyes appeared to be mostly Black people—speaking Spanish, not Creole. I was a little confused. That day I visited Centro León, a beautiful cultural center to explore a potential collaboration on our new Dominican initiative. The Santiago-Cibão region produces a large percentage of the Dominican diaspora to the U.S., and learning more about the culture and politics of the island is important to understanding the formation of the Dominican community in the U.S.

I asked about the radio show host. My query was greeted by a heavy, collective sigh. From that moment a complicated story began to unfold for me. To understand the Dominican reality one must know a little Dominican-Haitian history—logical, since the two countries share the island of Hispaniola. Basically, the Spaniards conquered the island; the French, in inimitable not-so-fast colonial fashion, swooped in when the Spaniards, having realized that The Gold was elsewhere, weakened its presence on the island. After securing Hispaniola's western section, *Les Blues* developed a prodigious, slave-driven sugar industry, while on the other side of the island, Santo Domingo withered from neglect and under-population, though remaining home to a proportionally large population of free people of color. Haiti maintained its superior position after securing its independence from France in 1804. Jean Pierre Boyer, under the banner of "one and indivisible," invaded the Dominican Republic in 1822, where Haitian rule prevailed until 1844, when Dominican patriots successfully expelled the Haitians and *Quisqueya* (the Taíno name for the DR) regained its sense of nationhood.

Historian Jalisco Lancer notes, "Today, to be Dominican is, above all, not to be Haitian." World history is rife with the racialized demonization of the perceived enemy, because it justifies hostility, nationalist imperative and, sometimes, slaughter, as was the case in 1937 when the notorious dictator Rafael Trujillo ordered the massacre of over 25,000 Haitians. Under *Operación Perejil* (Operation Parsley), Trujillo's men used the difficulty of Creole-speaking individuals to properly pronounce the Spanish "r" and "j" to select out those for elimination. Insidiously, Trujillo was a mulatto, whose first wife was part Haitian. Trujillo also institutionalized *non-Africaness* within the Dominican imaginary and legal system by creating *Indianess* as a way to distinguish Dominicans from Haitians, and preserve *Hispanidad*, the sense of *Spanishness* that made Dominicans distinctly unlike Haitians. At the time, I don't think the perpetrators were appreciating the many natural cultural traditions and family ties that thrived along the border and beyond—that they shared a common indigenous Taíno root (the casaba one, too), or that their national music and dance, the *merengue*, was inextricably and historically linked to the Haitian *méringue*.

The other evening I went to see Sierra Maestra, a popular Cuban band. I spotted a woman swaying,

unaccompanied, and asked her to dance. She was Haitian. I told her about the upcoming Haitian-Dominican Friendship Concert, sponsored by the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art and Latino Center, and the Haitian AND Dominican Embassies, featuring Tabou Combo (*méringue*), and Los Clarinetes Mágicos (*merengue*). She smiled, thanked me, and indicated that she'd spread the word, and then added that she would never set foot in the Dominican Republic. We at the Smithsonian are not so delusional or arrogant to think that one friendship concert will make a dent in a legacy of imbedded bitterness and hostility, but taking a musical stab at the notion of "one and indivisible" may be a place to start.