Image from the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center.

A 1758 map of "The island of Hispaniola, called by the French St. Domingo."

THE CARIBBEAN

Notes on Black latinidades, Antillean Political Thought, and Empire

By franchesca araújo

In our recent conversation about her book *Translating Blackness: Latinx Colonialities in Global Perspective* (Duke University Press, 2022), Lorgia García Peña said, "Archival documents are as important as hearsay in my work. They have the same value." This statement was as hilarious as it was profound. From her first book, *The Borders of Dominicanidad*, to her latest project, García Peña's work demonstrates a deep methodological attentiveness to Michel-Rolph Trouillot's call for us to not just consider what history is, but how history is produced and how it works. Such a declaration about the officialized archive grapples with the understanding that the way Black life shows up in the archive is often through violence, rendered through colonial subjugation, while it reveals the compounded erasures at work in Caribbean contexts. In the case of Afro-Caribbean subjects in a nation often elided by all of the fields and disciplines its existence touches, the voices and lives we want to reach frequently fall out of the "documentation regime," as historian Anne Eller puts it.[1]

García Peña's approach in her first chapter, "A Full Stature of Humanity: Latinx Difference, Colonial Musings, and Black Belonging during Reconstruction"—her engagement with the archive—is a process and tool through which she can approach a more intimate proximity to the life of the Black Caribbean latina whose personal subjectivity and theorizing provide us with a larger critical purchase regarding Blacknesses and their encounters, translation, and historical contingency. In this chapter's postscript, titled "Unsilencing the Past," García Peña reiterates Trouillot's description of how one *silences*

1. Anne Eller (2016), *We Dream Together: Dominican Independence, Haiti, and the Fight for Caribbean Freedom*, Duke University Press.

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Photo by CLAS staff.

Lorgia García Peña (left) at her UC Berkeley talk in 2023, with franchesca araújo.

in the production of history. That is, silencing is intentional in the creation of the archive as a site of exclusion. In this last section, she describes the challenge of "abundance rather than lack" while studying imperialist ventures of the United States in the Dominican Republic and Haiti: "The documentation of U.S. Americans' thoughts about Dominicans fills a room; but so does the silences this excess reproduces" (p. 74).

Among that excess of silencing are the sentiments of average Dominicans. Imagining what the moment of potential U.S. annexation must have been like for her father's great-grandmother María Frías, a farmer, García Peña writes:

> She must have been so overwhelmed by the uncertainty of a future in which men continued to decide if blood was to be shed, if we were to call ourselves Dominicans, Spaniards, Haitians, or Americans, if we continued to speak Spanish or if we would need to learn English or French. Or perhaps none of these questions were relevant when food was scarce and caudillos would not allow her to work her plot of land. Did María Frías care at all who governed the country or what flag was installed in a government building she would never visit? (p. 78)

García Peña's thoughtful moves related to archival silencing and the ways colonized subjects contradict the officialized archive was the point of departure from which I sought to discuss her analytical furthering of hegemonic Blackness (and the centrality of Reconstruction/post-Civil War articulations of Blackness in the United States through expansionist measures) and her theorizing of Black *latinidad* as an analytic in the aforementioned first chapter of *Translating Blackness*.

As a Black Studies scholar indebted to Caribbeanist theory, I understand Black Studies not merely as an investigation of identities or a multicultural medium through which we can facilitate a project of murderous inclusion into the nation-state as it stands, but as a critique of Western civilization. For that reason, I appreciate how *Translating Blackness* offers Black latinidad as an epistemology, a place from which to think and ask a different set of questions. By offering Black latinidad (and in this particular project, as I will touch on later, a Black latinidad that is firmly rooted and centered in the Antilles) as a place from which to think, García Peña helps us consider how *even among* the human "others" who suffer under the governing codes in which man is overrepresented[2]—that is, even

2. Sylvia Wynter (2003), "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3:3, 257-337.

within the oppositional politics and discourse that develop in response to that overrepresentation—there come to be assumed universals and perpetual footnotes. There is an assumed universal Black subject even within the critiques of default universalized enlightenment subjecthood. Hegemonic Blackness, which García Peña describes as Blackness "defined through U.S. culture, politics, histories, and the Anglophone experience," touches on that sensitive predicament (p. 4). Although the "construction of Blackness is always situational" and historically contextual, "hegemonic globalized versions of ethno-racial concepts dominate popular perceptions, intellectual discourse, social and popular media, and at times, even legislation, shaping people's actions and encounters with race and coloniality" (p. 6).

Lorgia García Peña thanks CLAS for her welcome. (From García Peña's Twitter feed.)

Tracing a particular consolidation of the emergence of hegemonic Blackness, García Peña focuses on Gregoria Fraser, a Black Caribbean latina musician and writer from the late 1800s, an era when the demands of legibility made the decision to insist on the centrality of her island geography to her Black identity a difficult one, yet still she decided to do so. García Peña explores the relationship between Fraser's two *patrias* (the Dominican Republic and the United States between 1867 and 1880, when both countries were recovering from civil wars) and her two godfathers, U.S. abolitionist and statesman Frederick Douglass and Gregorio Luperón, the Dominican general who led the war against Spain (1863-65) ending in the country's independence. García Peña uses these two male figures to get closer to Fraser's "vaivenes" and "contradictions," while analyzing the relationship between the project of U.S. imperial expansion throughout the Caribbean and the project of U.S. Black citizenship during the two decades that followed the U.S. Civil War as central to Black latinidad.

Although a rough translation of *vaivenes* would be "comings and goings," to better understand the precise work it does in this chapter, it is more useful to think about how the term stands in relation to the other categories of analysis and engagement present in the book. García Peña proposes "Black Latinidad as a category from which we can better understand the vaivenes of colonialism and migration that shape Black experiences in diaspora" (p. 5). So we might understand Fraser's vaivenes as the spatial and temporal contingencies of the moving, staying, and pausing in her life that were at once contoured and predetermined by colonial violence, racialization, and class access, while remaining an arena for Fraser's agency and self-definition.

Carefully tracing how imperial expansionist ideology coalesced with the problem of Black citizenship in the United States in the post-bellum era (that is, the inability to imagine Blackness as incorporable into citizenship, at least while still visibly present in the mainland), García Peña convincingly asserts that:

> ...it is precisely during Reconstruction and U.S. expansion, as U.S. Black subjects grappled with the contradictions of citizenship and empire, that we find the roots of a hegemonic narrative of Blackness—shaped by the U.S. empire—that continues to dominate transnational conversations, political processes, and intellectual and cultural discourses across the globe. (p. 35)

One of the imagined solutions to the "question of Blackness" was the possibility of annexing Black nations in the Caribbean and shipping freed Black people to these locations.

The Dominican Republic emerged as a promising site for this endeavor from 1867 until the middle of the 1870s. Focusing on the debate surrounding Dominican annexation through U.S. Senator Charles Sumner and Frederick Douglass (the former became an important ally for anti-annexation leaders and the latter was appointed to the Commission of Inquiry for annexation in 1871), García Peña demonstrates that:

> ...it is during Reconstruction—a period of mass U.S. expansion over the Americas—that the notion of a 'Latin difference' is articulated and expanded to include U.S. Blackness as different from other forms of Blackness. As U.S. Blacks were invited into the nation through the passage of the 14th Amendment, they were also invited into U.S. imperialism. (p. 36)

In this uncertain historical moment, Luperón and Douglass both articulate and construct a version

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of Black latinx difference. While “Douglass cited U.S. ‘civility’ and Dominican ‘barbarism’: the very language of colonial dominance that was used to enslave Black people for nearly three centuries” as justification for U.S. annexation and its attendant benefits, Luperón articulated a Black latinx difference as a way to mobilize desires for anti-colonial freedom and sovereignty against the threat of U.S. expansion in 1871 (ibid.). Through Luperón, we can recognize that this moment of Dominican anti-colonial insistence on Caribbean sovereignty marks latinidad as rooted in and emergent through Blackness and “Black citizenship in Hispaniola, in contradistinction to U.S. hegemony and expansionism” (p. 38). Luperón’s response to his contemporary moment and the conditions that birthed it leads García Peña to theorize “latinidad as a site of anti-colonial, racially inclusive citizenship that begins with the possibility of Black belonging” (ibid.).

Before I turn to the tensions between this Afro-Antillean-rooted political project of latinidad and the ways latinidad dominantly operates now, I want to pause on the precision with which García Peña narrates encounters between different geographic emergences of Blackness. During her March 2023 presentation at UC Berkeley, she declared:

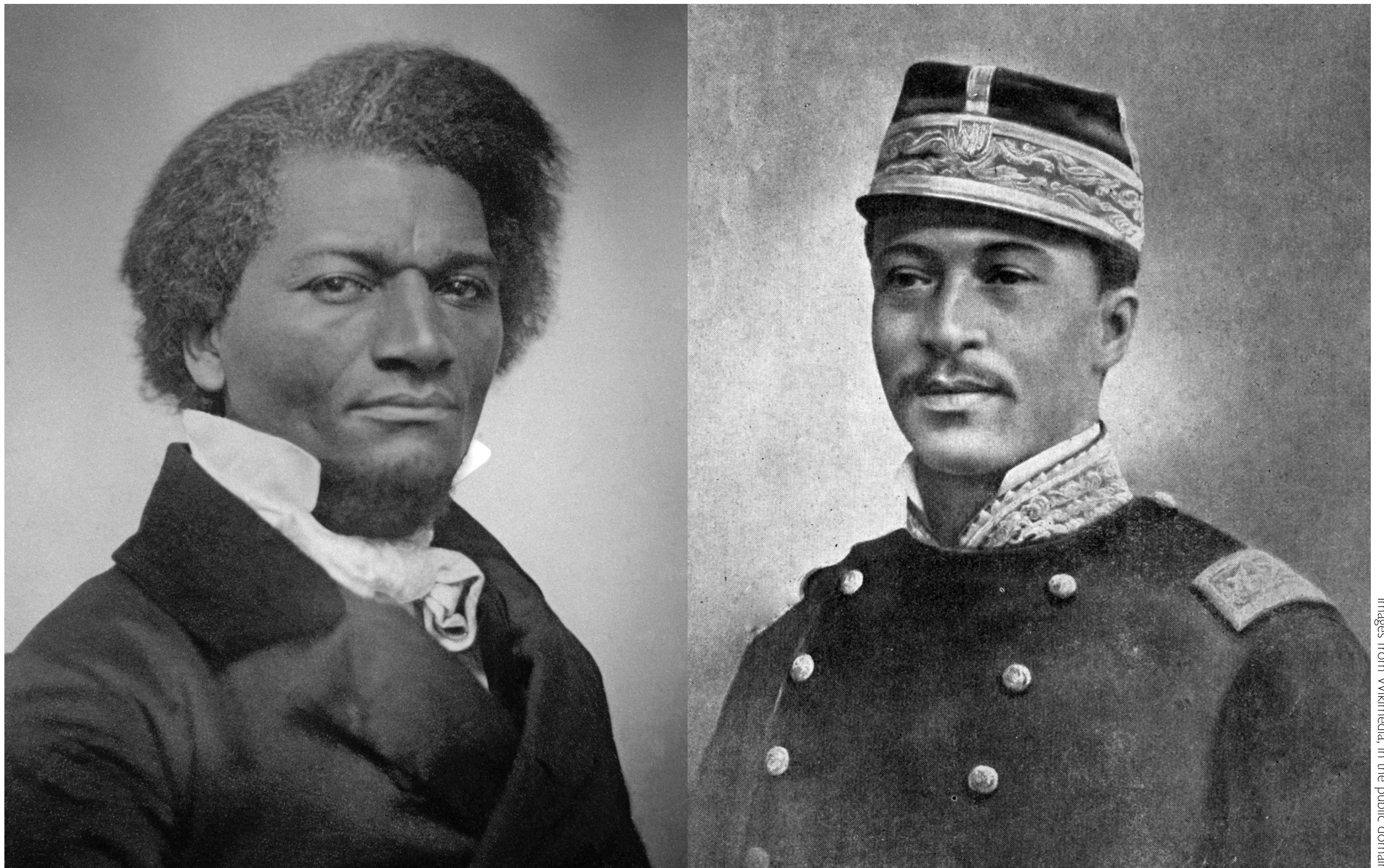
> “We can find the roots of the complicated vaivén of Dominican Blackness as a theory that is very much intertwined with the economic and political ambitions of expansionist post-Civil War United States, a process that has continued to grow and shape the internal and external constructions of Dominican Blackness.”

This assertion recalls Raj Chetty’s thoughtful highlighting of the transnational Black encounter exemplified by Antonio Thomem’s letter, titled “Listen: American Negro Soldier,” which was written in 1965 during the U.S. occupation of the Dominican Republic.[3] Chetty identifies that “while expressing racial solidarity with Black soldiers, the letter also exposes the central contradiction of Black U.S. soldiers facing racial struggles at home while acting as agents of U.S. imperialism.”[4]

Just as Chetty brings this instance to the center of our thinking and rejects its removal from the historical moments that have produced our current terrain, García Peña questions our current cyclical and self-affirming narratives, not just about Dominican pathology, but about U.S. authority over correct or ethical forms of

3. Raj Chetty and Amaury Rodriguez (2015, Summer), “The Challenge and Promise of Dominican Black Studies,” *The Black Scholar* 45:2, SPECIAL ISSUE: Dominican Black Studies, 1-9. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2015.1012990.
4. Ibid.

The godfathers of Gregoria Fraser, Frederick Douglass (left) and Gregorio Luperón.



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Blackness and their dependence on a particular kind of historical narrativization. One that, for example, elides the fact that it was precisely in post-Reconstruction U.S. discourses that the Dominican Republic was fantastically imagined as "a racial paradise—a perfect mix of white, Black, and Brown people, in contradistinction with 'Black Haiti,'" which, combined with its environmental wealth and geographic location, made it "attractive to investors, politicians, and *Black freedom advocates alike*" (p. 41, emphasis added). Chetty and García Peña both offer a Dominican Black Studies against the grain that centers translation as evoked by Brent Hayes Edwards[5] and, for García Peña's part, divests from the idea of the nation as the primary vehicle through which we should imagine our relationships.

Shifting the perpetual footnote from the periphery to the center allows for more rigorous understandings of Blackness that go beyond crass identity politics and into geographies (temporal and spatial) of specific constructions and uses of Blackness. It also disrupts the dominant *mestizo*-oriented, anti-Black, anti-Indigenous latinidad in both daily life and canonized academic texts.[6] On this note, I would like to turn to the centrality of Caribbeanness to Luperón's articulation and strategic use of latinidad. Luperón's vision of citizenship rested on an insistence on multiracial egalitarianism for which Black citizenship was integral and that was fundamentally incompatible with slavery—a discursive and political mobilization similar to the one Ada Ferrer traces in *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation and Revolution, 1868-1898* (University of North Carolina Press, 1999), which narrates the end of slavery and the emerging anti-colonial and anti-racist discourses in Cuba's nation building.

In both Ferrer and García Peña's historical offerings, we must mourn the contingent possibilities those projects represented. One of the earliest proponents of the Confederación Antillana,[7] Luperón's political voice and imagined political horizon remind us that historically contingent projects of *dominicanidad* cannot be reduced to the era of Trujillo or to Hispanophile directions and desires, even among political leaders and generals. In Luperón's political vision, the country's values were established by "negotiating and imagining it as part of three territories and political projects: the island of Hispaniola, the Antilles, and latinidad. These negotiations were grounded on an understanding of *mulataje*—Black and white racial mixing (as opposed to Hispanicized *mestizaje*)—that did not privilege whiteness but centered Blackness" (p. 38).

Thus, latinidad "emerged as a political and intellectual project in Hispaniola during the intense period of expansionism that followed the end of the U.S. Civil War (1865-98) … the idea of latinidad was intrinsically shaped by a preoccupation with multiracial citizenship in the face of U.S. imperial expansion, in contra*diction* to the violence of slavery and the ever-present specter of European coloniality embodied in white criollos and caudillos" (p. 38, emphasis in original). This kind of political orientation anticipates Dominican intellectual, writer, and short-lived president Juan Bosch's later understanding of the Caribbean as the imperial frontier and the centrality of Caribbean geographic particularity in understanding the Dominican Republic. I see this attentiveness as an opening for us to consider how we might put these 19th- and 20th-century articulations of Caribbeanness in conversation with francophone and anglophone Caribbeanist theory.

Clearly García Peña's work is engaging in an act of recovery and a rejection of a singularized origin of latinidad most compatible with its contemporary dominant operation that facilitates Black erasure and death.[8] Given the ways in which latinidad has come to develop dominantly in the United States and other sites, I am unsure about the political possibilities of reclaiming this Hispaniola and Luperón origin story to intervene in and change the trajectory and terms with which we articulate ourselves and our futures through latinidad. But I do see the reminder of the layered positioning of the Dominican Republic as central to Blackness, Caribbeanness, and latinidad as a critical point of departure from which we can expand and reconsider our accepted problem-spaces[9] and governing terms, in all of their convergences and disjunctures. If Black latinidad is an analytic and an epistemology, what would it mean for those at the U.S. locus and most legible through the terms of hegemonic Blackness to pause and think from that space?

5. Brent Hayes Edwards (2001), The Uses of Diaspora. *Social Text* 19:1, 45-73.

6. Tatiana Flores (2021), "Latinidad Is Canceled: Confronting an Anti-Black Construct." *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture* 3:3, 58-79.

7. The Confederación was "a project that sought the political unification of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic against U.S. imperialism and Spanish colonization under the ideals of freedom, justice, and racial equality … articulated and redefined in a historical circularity that parallels the struggles for freedom in the Caribbean, including Haitian independence (1804), Dominican Restoration (1865), Grito de Lares in Puerto Rico (1868), and Grito de Yara in Cuba (1869)" (*Translating Blackness*, pp. 60-61).

8. See cultural critic Zahira Kelly Cabrera's conversation in the "Bag Ladiez" podcast. https://www.boomplay.com/episode/1623860.

9. David Scott's concept of a "problem-space," after an engagement with R.G. Collingwood and Quentin Skinner, revisits a "logic of question and answer." In *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton University Press, 1999), Scott argues that texts are responses to a contingent demand posed by (and within) a particular historical moment. These historical "conjunctures" are "problem-spaces" or "conceptual-ideological ensembles, discursive formations, or language games that are *generative of objects, and therefore of questions*." Therefore, in order to assess how our questions and answers are actually relevant or not relevant to our current political moment, we need to "*reconstruct* the questions that organize and give point to the problem-spaces in which they are generated" (Scott, p. 6, emphasis added).

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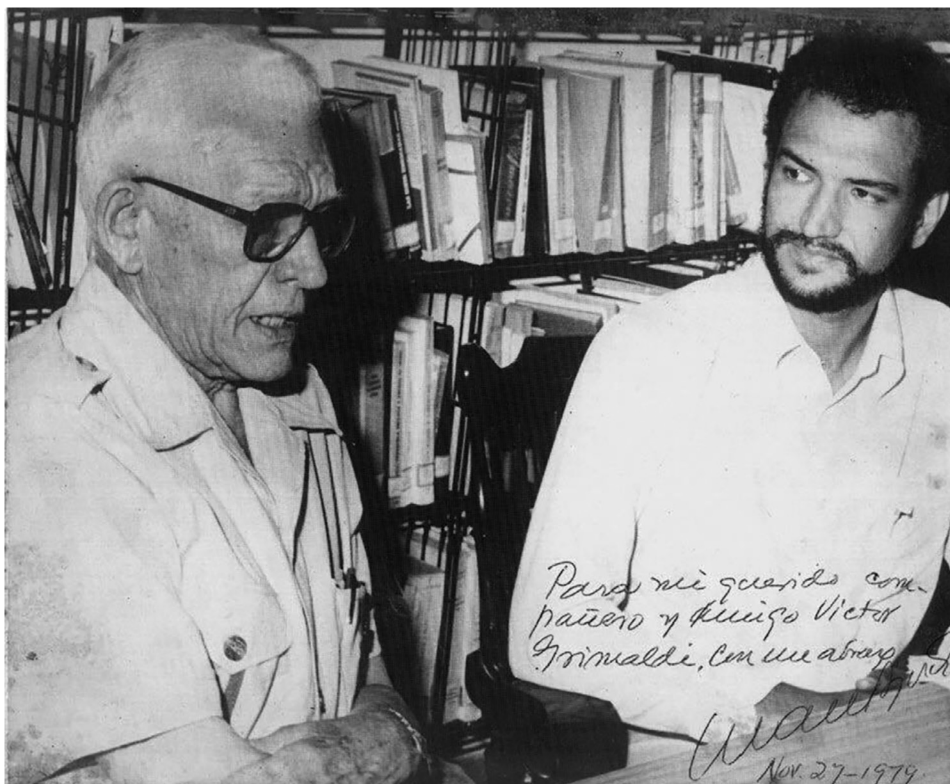

Photo courtesy of convictorgrimaldi.

Juan Bosch (left) and Dominican journalist and political figure Víctor Manuel Grimaldi Céspedes.

What I find so deeply crucial and profound about García Peña's identification of this articulation of latinidad as grounded in the geography of the Dominican Republic and in Caribbeanness—and oftentimes centering Blackness—is the cross-temporal reiterations of this insistence. It is precisely that layered positioning that makes the continued glimmer of Antillean insistence in Dominican articulations so interesting to me, particularly in the following case: through dembow.[10] Indebted to Deborah Thomas's and Dixa Ramirez's framings of popular culture, I consider—while resisting a binary analysis that searches for liberatory or counter-revolutionary signal posts as the only possible metrics through which we can understand them—how popular culture and barrio/hood aesthetics emerge as an articulation of Dominicanness distinct from that which is sanctioned by the state and its officialized narrative.[11]

For example, in the recently released remix to "Yo Soy Mamá," by Dominican dembow artist La Insuperable, the Dominican *dembowsera* Yailin La Más Viral declares that "todas quieren ser dominicana" (every woman wants to be Dominican), after which she reminds listeners to regard her as a "negra del cocoleo."[12] *Cocoleo* derives from the word *cocolo*, a Hispanic Caribbean term levied at Afro-Caribbean migrants from the end of the 19th century onwards. In the Dominican Republic, it has been used to describe dark-skinned people, whether Dominican or Haitian, Dominicans of Haitian descent/ethnic Haitians, or Haitian migrants. In its past daily articulations, the term was frequently an anti-Black insult. More recently, it has been appropriated in urban music scenes from rap to dembow.[13]

Yailin isn't the first Dominican artist to claim this word in a cheeky, self-celebratory way.[14] But the context in which she does so, and the particular subject position from which she's acting—as a light-skinned Black woman who is a loud defender of dembow as a nationally rejected genre emerging from neglected youth in barrios deemed incompatible with the national project—makes it especially interesting. I see this utterance as a telling instance of Afro-Antillean dissonant diction. That is, an instance of racialized literary articulation that negotiates, engages with, rejects, or turns around the relationship with the nation-state via ambivalence, negotiation, rejection, or rewriting of keywords central to state identity.

Turning the nation upside down is central to the Black geographic as well as to the call for historical specificities that García Peña rigorously exemplifies in her work. This dissonant articulation of an affirmation of place—and of Dominican Blackness within a broader, erasure-ridden latinidad—points to some ways that we might approach translating Blackness: by firmly rooting ourselves in the "when and where" of Blackness, in the politics of place, placing primacy on geographic space (not just cultural difference).[15]

10. Although describing the intricacies, evolutions, aesthetics, and innovations of dembow is nearly impossible to do in a brief sentence here it must suffice to describe it as Black music from the barrios/hoods of the Dominican Republic, with rhythmic roots in Jamaican dancehall riddims (its name, in fact, being shared with Shabba Ranks's 1990 song "Dem Bow"). As an art form and an archive, Dominican dembow challenges us toward an engagement with relation and the productive force of Black creation within colonial modernity, rather than purity and insular origins.

11. Lorgia García Peña (2016), *The Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation, and Archives of Contradiction*, Duke University Press.

12. Yailin worked as a hair braider in urban barrios of Santo Domingo before releasing her own music.

13. See Petra Rivera-Rideau (2013), 'Cocolos Modernos': Salsa, Reggaetón, and Puerto Rico's Cultural Politics of Blackness, for a history of how Cocolo has been taken up in diasporic Puerto Rican contexts. https://doi.org/10.1080/17442222.2013.768459.

14. See Patogeno Musa's music video for his song "Cocoleo." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdEuuqUi6mE.

15. Place signals us towards how assertions of decolonial practices, Black life, and Black futures are embedded in place, meaning that it allows us to "dislodge crude identity politics" and not fall victim to a sort of disavowal of nation that fails to account for the centrality of the soils, concrete, and shores that contour where people think from and what kinds of alternatives to domination they imagine; see Katherine McKittrick (2020), *Dear Science and Other Stories*. Duke University Press). I distinguish this from cultural

Ostensibly, Yailin's response is to the racial vitriol she has received from non-Black South Americans—and non-Black latinos in general—regarding her relationships with two other music artists from Latin America, one a white Colombian woman.[16] Yet, viewing this utterance as merely reactionary obfuscates the racial dynamics within latinidad as a category and as an imagined community, as well as the process through which nation-states as units are racialized and the ways in which that categorization relegates their citizen-subjects to specific positions within the global economy. For Black Dominican women, Yailin's declaration "todas quieren ser dominicana" is a proclamation of arrogant celebration and an affirmation of the unacceptability of colonial anti-Black violence.

It is also an astute observation of the profitability of Dominican culture from the barrio, evinced by Bad Bunny, Rosalía, and many other artists' uses of Dominican genres, dialects, and culture in globally renowned projects. Because of her context, Yailin's declaration was a bigger risk and heftier truth than Bad Bunny's line, "todos quieren ser latinos" (everybody wants to be latino), in one of the most popular songs in *Un Verano Sin Ti*, the biggest album of 2022.[17]

Arguably, based on the geographic emergence of the genres and forms used to relay the message, the technically correct refrain for "El Apagón" would have been "todos quieren ser caribeños" (everybody wants to be Caribbean), a proclamation that would destabilize hegemonic latinidad and the displacement of Caribbeanness and Blackness from the very aesthetics and cultural productions that emerged from both. A proclamation that would remind consumers and partakers that tiny island geographies are the source of the Afro-Caribbean creativity that becomes subsumed by the generalized category of latinx. In contrast, Yailin's affirmation is distinctly *Black* Caribbean and particularly Dominican: "Caribeña la connect del fogueo." Yailin's articulation is a dissonant diction because it inverts the stigmatized and contained into what is centered and celebrated.

Nonetheless, I want to be clear that by using the language of inversion, I am not attaching myself to the

Image captured from YouTube.

Yailin La Más Viral in the 2022 video for *Soy Mama*.

problem-space we have been forced to inherit, where we start and end at the question of a progressive teleology of purported Black self-affirmation or self-hatred. Through García Peña's precise consideration of translation, converging colonial violence, and hegemonic Blackness, I would hope most people would arrive at an understanding that attempting to present the articulation of Black centrality or Caribbean connection as a new and novel development or an unimaginable contradiction to the usual Dominican pathology would be more of a discursive imperative and narrativized construction than a unique empirical truth applicable to no other geography. Clearly, the sense of Antillean geographic emplacement that led to Yailin's declaration extends back to at least the 19th century.

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difference, which can end in individualized identity politics or insular nationalism (though, of course, not always). Place, or a space that has been storied with meaning, demands of us an attentiveness to exchanges and both materiality and the discursive.

16. Yailin's connection to Puerto Rican rapper Anuel AA and by extension, Colombian singer Karol G, has led to vicious comments on her social media accounts and constant racially and nationally coded discourses about Yailin's lack of class surrounding her work and appearance in radio shows and pop culture news mediums. That Karol G and Anuel AA are currently two of the most prominent "Latin music" artists in the world makes the aforementioned visibility and scrutiny especially intense.

17. Bad Bunny's *Un Verano Sin Ti* wrapped 2022 as the most popular album of the year in the United States, according to music data tracking firm Luminate. *Un Verano Sin Ti* debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard 200 chart dated May 21, 2022, and spent 13 nonconsecutive weeks atop the list, the most weeks at No. 1 for any album since Drake's Views also logged 13 weeks at No. 1 in 2016.

See Keith Caulfield (2023). "Bad Bunny's 'Un Verano Sin Ti' Is Luminate's Top Album of 2022 in U.S." Billboard. https://www.billboard.com/music/chart-beat/2022-us-year-end-music-report-luminate-top-album-bad-bunny-un-verano-sin-ti-1235196736/.