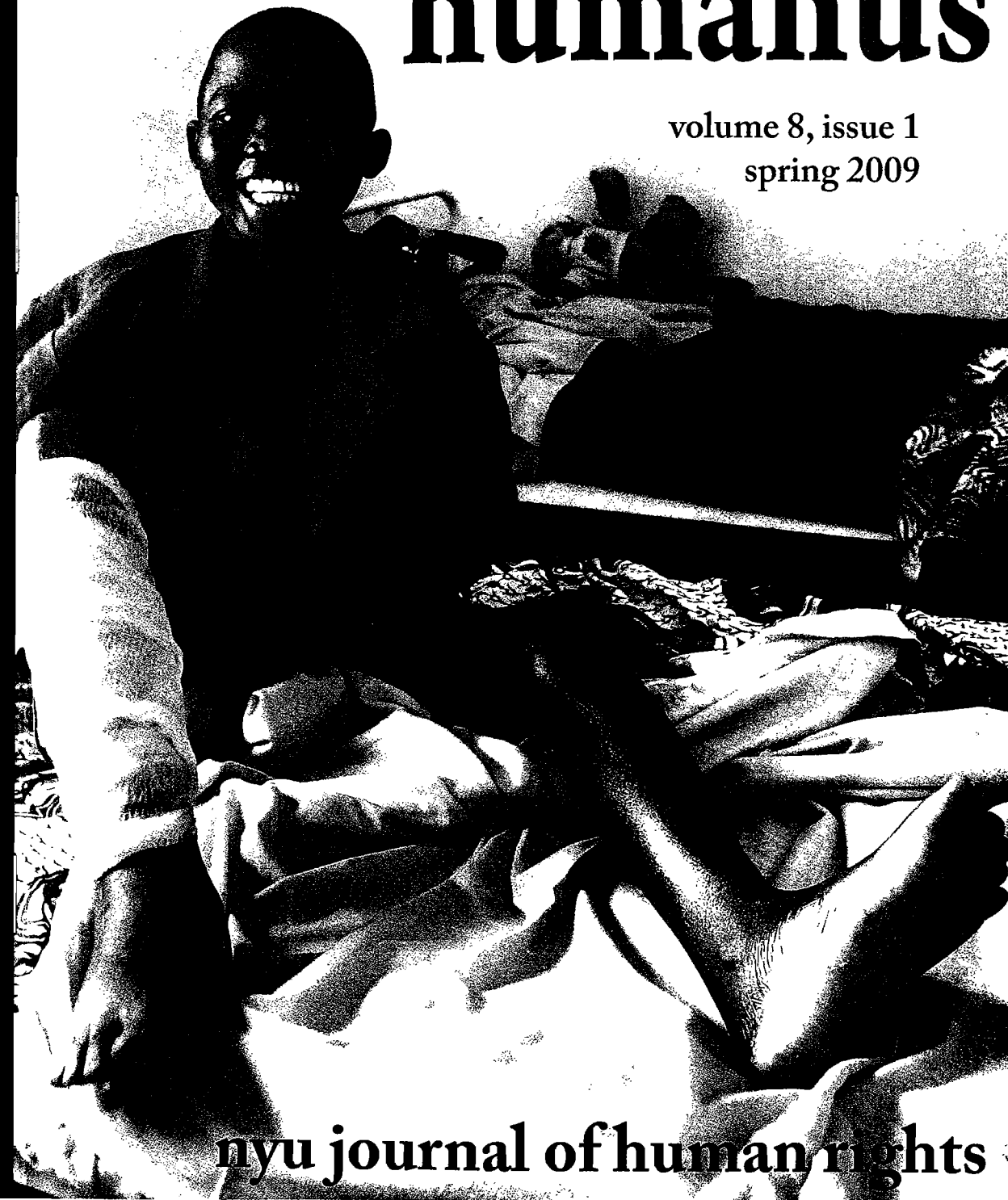


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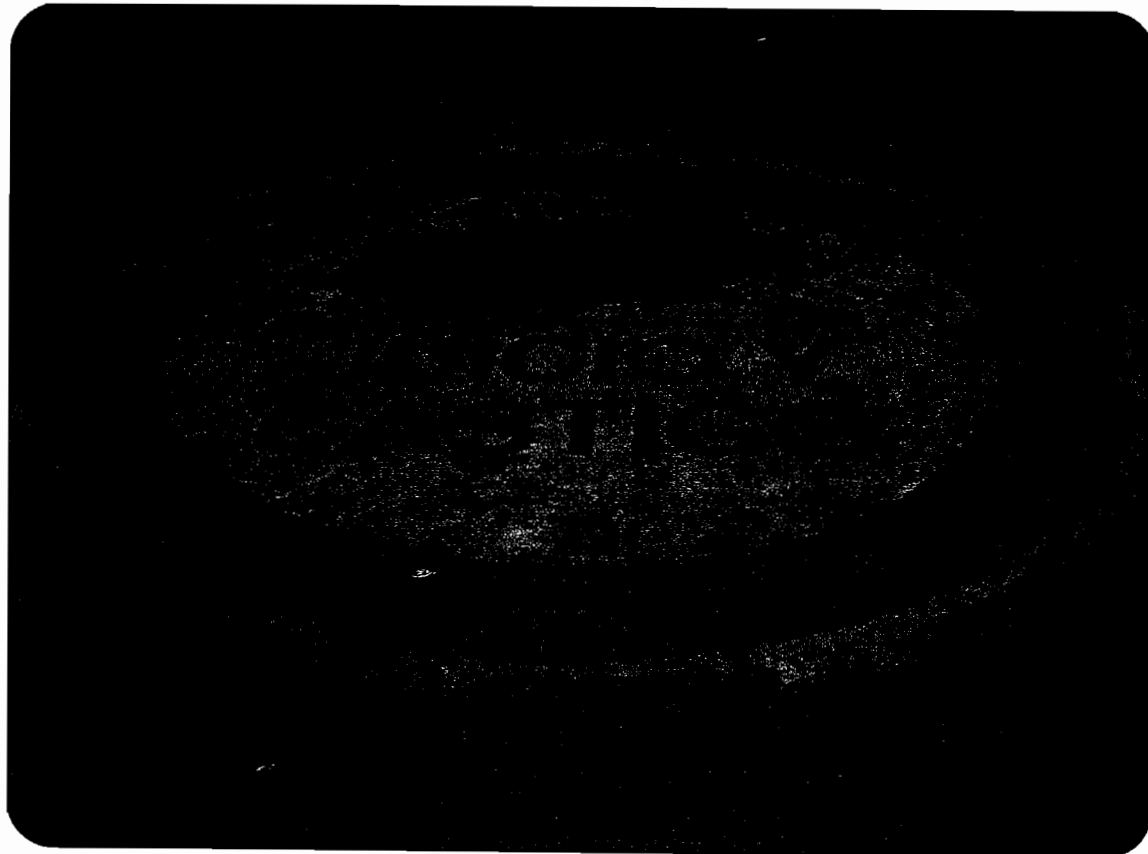
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Street art in Buenos Aires, Argentina (translating to "Judgement and Punishment") by Grupo de Arte Callejero (Street Art Group), a social justice artists' collective. They aim to draw attention to the ongoing presence in Buenos Aires' residential neighborhoods of those who took part in the criminal activities of the military government and to shed light on their ongoing impunity.

Dana Farrington

Ethnicity and Exclusion in the Dominican Republic

Steeve Coupeau

During my last trip to the Dominican Republic, I met a well-meaning Dominican journalist. She asked me how I was perceived in the United States. I told her that, in most places, people saw me as "Black," though I consider myself to be Afro-Latino. Her response was: "Thank God I am Latina, because down here, it is not good to be black." This paper is written to tell my colleague that it is just fine to be both black and Latino, whether one is in the United States or Dominican Republic.

This study focuses on Afro-Latin identity and its relations to Africa. Original interest tracing Africanisms, associated with Herskovits, developed into journeys into processes of syncretism. Black social movements are concerned with culture and often with Africa. According to Wade, the Atlantic panorama fits with emerging theoretical work on Diaspora and globalization that widened the frame within which Afro-Latin culture can be understood.¹

I use the term Afro-Latin to highlight the historical African connections in shaping black culture on this side of the Atlantic. A more recent term "Afro-descendants" has become popular, especially in international circles of such bodies as the Inter-American Development Bank or the United Nations, where there is an increasing focus on Afro-Latinos. With an emphasis on self-identification, the term Afro-descendant serves as an invitation to join the diaspora as much as an objectifying classification.²

The Haitian Presence and the Dominican Ethnic Framework

The nation-state is grounded on ethnicity as a modern instrument of exclusion. Ethnicity provides a means to distinguish "us against them." The Republic of Haiti and the Dominican Republic share the Caribbean island of Quisqueya. It is no wonder that Dominicans define themselves in opposition to their neighbors, the Haitians. In spite of geographic proximity, the two nations define themselves very differently. While Haiti embraces its African roots, Dominican society has chosen to promote cultural affinity with Spain. Torres-Saillant posits that, in the Dominican Republic, compared to the United States, blackness has historically not been very salient in defining identity and

racial terminologies are multiple and shifting.³ This seems odd for a country where the majority of the population is of African descent. In a recent interview, Padre Regino Martinez of Border Solidarity explains that Dominicans consider themselves to be “morenos”, “Indians”, “meztizos”, “jabaos” “prietos” but not black... the Haitians are black. An entire ideology of “rejection” towards the Haitians was built on these differentiations during the Trujillo era in the 1930s. This ideology was predicated on the rejection of the black Haitian. All these cultural, political, and economic differences have gradually increased and have been upheld by the Dominican elite.

Former dictator Rafael Trujillo exalted the country’s Hispanic identity while rejecting its African heritage. The Trujillo regime promoted a Eurocentric view of Dominican identity. It looked to the Spanish conquerors and colonial settlers to find the ethno-racial foundation of the nation while excising any cultural forms associated with the African heritage.⁴ The contents of state-sponsored educational materials used in Dominican schools are restricted to Christian civilization and Hispanic traditions. This Eurocentric view lends itself to racism as it distinguishes bodies of people from each other by introducing issues of superiority and inferiority within Dominican society. The essence of Trujillismo is that the Dominican Republic is a community of Hispanic and taíno origins that is threatened by the constant degrading contamination of “the African thing”: that black and Haitian thing. Attitudes and individuals seen as disgraceful and poor are also seen as black.

A politically convenient substitution has been the term “Indio”. The “Indian” is a non-white Dominican who is not black. As a social construction, the “Indian” label accommodates non-white persons and makes them accomplices of this ideological setting. In fact, the term Indio was widely used, especially during Trujillo’s dictatorship, to describe this population, which national elites were at pains to clearly distinguish from neighboring “black” Haiti.⁵

Xenophobic politicians consistently fan the flames of hatred against Dominicans of Haitian descent and Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic. Their xenophobic discourse portrays the Haitian presence as a “burden” for the Dominican Republic. It seeks to create a sense of fear of a “peaceful Haitian invasion”, which then breeds irrational violence against Haitians. In the absence of any investigative reporting, Dominican media often divulges accusations of Haitians for any act of violence, whether founded or

unfounded. The alarming and exclusive nature of the nationalist discourse on migration incites anti-Haitian attitudes, which denies the continuous contributions of Haitian migrants to wealth creation in the Dominican Republic.

Fortunately, some voices of reason and pragmatism have acknowledged the importance of Haitian labor in the Dominican economy. One can recall the voice of Diandino Peña, Minister of Public Works in the first term of President Leonel Fernandez highlighting the negative effects of massive deportation of Haitian migrants on the Dominican economy. Even before entering public service and building the metro in Santo Domingo, as an engineer, Peña widely used Haitian workers in real estate development. More recently, Dominican Labor minister Max Puig admitted the fundamental dependency of Dominican agriculture on Haitian manpower. Dominicantoday.com reports that Minister Puig stated that enforcing the law stipulating that 80% of the payroll has to be national would yield disastrous consequences for the Dominican farming sector. In addition to enormous contributions to the Dominican agricultural sector, Haitian manpower has contributed to wholesale transformations of the national urban landscape and the creation of over 70,000 hotel rooms that comply with international standard.

The Consequences of Massive Deportation of Haitian Manpower

The Dominican elite impose an ethnic configuration that sees the majority of blacks in Haiti as a threat to the Dominican Republic. Seen in the light, the massive deportation is a means to preserve the Hispanic ethnic identity of the Dominican Republic. On average, some 25,000 Haitians are deported to Haiti every year. In the modern history of relations between the two countries, massive deportations began in 2005. This pattern began with the incidents at Hatillo Palma in May 2005, where a crime has been broadly attributed to Haitians without any form of police investigation.

The lack of due process and punishment against authors of attacks against Haitian-looking individuals sent signals to xenophobic sectors in Dominican society that the Dominican state condones impunity. This created a situation of chain reaction where towns openly attack Haitians after criminal acts against them have remained unpunished in other towns. For instance, our first documentary, Human Rights in Quisqueya, portrayed a mob of angry Dominicans in Mao citing the precedent set in Hatillo Palma as a

source of legitimacy for their actions. As attacks against Haitians remained unpunished in Hatillo Palma, similar attacks were also reported in Dajabòn (August 5-6, 2005); Higüey (September 7, 2005); Baranca (September 8, 2005) and Villa Trina (December 10, 2005). Even after proper investigations cleared Haitians in the case of Hatillo Palma, no reparations were offered to victimized families.

Throughout history, human life has been enriched by diversity. The denial of the contributions of Haitian manpower to Dominican Republic is depriving a significant segment of the Dominican Population of a path to ascension in Dominican society. Dominican interests would be better served by rational labor and migration policies that recognize skills and moves beyond skin color to focus on prosperity on both sides of the island.

The deportations create immense pain for the individuals involved, their families and their communities in the Dominican Republic. Dark-skin Dominicans are ripped apart from their Dominican families and deported to Haiti, a country to which they have no connections. Their black skin simply makes them deportable to Haiti. The negative consequences of deportations should be of deep concern to all of us in America. This pattern should be of great distress to Dominicans who migrated to the United States in search of a better life. Future research should strive to compare the treatment of Haitians in the Dominican Republic and Dominicans in the United States and Spain to identify common patterns in reasons for migration and societal perceptions.

For more information go to <http://www.dominicantoday.com/dr/economy/2009/1/30/30920/Dominican-Labor-chief-admits-need-for-Haitian-workers>

Dr. Steeve Coupeau teaches ethnicity and public policy. His company, NYIHA MEDIA, produces books, films and new media to highlight diversity and human rights in the U.S. and abroad. Dr. Coupeau's publications focus on human rights advocacy by exploring contemporary issues confronting Dominican-Haitians in the Dominican Republic and Afro-Latino representations in the United States.

Notes:

1 Wade, Peter. "Afro-Latin Studies: Reflections on the Field." *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* Vol. 1, No. 1 April 2006, pp. 105-124.

2 Ibid.

3 Torres-Saillant, Sylvio. 2000. "The tribulations of blackness: stages in Dominican racial identity" *Callaloo*, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 1086-1111.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.