

Gagá Pa'l Pueblo: A Critical Afro Dominican Celebration in New York City

by

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Abstract

Gagá Pa'l Pueblo (GPP) is an Afro Dominican group that hosts a recurring summer religious musical event that takes place every Sunday afternoon at Manhattan's Anne Loftus Playground in Washington Heights, a haven for Dominican immigrants in the U.S. The summer event consists of performing gagá music and hosting weekly ceremonies in honor of a Dominican Vodú loa or deity. Through the use of direct observation and interviews of specific members of GPP, this paper explores the reasons for which the participants infuse racial themes that center on praising blackness and African heritage into their musical religious sessions. Ultimately, I argue that Gaga Pa'l Pueblo is a radical celebration of Dominican blackness, evidenced through the primary participants/interviewees' discourse on race, nation, and identity that departs from and ruptures traditional definitions of Dominicaness.

Keywords: anti-Haitianism, Pan Africanism, Dominican Republic, Dominican, Trujillo, nationalism, Gagá,

Gagá Pa'l Pueblo (GPP) is an Afro Dominican group that hosts a recurring summer religious musical event that takes place every Sunday afternoon at Manhattan's Anne Loftus Playground in Washington Heights, a haven for Dominican immigrants in the US. The summer event consists of performing gagá music and hosting weekly ceremonies in honor of a Dominican Vodú loa or deity. Throughout this essay I will differentiate through spelling Dominican Vodú from Haitian Vodoun and from Hollywood Voodoo, where the latter stereotypes and maligns the West African religion aptly called Vodun. Martha Ellen Davis writes, "vodu (or vudu) is the Dominican counterpart of Haitian vodoun (or vodun). It is similar to the Haitian, indeed influenced by it, yet different, with regional differences as well" (75). The last day of the GPP summer event is the largest of performances, attracting more people, lasting longer, and where music and dancing are performed more aggressively than usual.

Gagá Pa'l Pueblo emerged in 2011 priding itself in using gagá to, as they state in their newly launched website, “redefin[e] Dominican identity through music and dance in a time of globalization,” essentially challenging the Dominican national identity constructed by the Dominican Right (Gagá Pa'l Pueblo website). The GPP website displays pictorial images and videos of their events. Through the use of direct observation and interviews of specific members of GPP, this paper explores the reasons for which the participants infuse racial themes that center on praising blackness and African heritage, into their musical religious sessions. Ultimately, I argue that Gaga Pa'l Pueblo is a radical celebration of Dominican blackness, evidenced through the primary participants/interviewees' discourse on race, nation, and identity that departs from and ruptures traditional definitions of Dominicaness. In the summer of 2015 the Dominican government stripped thousands of Dominicans of Haitian ancestry of their citizenship and impeded others from obtaining it. As a result, the Dominican Republic gained bad international press, emphasizing Dominicans' reluctance to embrace their blackness while citing historical events of anti-Haitian wars and one genocide in 1937. These *gagueros* break this narrative, embracing Dominican gaga and Vudú while identifying as Pan African in identity and spiritual and artistic intent.

I first came to know these *gagueros* through social media, meeting them at Hostos College in New York City where they performed gagá. I later spent additional time with them at Philadelphia's 2011 Odunde festival. Odunde, as the festival is often informally called, pays homage to the African Yoruba deity Oshun. For this paper, I interviewed them sporadically throughout 2014-2015.

Isabel Brown defines gagá as “the Dominican version of Haitian Vodou[n], which assimilated the vestiges of the Taino belief system in addition to the mythology imported from Africa” (74). Gagá, emanating from Haitian rara, a religious music to the tune of Haitian Vodoun, consists of musical instruments harking back to ancient African traditions, songs, dances, and religious rituals. It was in the early 20th century, with the US occupation of the entire island that Haitians began entering Dominican territory as exploited sugarcane workers that imported rara. As a result, Haitian cane workers' intermingled with Dominicans in Dominican sugarcane fields, which eventually led to the creation of gagá. Many Dominicans, whether in the Dominican Republic or New York City, celebrate gagá, with its visibility especially salient in the Dominican Republic during Carnival in the month of February.

Celebrating AfroDominican life, gagá is an African derived cultural practice that unfortunately is not accompanied by Dominicans' national identity. Historically, the conservative Dominican elite defined Dominican national identity as white, Catholic, culturally Hispani, in opposition to Haiti. The elites base their ideas on the fear that foreign entities, consisting of the Haitian government, France, and Canada, are plotting to politically merge both the Dominican Republic and Haiti, and thereby “reduce” the former country to the poverty level of the latter. Anti-Haitianism treats Haitians as the Dominican Republic's convenient scapegoat and thrives on defining Haitians as the country's racial *other*.

Ernesto Sagas defines Antihaitianismo as “a legacy of racist Spanish colonial mentality, nineteenth-century racial theories, and twentieth-century cultural neoracism into a web of anti-Haitian attitudes, racial stereotypes, and historical distortions” (ix). Gagá, on the other hand, represents not only the physical union of both Dominicans and Haitians, since they both come together in amicable unison on sugarcane plantations, but also the spiritual fusion. The Dominican Right, in essence, deems any type of cultural fusion between Dominicans and Haitians anti-Dominican and therefore a threat to the country’s social order. Silvio Torres-Saillant writes that gagá was:

born of the vibrant interaction of Haitian and Dominican folk traditions in the vicinity of sugar plantations, constitutes the coming together of two spiritual sources which are themselves differentiated expressions of the transculturation between African and European cultures... Unable to deny that Dominicans do engage in African-descended spirituality, they [conservative elites] have proceeded to ascribe that predilection to an unwelcome foreign influence, a logic that often has justified the persecution of folk religious practices as a threat to morality and Christian values. (20-21)

It is common to find key figures during the GPP musical-religious sessions explicitly praising Africa, their blackness, Haitians, and their African ancestors—an uncommon phenomenon among everyday Dominicans. The participants I specifically selected to interview proclaim a radical definition of Dominicanity in complete opposition to those espoused by the Dominican Right. In one study conducted on Dominican Americans Jose Itzigsohn, Silvia Giorguli, and Obed Vazquez, found that those Dominicans who do self-identify “as black correlates with a critical view of relations between Dominicans and white Americans” (51). We can assume here that it is possible that African American notions of race, racial identity, and racial ideologies that respond to white racism like Pan Africanism and Black Nationalism may play a role in influencing these *gagueros*. It remains important to note that not all participants of GPP proclaim their blackness to the extent that the ones I interviewed do. In fact, the *gagueros* I interviewed have struggled with navigating and/or negotiating how to incorporate their radical brand of blackness into their ceremonies without “turning” off other Dominican participants who may not fully adhere to this brand of Dominican identity. One must keep in mind Silvio Torres-Saillant’s argument, that although Dominicans with their deracialized consciousness may not necessarily self-identify as black, their cultural practices, customs, and mannerisms indeed are.

According to Marimer Berberena, the first and only person to my knowledge to thus far conduct a study on GPP, argues that those that actively engage in GPP as “trabajadores de la cultura (cultural promoters) perform Gagá and other rhythms as a means of reclaiming a cultural heritage forgotten by many” (2) even though it may not be “as ritually-based as the Gagás in the Dominican Republic” (5).

When observing GPP in action Berberena finds that “The community of [GPP] integrates diverse participants that simultaneously secularize and ritualize Gagá” and that “those that ‘believe in’ and practice the Twenty-One Divisions tend to be more Afro-centric while those who are there for aesthetic or political reasons rather than spirituality, tend to think of both Dominicans and Gagá as mixed cultures” (5).

Gagá as a religious practice engages spirits referred to as *loas* that “serve as intermediaries between the living world and the supreme” entity (God) and “receive offerings and food” often “possessing the participants of Gagá” as “a way to communicate with the Gagá community” (Berberena, 9-10). Berberena found that GPP’s brand of Gagá is not as hardcore as those of the Dominican Republic for in New York City “trances or possessions are not experienced in the public activity of Gagá Pa’l Pueblo. Few in GPP have been initiated in Gagás of the Dominican Republic and even those who have been initiated, have not been prepared for trance possession” (Berberena, 68).

Gagá, with a history of vilification by the hands of hardcore conservative elite Christian Dominicans, sustained legal assault and disparagement during the racist Dominican dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo (1930-1961). Trujillo, ironically of Haitian descent, an admirer of Nazi Adolf Hitler, whose regime spanned 31 years, left a legacy that continues to attempt to monopolize the discourse on Dominican national identity. Conservative Dominican intellectuals, known for their negrophobic attitudes deem gagá antiDominican due to its direct linkage to African culture *vis a vis* Haiti. Considering that the Dominican Republic, unlike other countries of the West that obtained their independence from European colonial powers, achieved its independence from Haiti by ending a Haitian political occupation that lasted from 1822 to 1844. This occupation led to the founding of the Dominican nation on the basis of anti-Haitian sentiment. In the 1930s, we witness Trujillo manipulating this history to further his own political agenda promoting the myth that Haitian immigrants posed a social and cultural threat for the Dominican people, and he was their savior. In 1937, the Dominican dictator ordered the genocidal attack against Haitian immigrants residing in the Dominican borderlands roughly killing thousands of victims; essentially a “Dominicanizing” project that resurrected anti-Haitianism, launching the negrophobic philosophy to a new intellectual and social apex. Afterwards, the regime passed laws that fined and punished Dominicans suspected of engaging in “peculiar witchcraft like practices,” gagá included, and historians and institutions were hired to disseminate a bleached version of Dominican history for the masses’ consumption that appropriated whiteness as Dominicaness’ essence while disparaging blackness. Immediately after the massacre, the Trujillo regime grew and strengthened itself with the assistance of Dominican intellectuals who created an anti-Haitian based narrative that sought to establish a new national identity for the country and to further add credibility to his regime. One significant aspect of this narrative is its racial component, which denies African heritage any place within the Dominican nationalist conscience, with Haitians being presented as Dominicans’ racial *other*.

To this day, ripple effects still permeate Dominican society affecting many Dominicans' sense of identity and attitudes towards Haitian immigrants. Yet, in spite of the Trujillo regime aiming to whiten Dominican culture, *gagá* was never fully eradicated, with Dominicans continuing to practice it in hiding.

In the last 30 years, a new conservative Dominican nationalist intelligentsia emerged, largely descendant from the Trujillo regime that continues to strive to propagate the legacy of anti-Haitian sentiment as the appropriate means for "saving" the Dominican nation from the increasing influx of the Haitian immigrants whose presence supposedly disrupts Dominican society. Manuel Nuñez, a black Dominican, currently one of the most vociferous anti-Haitian intellectuals, fallaciously contends that *gagá* is anti-Dominican and foreign because of its Haitian origins and therefore on the verge of eradicating "Dominican" culture. For this reason, we witness Ernesto Sagás and other scholars on many occasions refer to Nuñez as a neo Trujillista.

Dominican Racial Identity

I analyze my interviewees by juxtaposing them to, while simultaneously reading them against, the historical trajectory of Dominican identity. The history of the Dominican Republic is replete with an elite that has inter-generationally aligned Dominicanness (what it means to be Dominican) with Spanish and Native American heritage while omitting and belittling the African. Ginetta Candelario, for instance, contends that for the most part in "Dominican history, the national body has been defined as not-black, even as black ancestry has been grudgingly acknowledged. In the place of blackness, official identity discourses and displays have held that Dominicans are racially Indian and culturally Hispanic" (2). Candelario additionally informs that Dominican self-perception, dating back to the colonial era, has been based on perceiving Haitians as racially and culturally inferior. For even the darkest of Dominicans, in addition to the enslaved, saw themselves as white (read: superior) in comparison to Haitians. José Alcántara Almánzar backs Candelario saying that: "The Dominican has a scale of values in which the white person occupies the highest position, and the black man" the lowest (165). Adding that, presently even the darkest of Dominicans shuns racial alliances with Haitians considering "himself superior to a black Haitian."

Economic differences, however, explain the contrast in the development of the national identity between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. For the latter had a harsh plantation economy with a brutal colonial power in place in comparison to the former that subsisted off of cattle ranching with a neglectful, thus lax, colonial power that somewhat leveled the relationship between master and the enslaved.

Candelario also notes the various results different studies have produced when examining Dominican identity upon migrating to the US. She writes:

There has been an ongoing debate within Dominican Studies about whether and how the racial perceptions and ideologies of Dominicans change on migration. Some argue that the migration process and the experience of a racial system different from the one they were socialized into causes a shift in Dominican perceptions of self and other—and, therefore, of Dominican identity. Others argue that Dominicans’ perceptions do not change, or that they change only in that their ideological commitment to anti-Haitianism and Negrophobia is hardened. Still others argue that even if there is a shift or a reorientation of Dominican identity outside the Dominican Republic, migrants who return to the Republic reassume local identity norms, often with increased vigor. (11)

In contrast, one of the most well-known Dominican historians, Frank Moya Pons, argues that anti-Haitianism is not only as old as the founding of the country persisting to date, but that those Dominicans that migrate to the US begin to see themselves as black ().

Emigration forces Dominicans to encounter other groups of people of the African Diaspora, broadening their horizons and, in effect, diminishing xenophobia and even leading up to establishing ties of solidarities with other groups. I find that Pons’ argument describes the *gagueros* I interviewed that openly proclaim that their identity is centered on their African heritage and is in effect political and in opposition to the Dominican State’s definition of *dominicanidad*.

GPP differs from Benjamin Bailey’s study where he interviewed Dominican American high school students on their identity that instead of using the black/white US racial framework, they self-identified instead on account of “linguistic/cultural/national origins” (156). GPP members express an identity similar to non-Spanish speaking afro-Caribbean groups in that they affirm blackness or Afro-Caribbeaness as their primary identity. Bailey reports that other non-Spanish speaking afro-Caribbean groups differ from Dominican American high school students in that those of lower class actually tend to self-identify as African American or black (161). Bailey adds, that:

Unlike non-Hispanic African-descent immigrants, who generally identify themselves as 'Black' in the second generation, Dominicans in the second generation think of themselves as 'Dominican' or 'Spanish'/'Hispanic'/'Latino.' Spanish language is a key to claiming and enacting these ethnolinguistic identities. In everyday life, Spanish language enables participation in a vibrant, growing ethnolinguistic community, which helps to preserve a common cultural memory and distinct sense of Dominican origins. This encourages the second generation to see their roots as remote from the American history of social relations out of which American Black/White racialization practices have grown and promotes the maintenance of culturally distinctive frames of reference for self-definition. (190)

As previously stated, the Dominican Republic has had a history of conservative anti-Haitian elite that insured that the Dominican people sustained an antagonistic relationship with Haitians and in effect blackness. Silvio Torres-Saillant informs that it was only until the 1960s that a new more progressive discourse at the academic and intellectual realm emerged, but the conservatives continued to enforce anti-blackness onto Dominican national identity (46-47). Torres-Saillant then makes a call, revealing how Dominicans are traditionally taught to see themselves when studying their history, stating that:

Historians can, by simply shifting the limelight of their chronicles of the Dominican past, contribute to the empowerment of their people. African-descended Dominicans [...] need to see their forbears in the slaves who rose against colonial oppression. In these and innumerable other episodes blacks in Santo Domingo forged an estimable saga of heroic commitment to freedom and justice that goes from the dawn of the colonial transaction to its twilight in the nineteenth century. The ability to appropriate, for instance, the glorious inheritance of maroon dissidence, with its intransigent dedication to the pursuit of a social order that precluded the dehumanization of the colonial regime, will arm the Dominican people with their own retaliatory discourse to direct against white supremacist spokespersons. (49-50)

Although the participants interviewed of GPP are not historians, but familiarized with Dominican history, they nonetheless took it upon themselves to shift their focus on the oppressed and not see themselves through the eyes or as extensions of colonial oppressors.

The Interviews

Gagá Pa'l Pueblo's founder, Genaro Ozuna, takes pride in his African last name claiming that in Akan (West African Ghanaian ethnic group) it means elephant. Genaro believes that his job is to ensure that Dominicans who are of "la cultura" can use the GPP summer sessions to network, come together to plan, and work on future and present projects with others of "la cultura." His main concern is preserving gagá and exposing it (by making it available) to Dominicans in Washington Heights. GPP has reached new heights, with the launching of its website, printing of T-shirts, photo exhibition of the events in art galleries, and their performances throughout various higher learning institutions in the state of NY. Since GPP lacks a cultural center, Genaro arranged the use of the space in Anne Loftus park. The people, meaning audience, he says, are the leaders and drivers of the sessions. His ultimate goal is for GPP to spread to other parks throughout New York City.

Genaro claims that, racially, Dominicans are psychologically inclined to whiteness to the extent that they cannot perform gagá without using white saints in the ceremonies. Yet, *Santa Marta la dominadora*, referred to in West Africa as Mami Wata, is always displayed as a black woman with a large afro hairstyle holding two snakes. He says "everyday we display that we are of afro descent. By hosting the Sunday event, we lose fear of showing our religious traditions." The Vudú symbols are always exposed and presented as an emblem on all of their promotional imagery. In other words, publicly engaging in gagá sessions normalizes the ceremonies for Dominicans in the neighborhood, because they then get to see the folk culture and lose fear of its "tabooness," especially when they see many Dominicans openly embracing it by dancing to the rhythms and casting offerings to the *santos* and singing along to afro-Dominican tunes.

Kwesi Ernesto Rodriguez, the musical director of GPP, however, extends the conversation by claiming that it is his purpose via GPP to raise Dominicans' consciousness about their African heritage. In an online interview, Kwesi placing emphasis on the letter "k" instead of the letter "c" as a way to aesthetically demonstrate his African-centered orientation wrote me the following:

"We at gagá pal pueblo hope to reach out to the Dominican community with the purpose of bringing awareness of the Afrikan element in our culture, particularly here in the diaspora where we are at risk of losing most of our cultural values...Gagá pal pueblo started as the brain child of brother Genaro Ozuna, a brother who has been committed to maintaining the cultural elements of Dominican culture for close to 40 years. I was given the privilege by brother Genaro to be the musical director of this very valuable cultural activity...Personally I participate in this activity because as a self-proclaimed pan-Afrikanist, for close to 30 years now, I feel that the Dominican community is in dire need of being reminded that we are generally an afro-Caribbean community, that we have maybe the oldest Afrikan legacy in the western hemisphere along with our inseparable brothers and sisters on the western side of our island, the republic of Ayiti. I feel it is a must to constantly uplift our Afrikan heritage as part of [our] national identity."

So, Ernesto clearly feels that Dominicans must be reminded not only of their blackness, but of the necessity to preserve who they are by learning of and paying respect to the spiritual culture left by our African ancestors in the Dominican Republic. Unlike, the Dominican Right, Kwesi believes in uplifting blackness, reversing the lingering effects of the Trujillo regime. Kwesi proclaims himself a pan Africanist. He contends that Pan Africanism uplifts blackness since it shuns colonialism's effects. For Pan Africanism allows Dominicans to embrace positive values in African culture that enrich Dominican life.

Moreover, Ernesto claims that Dominicans have lost their religious connection to Gagá because the Dominican Right in power "provoked the loss of the *fundamentacion* (secrecy within the religiosity) by repressing practices such as Vodou and Gagá and associating them with the devil" (Berberena, 70). Palos, another spiritual musical form practiced by Dominicans with its own distinct sound and rituals, on the other hand, he argues, is more familiar to the everyday Dominican because it has been "practiced everywhere in the country and should be considered, instead of Merengue, as the real traditional national genre." Gagá continues to be maligned due to its Haitian origins whereas "Palo is associated with Dominicans."

Oftentimes throughout the GPP Sunday sessions Kwesi Ernesto and others would pause to blurt out statements and give short lectures that praise blackness and Africa. When I first saw GPP perform at Hostos College, Kwesi praised Africa towards the end of the performance and claimed that Africa is the Dominican people's true motherland. I remember seeing a woman in the audience yelling "Ay no!" Although she went to celebrate and dance to gagá music, she rejected the philosophy that this type of gagá brings to table.

Kwesi Ernesto's purpose for GPP differs from Genaro's in that Kwesi emphasizes educating Dominicans more so than bringing those of "la cultura" together. Kwesi says:

"Well, basically Gagá Pa'l Pueblo is devoted to showing the various aspects of Dominican culture that derive from Afrikan traditions within our cultural heritage, such as the altars for the ancestors, the Dominican element in our music, the different way[s] we prepare foods and their Afrikan origin, the Afrikan influences in our dances, and even our corporal expressions, speech patterns and words. Also we take part in sharing historical elements such as *el cimaronage* and its [Afrikan] leaders like Lemba and Maria Wolofa. All this is done with the intention of bringing forth consciousness and awareness of the importance of the Afrikan roots of Dominican identity...well they are always celebrated, the fact is people celebrate them without knowing they fought against slavery, such is the case of Ogu who was present in all the anti-colonial struggles and is now venerated as the god of wars and metals (weapons), but thanks to Christian syncretism most people think of him as San Santiago."

Ernesto attributes his inclination to a black identity towards his migratory experience to New York City in the 80s where he not only encountered a brand of HipHop that preached Afrocentric rhymes but also John Henrik Clarke who he credits for having sparked his African-centered consciousness.

Jose Figueroa, on the other hand, a third party, highly involved in assisting in the creation of GPP. Jose grew up in New York City among continental Africans from the Congo and through a culmination of various friendships learned Congolese religious traditions and even initiated into Congo's Kalunga religion. Jose and Kwesi both consider themselves Caribbean more so than Dominican, although they were both born on the island. In fact, they reject the term Dominican due to its colonial origin and instead self identify as Pan Africanists. Pan Africanism, a hardcore anti-colonial movement, spanning since the days of slavery up until present day, calls for people of African descent to see extension of themselves among other people of African descent in spite of national borders and take on an anti-colonial and even anti capitalist stance against the West. As a result, both Kwesi and Jose, report that they see Haitians as no different than Dominicans and see present day Dominican identity as too attached to anti Haitianism. Therefore, they believe that to be truly free of colonialism, which means to be in a state of fully embracing one's blackness, one must shun the identity and term Dominican. Kwesi, goes as far as calling for the political merging of the island in the spirit of Pan Africanism, harking back to Marcus Garvey and Kwame Nkrumahs' aspirations of making the entire continent of Africa one country. In this sense, these gagá practitioners stand in stark opposition to the Dominican Right.

Both, Kwesi and Jose, affirmed that what makes them different from most Dominicans is their anti-Duarte stance. Juan Pablo Duarte is the founding father of the Dominican Republic. Duarte is acknowledged as the intellectual architect of Dominican independence from Haitian political domination under Jean Pierre Boyer. He created the organization La Trinitaria to oust the Haitian occupiers. Kwesi and Jose claim that La Trinitaria movement did nothing more than disrupt, "the first free black island in the western hemisphere." Furthermore, abolition was not initially part of La Trinitaria's agenda. La Trinitaria battled the *Batallon de los morenos* (or African battalion) with leaders such as Santiago Basora until the white Dominican elite finally adopted abolition as part of the national agenda (Torres-Saillant, 16).

The term Dominican goes back to St. Dominic the young, a 13th century Spanish friar. Saint Dominic served as an inspiration for the creation of the Dominican Order that eventually became the face of the Spanish inquisition. The Dominican Order was known for setting people on fire whose conversion to Catholicism was questioned and suspected of still clinging to their Muslim and Jewish faiths. St. Dominic is the saint Christopher Columbus paid respect to when erroneously venturing out to India and instead landing in the Americas. As a result, Kwesi and Jose both believe that the Dominican Republic, in and of itself, needs to be thoroughly reinvented, from the name, to the flag, to the borders that define the country, and everything in between, rupturing its connection to colonial Spain. Oftentimes, on social media, Kwesi and Jose flaunt the Marcus Garvey UNIA flag colors red black and green and with the emblem of the island embedded in the center as its crest.

Jose finds that GPP is not as aggressive about promoting blackness as he would like because Dominicans are easily turned off. Blackness' lack of appeal for many Dominicans brings to mind Torres-Saillant's argument that "Dominican blacks and mulattos seem to accept passively the rigid Eurocentrism of the official cultural discourse" (22). The fact that "too much blackness" scares off some Dominicans may be in part due to the psychological assault Dominicans have had to sustain at the hands of white supremacist dictators like Trujillo and Balaguer. According to Jose, even the term vudu, in many instances, frightens Dominicans more so than the term gagá. Jose says that when Kwesi and he yell out in the middle of a GPP session that they are not Dominican and are instead African Caribbeanites, other Dominicans in attendance react in either "attack or defense mode." Overaggression makes Dominicans clam up, so one must be strategic, he says. Interestingly, Berberena found that some GPP members hesitate in introducing profound Gagá rituals into their events out of fear of "scar[ing] off the Dominican community" while "others...are only interested in the musical layer of GPP" (Berberena, 71). It is common to find at either the beginning or ending of a GPP event, for a spokesperson to preach of Gagá's roots in old African traditions. Although not everyone in attendance agrees, those are still cultural moments of factual transmission, where the performance is presented to the audience as African. Genaro Ozuna via his online site further stresses the African component of GPP via advertisements that clearly describe gagá as "Afro-Dominican" and calls for people to "conocer y hacer nuestra historia" (Berberena, 88). On Genaro's FaceBook page one can find images of the Dominican and Haitian flag standing side by side with both flags blending/merging into each other, a Dominican nationalist's nightmare.

Jose defines GPP as an Afrocentric group whose open embracing of blackness many Dominicans are not open to. Therefore, Jose says, Black Nationalism or Pan Africanism cannot be the essence of GPP, because one has to wear a mask until one is in "the door, [for] Dominicans are really mentally blocked and not open to it. So, one has to engage in subtle practice. The Dominican Republic isn't the US."

Although Kwesi and Jose proclaim themselves as ardent Pan Africanists, rarely do other peoples of the African diaspora venture into GPP turf, for instance Haitians and other Caribbean peoples, with the exception of Puerto Ricans who are probably the second greatest group to numerically attend GPP session. Yet, it must be noted that GPP initially emerged out of Haitian Rara in New York City Central Park and eventually broke off to expand and focus solely on Dominicans in the Heights.

In conclusion, the most radical aspect about these participants of GPP is that their philosophy coupled with their practice is essentially anti-colonial and since the term Dominican is colonial, essentially anti-Dominican, calling for a new name and identity. In essence, GPP's major players not only challenge European colonialism but also attempt to reverse its effects by 1. Promoting a cultural practice that provides the time and space for people of African descent to pray to deities of African descent.

For instance, the black image of Mami Wata, *Santa Marta la dominadora*, is often publicly displayed, venerated, and celebrated and 2. Challenging Trujillismo by doing the exact same thing Trujillo outlawed in the Dominican Republic (meaning outlawing the practice of Vudú) and 3. Promoting an alternative identity centered on blackness even though they struggle with getting Dominicans to tune in.

A fourth party Fermin Aquino, who is more of a supporter than a participant of GPP, claims that what he most finds troubling about GPP is that it fails to attract Dominican youth, who at this moment, he finds, are outsiders. Fermin argues that perhaps if GPP plays gagá to Hip-Hop beats, the folklore would be more appealing to the youth who he finds are the people most liable to revolutionize Dominican identity, by injecting it with new life.

According to Berberena, “Gagá Pal Pueblo (GPP) is an educational project, though small and with limited scope, to make Dominicans aware of Gagá and Palo music. In other words, it is a project of *concientizacion* (awareness) that strives to present Dominican cultural traditions typically understood as sorcery and as devil worship, as culturally valuable traditions whose goal is to promote the wellbeing of communities as a whole” (44). GPP also strives to preach a type of Black Dominican pride uncommon to most Dominican cultural practices. Shunning European colonialism and Trujillismo, GPP embodies an alternative brand of Dominican identity from New York City whose members hope will spread throughout other parts of the Dominican diaspora igniting a new consciousness movement among the Dominican people.

Late summer of 2015 I attended a GPP session. I noticed that mid-way through the session a white North American woman approached a group of *gagueros* that included Genaro. What struck me is that the White woman approached the group with an angry tone and aggressive demeanor to gripe about the noise, thus disturbing the peace. Washington Heights is currently experiencing gentrification on account of a great deal of Whites moving in. Police of this New York City neighborhood also receive many noise complaints. As Genaro continued to play his music, the *gagueros* yelled at the woman to leave the park and shut up with one attendee, that I suspect was a Puerto Rican due to his Spanish accent, told her to “Go back to Europe, because this is Africa right here!” I was shocked to see that no Dominican disagreed and instead chimed in demanding the woman that she leave the park. These same attendees then proceeded to inform me that this one woman, whose presence is a result of the gentrification that is sweeping Northern Manhattan, has taken it upon herself on various occasions to verbally harass GPP. Clearly, GPP refuses to kowtow to the effects of gentrification and is determined to continue to spread throughout New York City boroughs with aims of further normalizing its presence amongst Dominican and other Afro Caribbean cultural spaces.

These gagá sessions although not in exact accordance with gagá and Vodun sessions of Hispaniola manage to attract people from all walks of life. The *gagueros* interviewed unapologetically self-identify as Pan Africanists challenging hegemonic notions of Dominican identity. While infusing African centered themes into their gagá sessions they manage to navigate harsh terrain in not detracting Dominican participants who may find such pro-black manifestations over whelming. Yet, the most radical aspect of GPP is that it continues to defy Dominican anti-Haitian nationalism by presenting and promoting itself as authentically Dominican to a primarily Dominican audience, rupturing the stereotypes that associate Dominicans with anti-blackness.

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