

## Book Review

- *We Dream Together: Dominican Independence, Haiti and the Fight for Caribbean Freedom*, by Anne Eller. Duke University Press, 2017

In few other places could the origins of the nation be the object of more biased history-writing than in the Dominican Republic. Anne Eller's richly researched, intricately built book takes us to the 1844 to 1865 period during which Dominican independence was twice won, first against Haiti and then from Spain. She traces out not only complexities of Haitian-Dominican relations but also maps the skein of international intrigue, racialized inequality and intercultural exchange that shaped Dominican independence. Eller will be commended by some and questioned by others in having skirted directly considering myths of Dominican racial exceptionalism, which hold Dominicans to be the Americas' most racially mixed society and also paradoxically its most anti-Black and Hispanophilic. That myth commonly gets historically justified by the Dominican Republic having won its independence from its Haitian neighbour rather than from a European colonizer. The truth, according to Eller, may be more ambiguous and troubling than either nationalist or revisionist historians would admit. With meticulous attention to fact, she resituates the decisive moment in the nation's identity formation to the period between the two independence struggles. In recounting the nation's origins and accounting for its identity, more attention deserves to go to the country's "second independence," the War of Restoration that drove Spanish recolonization from the island in 1865. Contrary to the narrative, widely-accepted on both the nationalist right and progressive left, that the two nations were cast in aggressive confrontation by the simple fact of Dominican independence having been won from Haiti, Dominican autonomy was neither fully grown nor certain in its shape in 1844. The counter-narrative, developed in the first half of *We Dream Together*, is that the years between 1844 and 1861 sped by in a flurry of political intrigue revolving around General Pedro Santana's efforts to establish authoritarian rule and popular efforts to resist this. The nation was barely formed before Santana gave away its sovereignty to Spain, less out of a fear of Haitian invasion than of yielding power to his Dominican political adversaries.

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While it is treated as more than a footnote in conventional accounts of Dominican history, it is none the less embarrassing to Dominican nationalists that a Dominican President, Pedro Santana, would conspire with Spanish officials to restore Santo Domingo to the Spanish colonial orbit in 1861. Eller recounts in rich detail the truly bizarre convergence of circumstances that led an embattled Santana and an opportunistic Spanish governor of Cuba, Captain General Francisco Serrano, to spring recolonization on an unsuspecting government in Madrid. Even as rumors of Dominican cession of independence to Spain had swirled around the Antilles for months, neither the Dominican people nor Madrid were consulted before the fact. Spain ironically seemed to be the European colonial power least disposed to see Dominican independence as an opportunity to grab a piece of the now once more divided island of Hispaniola. American, French and British agents, by contrast, aggressively evangelized for colonization and foreign investment.

Perhaps less convenient still for Dominican nationalists is how many divisions of region, race, and class among Dominicans the War of Restoration put on display. Racial optimists in Madrid viewed Dominican annexation as an opportunity to try out a new, free-soil, racially-democratic version of Spanish Caribbean rule, and Spanish officials warned their troops to treat all Dominican officials with respect, regardless of their heritage. Yet through “blundering, insensitive, and racist actions,” Spanish authorities practiced in the more racially-segregated ways of governing in Cuba, “betrayed their experiences in the neighbouring colonies and their fundamental unease with emancipated subjects” (p. 94). Mixed race Dominicans in towns and rural areas of the interior arose in rebellion right after annexation and took to arms increasingly often in the years that followed. As an author in Santo Domingo’s *Boletín Oficial* observed in January 1864, “In the current revolution, it was the masses who rose up, dragging with them everyone else” (p. 188). Santana and others blamed resistance on Haiti, even as Fabre Geffrard’s liberal government in Haiti delicately toed a line of neutrality. Yet even urban elites who initially welcomed the opportunity to cooperate with the Spanish were at times met with scorn, their experiences of personal rejection turning them toward anti-colonialist sentiments. More than anything else, rumors that slavery might be reinstated not only drew popular support to the fight against Spain but made the struggle look like a race war to people on either side. While rumor and racial/class politics dominated the information battle, *guerrilla* tactics confronted the Spanish with an adversary of shadows and smoke. The cost to the Spanish in lives and state revenues rose in 1863 and 1864 and threatened to escalate further. Faced with a growing spiral of conflict, an exhausted Spanish colonial administration chose to give up the fight in 1865 rather than risk losing the war outright to the Dominicans.

Eller deploys sources drawn from archives in Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States, and she excels in examining the surrounding regional ripple effects and overlapping waves of

communication, exile, rumor, and diplomacy. References to the regional context almost always feel unforced and enriching to the advanced Caribbeanist, but the complexity of the resulting mix may put off the novice. Also, evidence dominates interpretation in this book to a degree that will please traditionalist historians while leaving questions about the author's political commitments unanswered. Eller's refusal to simplify or sloganize may make the book less than welcoming to the neophyte and to critical race theorists but will add to its importance for anyone to whom the Dominican Republic's history really matters. Grappling with an already complex panorama, Eller amplifies the story's significance even further by revealing its regional-scale repercussions. With a stereoscopic vision that encompasses both minute local details and the regional context, *We Dream Together* succeeds in raising the stature of the Dominican War of Restoration within the larger context of Caribbean post-emancipation struggles against racism and colonialism.

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