

Book Review

– *Spirals of the Caribbean. Representing violence and connection in Haiti and the Dominican Republic*, by Sophie Maríñez. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024

In the 1960s, a group of Haitian intellectuals developed an aesthetic that they called ‘spiralism’, representing ‘the perpetual motion of life and realities that reproduce elements of the past in broader, deeper and more complex iterations’. In her *Spirals of the Caribbean*, Sophie Maríñez returns to these ideas to realize the complex relations between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Her wide use of French-language sources allows her to deepen recent trends towards an island-wide perspective. For her spiralist perspective, Maríñez focuses on three crucial historical periods: the ‘genocide’ of the Indigenous population in the sixteenth century, the Haitian Revolution and the 1937 ‘genocide’ of the border population of Haitian descent by the Trujillo regime. The book is not so much about these three events, but more about their use and conceptualisation in twentieth-century intellectual analysis. In this context, we could say that there is a fourth event that informs Maríñez’s book: In September 2013 the Constitutional Court of the Dominican Republic issued the court ruling 168-13, often simply called La Sentencia, which effectively ended the birthright, *ius soli*, for the population of Haitian descent and left thousands of people ‘stateless’. Maríñez presents this episode as proof of the ever-returning spiral of anti-Haitian imagery in the country.

The book is built around four chapters. The first chapter focuses on the origins and meanings of the *comegente* in Dominican folklore, a mythical figure that is believed to attack and devour innocent people. The story emerged in the late eighteenth century but acquired traction in the late nineteenth century as it became increasingly racialized and associated with Haitian immigration.

The second chapter presents the massacre of around 12.000 people of Haitian descent in the border region between the two countries in 1937. This macabre episode has been the topic of a flurry of recent literature, which stands in stark contrast to its disregard for Dominican politics. By analysing Haitian novels, Maríñez adds a more fully Haitian perspective to the debates around this episode. She shows that Haitian imagery reverses the cannibal trope of the *comegente* to the Dominican and Haitian authorities who allowed for this genocidal massacre.

In the third chapter, Maríñez introduces the idea of a newly emerging popular culture based on indigenous and African elements. Criticizing Dominican tendencies to contrast the supposedly Indigenous roots of its population with the African heritage in Haiti, she suggests that historical bonding between early African and Indigenous populations created an Afro-Indigenous culture that opposed racist colonialism and nationalism on the island. This critical tendency formed the basis of Dominican critical thinking that eventually led to the protests against the grandiose celebrations of the V Centenario in 1992.

The last chapter expands the analysis of this Afro-Indigenous perspective to its manifestations in contemporary Dominican culture, more specifically in the music and songs of Dominican musician Luis ‘Terror’ Díaz. Maríñez analyses the musician’s reference to the history of popular spiritual leader Olivorio Mateo (‘Liborio’) in the Southern border region. Her analysis is certainly interesting, but also elucidates the potential weakness of the spiral concept. It easily becomes a somewhat mechanical, perfunctory idea. When Maríñez for example stresses “the generative, multi-layered, spiralling potential of the symbolism attached to Liborio”, the concept becomes a kind of catch-all to indicate that history is constantly re-constructed and re-interpreted in the present.

This criticism could be extended to the book in general. The concept of spiraling is an enticing and inspiring idea which helps Maríñez to breach the gap between the past and the present, or, in other words, between history and memory. At the same time, it is not always easy to fit complex historical events into a relatively simple concept. In her closing argument of Chapter 1 Maríñez, concludes that the Sentencia 168-13 in her view amounted to the ‘civil death’ of many Dominicans of Haitian descent. It is difficult to argue with this conclusion, but then she concludes: “With this ruling, the Comegente now unfolds into a state-wide operation...”. Such mechanistic connections do, in my view, no justice to the complexity of the historical processes she has been describing.

These critical remarks should not obscure the merits of the book. The island-wide approach, although still not fully balanced, with ample attention to Haitian literature, is a necessary and refreshing element of the book. Many historical vignettes and descriptions are fascinating. The legal history of the border in chapter 2 presents an insightful overview of the complex history of the border region. Another pearl is the short exposé about Trujillo’s weird obsession with the so-called Citadel just on the other side of the border, as described by Haitian writer Philoctéte. Apart from demonstrating Trujillo’s pathological delusions, it also allows an interesting insight into Haitian perceptions of Dominican policies in the border region. There is no doubt, therefore, that this book will play an important role amidst the flurry of recent books on the complex cultural and political relations between Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

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