"A Revolution of Love": Ramón Emeterio Betances, Anténor Firmin, and Affective Communities in the Caribbean

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the revolutionary politics of Puerto Rican intellectual and physician Ramón Emeterio Betances (1827–98) through an inter-Caribbean lens that goes beyond teleological and insular narratives of national liberation and identity. An under-examined figure in Caribbean intellectual history, Betances stood out among his fellow Cuban and Puerto Ricans revolutionaries for his singular experiences of dislocation: he lived most of his life in France, he included Haiti within his vision of a Caribbean federation, and he was of African descent. The article focuses on Betances’s resignification of the Haitian Revolution within the transatlantic context of the Ten Years War in Cuba, looking at two key pamphlets: his translation of US radical abolitionist Wendell Phillips’s encomiastic biography of Toussaint Louverture, “Touissant L’ouverture” (1869), and “A Cuba libre,” an account of the life of Haitian revolutionary general and president Aléxandre Pétion (1871). Though Betances aligns himself with Phillips’s prophetic brand of abolitionism, his distinct romantic discourse concerning the Haitian Revolution and Pétion is ultimately linked to his affinity for French republicanism. I also explore Betances’s friendship with the Haitian intellectual and politician Anténor Firmin (1850–1911) and the latter’s musings about Betances, Haiti, and the Caribbean in Letters from Saint Thomas (1910), showing how the uses of community in Betances and Firmin signify an incipient “Latin” form of identification.
In 1880, two intellectual luminaries of the Caribbean—the Haitian Anténor Firmin (1850–1911) and the Puerto Rican Ramón Emeterio Betances (1827–99)—crossed paths in Paris, becoming political allies and friends. Twelve years after Betances’s death, Firmin reminisced about his relationship with Betances in Lettres de Saint Thomas (Letters from Saint Thomas, 1910) as he reflected on the possibility of creating a Caribbean federation of states. Although he mentions other prominent Latin American diplomats and writers, including the Cuban revolutionary José Martí, Firmin places the figure of Betances squarely at the center of his observations on Caribbean political unity in the book’s third “letter,” titled “Haiti and the Antillean Confederation.”

Here, he explains that he first encountered Betances in a meeting of the Society of Latin American Unity, which served as a social and political network for exiles from Latin America. Betances was an active participant in the Society, where members discussed issues ranging from the political sovereignty of Latin American nations and the revolutionary struggle in Cuba to the mounting threat of US imperialism in the region. For Firmin, Betances was “the main apostle of the Antillean gospel,” an irreproachable patriot who fully embraced the ideals of political sovereignty in the Caribbean region.

When Firmin met him for the first time, Betances was a well-known figure among the French republican elite. After studying medicine in Paris during the short-lived Second Republic, Betances earned his stripes as a Caribbean revolutionary activist: one of the main organizers behind the Grito de Lares (the failed Puerto Rican revolt of 1868), he also assisted in acquiring arms and money for the Cuban Ten Years War (1868–78) and for the rebellion that led to the ousting of Buenaventura Báez’s authoritarian government in the Dominican Republic in 1873. Finally settling in Paris in 1875 after his whirlwind itinerary through the Caribbean and the US, Betances participated in abolitionist meetings frequented by the likes of Victor Hugo and wrote articles for liberal newspapers such as Le XIX Siècle and La Revue Diplomatique. Meanwhile, Firmin was a budding politician who would become one of the principal leaders of the Liberal Party in Haiti and unsuccessfully aspire to the presidency in 1902.

In Letters from Saint Thomas, Firmin introduces Betances as a charismatic leader who possessed deep “conviction” and “sincerity”: “A magical and irresistible energy seemed to emanate from every part of his being, which attracted even those temperaments that were most resistant to magnetic forces” (112). Firmin shares with the reader his surprise at Betances’s effusive encouragement upon meeting him; this support would grow into admiration after Betances read De l’égalité des races humaines (The Equality of Human Races), Firmin’s 1885 book-length anthropological treatise against the racist discourse that dominated the social sciences at the time. But the celebratory tone of the text shifts as Firmin goes on to describe his friend’s last days:
The martyrdom of thought is normally silent. It possesses a concentrated bitterness that the soul endures when strong and courageous. Nevertheless, its corrosive power eats away and undermines the soul, as the beak of Jupiter’s eagle ripped apart Prometheus’ liver. Betances did not speak anymore, but he suffered horribly in misery. Just as well, his moral agony did not last long. The main apostle of the Antillean gospel passed away under the grip of a profound anguish. (118)

According to Firmin, Betances fell into this deep state of agony upon learning that, as a result of its defeat in the Cuban–Spanish–American War of 1898, Spain had ceded Puerto Rico and its other colonies (except its North African possessions) to the United States. Betances’s worst fears were thus realized: for decades, he had written about his distrust of the US government’s apparent sympathy towards the separatist movement, noting that it sought to expand into the Caribbean and consequently violate the region’s sovereignty. Only a couple of months after the distressing news, Betances died with Firmin and other close friends at his bedside.

For Firmin, Betances’s death was rooted in the Puerto Rican’s melancholic reaction to the apparent failure of his revolutionary project. But Firmin’s heartfelt eulogy invokes the deceased militant’s spirit to shine light on the possibility of a Caribbean federation. Even as he represents Betances as a Prometheus-like martyr whose death is intertwined with his revolutionary convictions, Firmin calls attention to their fraternal connection—which he calls “an affinity of views and aspirations that produced a powerful and consistent bond” (118). Letters from Saint Thomas constructs Betances as a symbol of creative inspiration that simultaneously mirrors Firmin’s description of his own experience of exile. For Firmin, exile produces a state of “patriotic nostalgia” as the subject gazes at the dislocations of the past. But at the same time, exile regenerates such dislocations as lessons for the future. In Firmin’s vision, the figures of both exile and Betances become catalysts for the “burning desire to change an order of things [one] sees as wrong” (i).

I invoke Firmin’s musings on Betances here to call attention, like Firmin, to the significance of Betances within Caribbean intellectual history, particularly anticolonial thought. For the most part, scholarly research has focused on Betances’s political role in the Grito de Lares and the Cuban revolutionary struggle, instead of his extensive engagement and writings on Haiti and France. Recent interventions from scholars such as Félix Ojeda Reyes, José F. Buscaglia Salgado, Jossianna Arroyo, and Irmary Reyes-Santos have paved the way for reexamining Betances through an inter-Caribbean lens that goes beyond teleological and insular narratives of national liberation, as well as the region’s racial and linguistic divisions.
As he moved between territories, languages, and cultures in order to bring his project into fruition—the fulfillment of political sovereignty and a federation of states in the Caribbean—Betances articulated the idea of a revolutionary community, what he called, in reference to the Cuban Independence War, a "revolution of love" ("Discurso del Dr. Betances" 163). In negotiating these multiple material and symbolic dislocations, which included his mixed-race background, Betances produced a dialogue uncommon at the time for a member of the Puerto Rican creole elite. This dialogue encompassed the Haitian Revolution, which Betances celebrated in various political pamphlets published during the early years of the Cuban Ten Years War. In this regard, Betances stands apart from other icons of the Cuban and Puerto Rican separatist movement, including the white creoles José Martí and Eugenio María de Hostos, who did not see Haiti as an ideal revolutionary model and excluded it in their own plans for a Hispanic Caribbean federation.

Writing Secrecy in Caribbean Freemasonry, Arroyo situates Betances within a continuum of Freemasonry cultures traversing the Antilles and the US, thus stressing the importance of another form of dislocation in his work: translation. According to Arroyo, "Betances relied in his writings upon the politics of translation as a strategic technology for ethnic crossovers and Pan-Caribbean affiliation" (75). Building on Arroyo’s important contribution, I argue here that Betances’s translations, "crossovers," and "affiliations" represented a negotiation with his own dislocated self, navigating between his affinity for Haiti and his life-long attachment to Paris and its republican tradition. In gazing back at how Betances positioned himself strategically and affectively across these sites, I do not seek to create a story of “patriotic nostalgia,” to use Firmin’s words, nor to produce a heroic narrative of “Pan-Caribbean” fraternity out of Betances’s relationship with Haiti. Rather, I seek to grasp the conflicted processes of identification that he navigated, much like other late-nineteenth-century Puerto Rican intellectuals, yet also in ways unique to him as an advocate of Caribbean unity.

The first section of this essay focuses on Betances’s resignification of the Haitian Revolution in the transatlantic context of the Ten Years War, looking at two key pamphlets: his translation of US radical abolitionist Wendell Phillips’s encomiastic biography of Toussaint Louverture, simply titled “Touissant L’ouverture” (1869), and “A Cuba libre,” Betances’s account of the life of Haitian revolutionary general and president Aléxandre Pétion (1871). To use Betances’s words, history is represented in these texts as a “drama of Haitian liberation” ("A Cuba libre" 49)—a romantic struggle led by heroes whose exemplary virtues should be learned and actualized in the present. I particularly consider how, even as he aligns himself with Phillips’s prophetic brand of abolitionism, Betances’s translation inscribes an otherness in the original, producing its own distinct discourse on the role of heroism and popular agency in the Haitian Revolution. Betances’s critique of Phillips is clear in "A Cuba libre,”
where, instead of Louverture,\textsuperscript{10} he romanticizes Aléxandre Pétion as the true founding father of Haiti. As Arroyo points out, Betances’s identification with the Haitian Revolution and Pétion, who belonged to the \textit{mulâtre} (mulatto) elite, could be linked to the Puerto Rican revolutionary’s own mixed race and Dominican genealogy. But, although quite plausible, this connection remains conjectural: Betances never addressed his racial background publicly and always identified in his published texts either as Puerto Rican or Caribbean.\textsuperscript{11} I propose instead that Betances’s idealization of Pétion’s republican virtues can be traced to another type of identification of which we do have textual documentation: his affinity for French republicanism.

In the second part of the article, I further develop these ideas by returning to Firmin’s reflections on Betances and their discourse on community, the Caribbean, and France. As was typical for most male intellectuals of the period, Firmin and Betances’s affiliation was defined along gender lines, as a bond between men who, to borrow Michelle Stephens’s words on twentieth-century black internationalism, would “share a common state of desiring, desiring freedom . . . community—and each other” (14).\textsuperscript{12} Taking into consideration Jacques Derrida’s theorization of friendship, I analyze the uses of community in the discourse of Firmin and Betances, parsing out their filiations with France and the Caribbean while revealing the “others,” the US in particular, against which they position their “common state of desiring.” I show how Firmin and Betances’s sense of a “common state” was rooted in another form of identification: an incipient “Latin” bond. In weaving together these disparate narratives, my ultimate aim is to illuminate the fraught negotiations of Caribbean intellectuals with empire, the (post)colonial homeland, and their own racial and cultural differences—a history of dislocations that continues to reverberate in the present day.

\textbf{TRANSLATING HAITI: OF ROMANTIC HEROES, TEXTUAL SILENCES, AND REVOLUTION}

One of the main ways in which Betances expressed his commitment to the struggle for political sovereignty in the Caribbean was through his signature. Many of the pamphlets and articles he produced in the late 1860s and early 1870s were simply signed “El Antillano” (“The Antillean”). The content of these texts varied, but centered mostly on demands and arguments for the immediate abolition of slavery, armed resistance to Spain, the creation of a Puerto Rican republic, and support for the revolutionary struggle in Cuba. Yet, the act of signature marked these often locally specific elements within a broader framework: the Caribbean. In displacing his proper name and writing as “the Antillean,” Betances performs the voice of the Antillean peoples, positioning his writings as representative of Caribbean interests at large. The adoption of
this identity represents the construction of a regional subjectivity that was quite novel, particularly in a historical moment that had not yet witnessed the emergence of cultural nationalism as a dominant elite ideology. In asserting an identification that encompassed the region’s heterogeneous societies and its history of colonialism and slavery, Betances enacted a modern vision of freedom and community for the Caribbean.

As the declaration “the Antilles for the Antilleans” underscores—it appears in some of his pamphlets of the same period—Betances’s vision of self-sovereignty equated territorial possession with the rise of a new (virile) community, what he calls “new men” in “A Cuba libre” (48). For this vision to be realized, the region would have to undergo a revolutionary process of transformation, following the footsteps of the anticolonial rebellion that exploded in Cuba in 1868: “Before the inert and silent Puerto Ricans, Cuba is proving to the world the truth of this daunting but indispensable principle: man can only cleanse himself from the ignominies of tyranny through blood; only through the efforts of heroism and sacrifice can the Homeland’s Independence be wrenched away from impious hands” (42–43).13 These blunt words, which introduce Betances’s essay on Aléxandre Pétion, showcase how he viewed revolution as a purifying event that blurs the lines between the sacred and the sacrificial. Furthermore, they reveal the significance of the figure of the revolutionary “great man” or hero—exemplified by the figure of “the Antillean”—within his project.

The majority of the speeches and articles where Betances developed these ideas were printed in La Revolución, the official newspaper of the Cuban and Puerto Rican revolutionary committee, which concentrated its US operations in New York.14 Betances traveled there twice, his longest stay dating from April 1869 to February 1870, when he left for Haiti as an official agent of the revolution alongside his Puerto Rican friend and fellow revolutionary José A. Basora, who had served as the committee’s secretary. It was in the pages of La Revolución that Betances published his translation of Wendell Phillips’s lecture on Toussaint Louverture, aligning his revolutionary vision with the emancipatory narrative of the Haitian Revolution. “A Cuba libre” was written in Haiti, but also saw its publication in New York in 1871.15 As these and other texts produced during this period demonstrate, Betances admired Haiti for being the first nation in Latin America to emancipate enslaved people and achieve political independence. As he avers in an article published in the Paris-based Hispanic journal El Americano in 1874, Haiti represents for Betances an “advanced sentinel” for the other Latin American nations and the Caribbean colonies (“Miseria entre riquezas” 16). Betances presents Haiti as the historical forerunner of the freedom struggles to come in the region: the avant-garde of the contemporary revolutionary movement. In “A Cuba libre,” Betances also calls Haitians “our precursors,” tracing a historical filiation be-
tween the creation of the Haitian republic and the formation of future sovereign states in the Caribbean (62).

In looking back at the Haitian Revolution and translating the lives of its military and political leaders for the Hispanic Caribbean revolutionary public, Betances produced an eminently romantic form of historical writing. Both Phillips and Betances approach the subject of Haiti following the Hegelian historical narrative of “great men” popularized by the British writer Thomas Carlyle in the nineteenth century. Carlyle equated the flow of history with the lives of society’s public leaders, defining them as “creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain” (3). Hayden White’s words on Carlyle sum up succinctly this historicist tradition: “The historian’s purpose, in Carlyle’s view, was to transmute the voices of the great men of the past into admonitions of, and inspirations for, the living” (147). Phillips and Betances offer different narratives that correspond to their distinct aims and audiences, but in both narratives the respective protagonists—Louverture and Pétion—perform the role of “creators” of the Haitian nation through their foundational acts. In fact, Phillips quotes Carlyle in order to explain Louverture’s political acumen as governor of Saint Domingue: “the natural king is one who melts all wills into his own” (173). In Phillips’s account, Louverture possessed the virile “genius” to subject the popular will, subsume it through his political decisions, and consequently create the new nation: “Toussaint made her what she is” (173, 184). Betances later echoes these words in “A Cuba libre,” arguing that it was not Louverture but Pétion who “created the Haitian homeland” for its people (65). In Betances and Phillips, the depiction of Louverture and Pétion as exemplary heroes constitutes a narrative of foundational origins that, as the word “sentinel” suggests, is meant to illuminate a still unfolding process of emancipation. In writing the history of Haiti’s “great men,” Phillips and Betances also perform their own role as “sentinels,” preaching their respective gospels—the moral dramas of radical abolitionism and political sovereignty—to guide their peoples to a future of social harmony following the tenets of nineteenth-century liberalism.

Phillips’s lecture on Louverture formed part of a broader public debate in the years that preceded the Civil War in the US. As tensions mounted between the North and the South, activists from different fronts deployed “competing narratives” of the Haitian Revolution to speak for and against the emancipation of slaves (Clavin 11–12). Supporters of slavery as well as moderate abolitionists depicted the revolution as a horrifying event that could potentially repeat itself in their own country, reducing black agency to a figure of violent excess and barbarism to be contained through subjection, a gradual process of emancipation, and/or exile to the African continent. In direct opposition to these arguments, members of the American Anti-Slavery Society, ranging from the African American activists Frederick Douglass and William...
Wells Brown to Phillips’s mentor William Lloyd Garrison, idealized the Haitian Revolution as an event that validated people of color as historical subjects and hence proved their equality with whites. Phillips’s narrative of the Haitian Revolution situates Louverture in a line of “great men” from the Anglo-Saxon tradition, ranking him above not only Oliver Cromwell and the radical abolitionist John Brown but also George Washington (184).

A lecture that Phillips delivered several times to mostly white audiences during the Civil War and that supporters and dissenters alike fiercely debated in US print culture, “Toussaint Louverture” articulates a historical counter-narrative that puts into question racist depictions of both the Haitian Revolution and blackness. These depictions constitute, as Phillips himself suggests, a normative archive produced exclusively by the nation’s dominant “race,” a history “written, mark you, by the white man, the whole picture from the pencil of the white race” (169). By means of a racialized dichotomy between white and black subjects, Phillips turns to the alleged virtues and military heroism of Louverture in order to validate the latter’s role in world history. In his words, Louverture was “entitled, judged by the facts of history, to a place close by the side of the Saxon” (164). The radical character of Phillips’s lecture and his interventions in the US public sphere should not be dismissed: he participated, alongside Douglass and other African American activists, in acts of civil disobedience against slavery and racial segregation. Furthermore, he shifted in the 1850s from a pacifist discourse of disunion—separation from pro-slavery states—to defending, if not actively supporting, violent action in the name of immediate abolition, as his panegyric of Louverture intimates.17

Yet, as Celeste-Marie Bernier states, with the hindsight of history the reader can detect “white racist paternalist biases” in “Toussaint Louverture” (60). Bernier reads Phillips’s comparison between “Saxons” and the “Negro race” as a reaffirmation of the racial hierarchies he pretends to critique. I would argue, however, that even though racial essentialism is evidently at work in the text, Phillips’s observations on the “closeness” between the two races—“a place as near ours as any other blood known in history” (164)—implies a relation of proximity and even commonality that he reaffirms through the comparison of Louverture with George Washington. By placing the former above one of the founding fathers, Phillips questions the very foundations of US patriotism through the inclusion of the racial other as an inspiring “great man.”

At the same time, Phillips’s lecture idealizes Louverture as a compassionate martyr and thus excludes any marks of violent excess or moral impurity from his biography. As Cora Kaplan explains, in such romantic representations of Louverture, “the violence that engenders freedom must be detached from him as a person; he must be seen as free of vengeful passions” (50). In particular, Phillips leaves out the authoritarian side of Louverture’s rule as governor-general of Saint Domingue: his maintenance of the plantation economy, his
forced labor policy, and the political assassination of his nephew Moïse, who disagreed with his uncle’s decision to reintegrate white plantation owners into the economy. Moreover, Phillips chooses not to criticize Louverture’s steadfast allegiance to France and describes his decision not to repel the forces of General Leclerc, who was sent by Napoleon in 1802 to reestablish slavery, as an inevitable outcome.\textsuperscript{18} Phillips’s repeated emphasis on Louverture’s clemency towards whites produces what must have been an attractive version of the revolutionary black man for his public. In contrast to the explicitly vengeful figure of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who goes unmentioned in the text even though he led the Haitian army to independence and was the first ruler of Haiti, this representation of Louverture could appeal to the abolitionist white public and be incorporated into its discourse of interracial solidarity.\textsuperscript{19}

For Phillips, the mission of US “great men” was to regenerate the values of liberty and equality promised by the Declaration of Independence: “all men are created equal.” For him such equality and freedom would be created by world-historical actors such as Washington, Louverture, and perhaps Phillips himself, leaving out the masses as passive, silent receptors of the heroic will of “great men.” In allusion to Louverture, Phillips states: “out of this mixed, and, as you say, despicable, mass, he forged a thunderbolt . . .” (172). Here Louverture achieves the unity of the heterogeneous, abject mass and turns it into a sublime event: emancipation. Phillips erases the role of popular agency from the Saint Domingue uprisings, imagining the Haitian Revolution as a romantic drama between individual geniuses, with Napoleon as Louverture’s foil. This conflict of heroic giants produced a moral “Truth,” a “Muse of history” that would continue to illuminate humankind (184). In balancing radical affirmation of racial equality and assuagement of whites’ fear of black violence, Phillips even falsely suggests that, before Louverture raised arms against the French, “the slave had taken no part in the struggle, except at the bidding of the government; and even then, not for himself, but only to sustain the laws” (169).\textsuperscript{20} By representing Haitian slaves as upholders of law and order, Phillips implicitly depicts US slaves as potentially law-abiding subjects who could be incorporated peacefully into the fold of the US nation—as France could have, Phillips seems to insinuate, if it had conceded full freedoms to Saint Domingue’s slaves and freed peoples of color.

Why would Betances invoke the specters of Saint Domingue in the pages of \textit{La Revolución} through his translation of Phillips’s “Toussaint Louverture”? The Cuban (and Puerto Rican) revolutionary leadership was largely white and moreover harbored, like US white abolitionists, anxieties about slaves. The first declaration of Cuban independence, issued in October 1868, did not include abolition of slavery in its program; not until the Guaimaro constitution in April 1869 was emancipation explicitly guaranteed for all inhabitants.\textsuperscript{21} Within the framework of revolutionary politics, Betances’s translation could
serve as a tactic for dissipating the fears of his fellow comrades through idealizing a black military hero.

Betances was not the only separatist who praised the Haitian Revolution in the pages of *La Revolución*. Between 1869 and 1870, a series of anonymous letters and articles alluded approvingly to the publication of Betances’s translation and touched on Haiti’s important relationship with the Dominican Republic at a time of upheaval in the island of Hispaniola. Both countries were in the midst of deep sociopolitical turmoil. In Haiti, an insurrection against the authoritarian government of Sylvain Salnave would lead to the liberal Nissage Saget’s rise to presidency in March of 1870. Meanwhile, in the Dominican Republic, another liberal rebellion was taking form under the leadership of Gregorio Luperón, a friend of Betances, against the regime of Buenaventura Báez. Leaders of both insurrections collaborated, uniting against a common enemy: the possibility of annexation, which Báez and Salnave were in the process of negotiating with the United States.22

A four-article series published in *La Revolución* from December to January reflects on these ongoing conflicts, advocating creation of a federation of states to secure sovereignty for the Caribbean peoples. The authorship of these articles is not clear. Although some of the letters include the “Antillean” signature commonly attributed to Betances, they are curiously addressed from Puerto Rico at a time when he was, according to the authoritative biographies, living in the United States or Haiti. A possible author could have been his friend José A. Basora, who as secretary of the revolutionary committee also served on the newspaper’s editorial board until he left for Haiti. Another conceivable explanation is that other anonymous activists could have produced these texts. The revolutionary network included a wide array of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, as other letters in *La Revolución* attest. In addition, although the majority of the Cuban leadership never embraced Betances’s ideas on the Haitian Revolution and the Caribbean federation, the publication of such texts in the official organ of the Cuban Revolutionary Committee indicates, at the very least, a strategic interest in Haiti. As Matthew Casey’s research illustrates, the Haitian governments in power between 1871 and 1877 assisted the rebellion in Cuba indirectly, selling them weapons and harboring a growing group of Cuban exiles. Even as articles in *La Revolución* continued to represent slaves negatively—for instance, an 1869 article depicts them as living in such “ignorance and savagery” that they would be unable to conspire against the revolutionaries—a fragile but existing bond of community linked Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic with Haiti.

Betances’s translation of “Toussaint L’ouverture” also signifies an alliance with Phillips’s radical abolitionism—and, indeed, Betances advocated immediate abolition of slavery, without economic reparations to the owners. Phillips persisted in his defense of racial equality through the Civil War and the
Reconstruction era, unlike many of his fellow American Anti-Slavery Society activists. He also supported the anticolonial struggle against Spain and thus could be considered, at least in spirit, as part of the revolutionary community that Betances envisioned. Phillips wrote against annexationist interests in the US and, like Betances, supported creation of a “West India Confederacy” in order “to help a nationality based on equality of races and emancipation” (“Cuba-England”). Although it is unclear whether they crossed paths, Betances probably read Phillips’s writings in the New York press. Furthermore, there is evidence that Basora, Betances’s friend and fellow revolutionary, exchanged letters with the US abolitionist. In this sense, Betances’s translation of “Toussaint L’ouverture” opens a space of community beyond his persistent distrust of the United States. In a letter published in La Revolución in 1869, where he alludes to the difficulties of circulating the text in Puerto Rico, Betances eulogizes Phillips, wondering how such a “great and generous soul” would reply to Spain’s censorship. Yet, Betances’s translation takes a critical distance from Phillips’s rendering of the Haitian Revolution. His version subtly dislocates the social relations delineated in the original, in particular its representation of the enslaved population and their relationship with Louverture. Through several key lexical shifts, the text signals other possible readings of the Haitian Revolution, which become more explicit in Betances’s account of Pétion’s feats.

The importance of such acts of resignification is already apparent in the beginning of the text. The translation of “the race from which he sprung” as “la raza que le engendró” (“the race that gave birth to him”) deemphasizes the individual agency of Louverture, transforming him into the object of race (10). The racial genealogy of Louverture is thus resignified as his “mother”—in other words, as the founding father’s procreator. The most obvious variations in the translation operate according to this pattern, shifting the romantic narrative of Louverture as a Promethean creator of the people to a more nuanced depiction of the slaves’ participation in the Haitian Revolution. Where Phillips writes that Louverture generated the revolution “out of” the masses of Saint Domingue, Betances uses “con” (“with”), which endows a sense of agency to the subjected people. In contrast to the original’s passive representation, the preposition “with” illustrates the masses as an independent subject alongside whom Louverture wages the war for emancipation.

These shifts can be attributed to Betances’s dialogue with the French romantic tradition, especially the republican romanticism of such mid-nineteenth-century intellectuals as Jules Michelet. One of the most prominent historians of France during the 1840s and 50s—the period when Betances finished his studies in Toulouse and Paris—Michelet viewed history not as a process determined by so-called great men, but, in the words of White, as a “process . . . secured, not by belief alone, but society itself” (160). In his classic History of the French Revolution (1847–1853), Michelet romanticizes 1789 as an
event through which “France became conscious of herself,” with the people as its “chief actor” (3, 12). In contrast to Carlyle, Michelet privileges the people over individual genius in his historical narratives. Despite the fact that Betances often perpetuates the history of “great men” in his writings, his translation of “Toussaint L’ouverture” shows glimpses of an alternate historical practice that, in constructing the “people” as the subject of historical transformation, enables the reader to imagine a more egalitarian, if not necessarily democratic politics of history.

Similar tales of “great men” also populate the writings of Betances’s fellow comrades. For example, an article in La Revolución is dedicated to the heroic exploits of Venezuelan independence leader Simón Bolívar, who is described grandiosely as a “patriot of undying patriotism.” Through “A Cuba libre”, Betances inserts himself within this tradition, intervening directly within the transatlantic public of La Revolución while incorporating an alternate foundational figure for the revolutionary movement. The essay explicitly addresses the separatist community, within which Betances includes himself by using the first person plural pronoun throughout the text. At the same time, by identifying Haitians as “our precursors,” Betances inscribes them within the genealogy of Cuban (and Puerto Rican) separatism (62). In constructing this inclusive “we,” the text enacts the inter-Caribbean bond of identification Betances performs through his signature and other texts. In “A Cuba libre,” Betances offers his readers the romantic narrative of a “great man”—he begins by describing him as “the Great Citizen of Haiti, the pure democrat, the unbreakable patriot” (42)—that could inspire a broad revolutionary movement. Thus, through idealizing Pétion as a founding father of the Haitian nation, the text also represents him as a patriarch of the Caribbean “we” Betances identifies with and projects onto the revolutionary imaginary of Cuba and Puerto Rico.

Betances structures his heroic vision of Pétion in direct opposition to Phillips’s biography of Louverture, suggesting that the latter’s silences were rooted in the constraints set by the pre–Civil War era and perhaps the ideological limits of his audiences. Announcing that “Pétion—and not Toussaint—was who made Haiti what it is” (66), Betances argues that his rendering of Pétion follows the norms of “historical reality,” whereas Phillips’s text obeys the immediate demands of his times. Through this contrast, Betances covers himself with the mantle of historical truth, much as Phillips invokes the “muse of History” in his speech. Written with the experiential and historical knowledge Betances accumulated during the first months of his stay in Haiti, which lasted from February 1870 to December 1871, “A Cuba libre” rejects not only Phillips’s text but also Louverture as a revolutionary icon. Through the creation of a dichotomy between Louverture and Pétion, Betances portrays the former as a tragic, tyrannical character—he points for instance to the authoritarian tendencies ignored in Phillips’s biography—while the latter is represented as the
sole savior of the Haitian Revolution: “Pétion witnessed the Revolution, observed her head on, and surrendered to her, understanding that he was the only Haitian leader, the only intellect able to give her the organization that leads to victory” (52). This scene of sublime revelation depicts the moment when Pétion decides to abandon the French republican forces and join Dessalines and Christophe in the struggle for independence in 1802. From the perspective of Betances’s radical anticolonialism, part of Louverture’s tragedy resides in his steadfast allegiance to France. Pétion’s moment of enlightenment liberated him and radicalized him, enabling him to achieve the destiny of the Haitian nation: independence. In other words, Louverture’s tragic flaw was that he did not read what Betances, in another romantic gesture, calls the “signs of the times,” which pointed inevitably towards anticolonial revolution (45).

By replacing one “great man” with another in what Betances calls the “drama of Haitian liberty,” “A Cuba libre” replicates the romantic historicism of “Toussaint L’ouverture” (40). The text goes on to enumerate and praise many of the policies Pétion implemented as president of the republic, most importantly the establishment of a free labor regime and the redistribution of plantation land among the peasantry (64). In addition, Betances sees Pétion as a figure who was able to transcend racial difference in Haiti, fostering unity between “pure blacks” and “people of color” among the elites (64). In her work on Betances, Arroyo perceptively calls attention to the leading role Betances attributes to peoples of African descent in the history of the Americas. In her words, through “A Cuba libre,” Betances “champions African blood and racial mixture as the embodiment of sacrifice and the quest for freedom” (97). Arroyo thus underscores the significance of Pétion’s “racialized body” in Betances’s celebration of the Haitian Revolution, pointing to the mixed racial background of both subjects (97).

But racial identity, black or mixed, does not have a privileged role in the revolutionary vision developed in “A Cuba libre.” In a striking analogy, Betances states, “there were conservative settlers as there are now black conservatives” (43–44; emphasis in original). Betances does not clarify this comparison, which appears in a discussion of Puerto Rican and Cuban supporters of slavery and Spanish colonialism. Nevertheless, through the equation of “conservative settlers” with “black conservatives,” the text suggests a distrust of discourses that ascribe a specific political value to racial identity. At the same time, in “A Cuba libre” the reader does not encounter racialized descriptions of the different historical characters and peoples mentioned: their physiognomy is never described and their social and moral characteristics are not associated with their racial or ethnic identity. Throughout the text, Pétion is portrayed not so much as a “racialized body,” but as a disembodied, sacred figure.

In “A Cuba libre,” Pétion takes shape as a messianic being that enables the union of the “People” with their “Homeland” through “love” (65). In addition,
the representation of Pétion is constructed not only through references to his military and political genius, but also through a series of analogies to exemplary intellectual and political figures, particularly from the French republican tradition, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Jacques-Pierre Brissot, the leader of the Girondins and supporter of abolition (44, 45). In this manner, Pétion is made to embody the virtues of French republicanism: as revolutionary general and then as first president of the Haitian Republic, he personifies the living spirit of the French Revolution in the Caribbean. Like Phillips’s comparison between Louverture and Washington, these analogies serve to validate Pétion within the Western pantheon of “great men.” Even as Betances imagines the Haitian Revolution as a foundational event in the history of the Americas, he traces back its origins—and, as I will argue in the last section, the origins of his own revolutionary vision—to the French Revolution and the fraternal bond between peoples of “Latin” origin.25

BETWEEN FIRMIN AND BETANCES: THE CARIBBEAN FEDERATION AND THE POLITICS OF “LATIN” SENTIMENT

As a self-proclaimed “Antillano” who lived virtually half of his life in France, Betances navigated a transatlantic experience of exile and dislocation that was adverse as well as productive. I have shown how his antiracist and anticolonial politics are delineated through a discourse of community that at times unsettles the boundaries of racial difference and the national or colonial homeland, as the rallying cry “the Antilles for the Antilleans” encapsulates. But Betances’s proposal of a regional federation of states was not exclusively based in an “Antillean” sentiment: it was also a political strategy that recognized US as a threat to Caribbean sovereignty. In returning to Betances by way of Firmin in this last section, I delve further into the relationship between sentiment and politics in Betances’s ideal of a “revolution of love,” examining how their sentimental bond of community intertwines with their mutual affection for French republican values.

In Letters from Saint Thomas, Firmin begins his chapter on the Antillean federation by alluding to the Society for Latin American Unity—the community of exiles where he met Betances—and how it exemplifies the principle of “solidarity between peoples of Latin origin” (108). Firmin calls attention to the Society’s project for constituting a Latin American federation, which he describes as a “dream” built on “political liberty” and “intellectual and moral emancipation for all people whose development is impaired by any exterior force, national despotism, or colonial exploitation.” Firmin writes admiringly about this vision, yet questions its feasibility, observing that even its members were “hardly concerned with it and didn’t support it” (112). The chapter frames the ensuing discussion of Betances and his politics through this trope of the “dream,” which is used in connection to the idea of a Caribbean federation (119).
For a moment, the aura of melancholy that surrounds Firmin’s representa-
tion of Betances overwhelms the dream of sovereignty in the Carib-
bean. Firmin’s skepticism of such an ambitious project is also evident in the text’s
preface, where he foresees its actualization only in a distant future, if ever. It is
worth stressing that, at the moment of writing the Letters, Firmin found him-
self in a state of helplessness similar to Betances’s own distress after learning
of the US occupation of Puerto Rico in 1898. After General Nord Alexis’s
US-assisted coup in 1902, Firmin was unable to return to his homeland and
regenerate, as leader of the Liberal Party, his presidential ambitions. Like Be-
tances, Firmin died in exile as he witnessed Haiti’s descent into political
and economic crisis after Alexis’s fall in 1908. As he wrote what was his last
book, Firmin’s hope—the making of a sovereign and economically stable lib-
eral republic in Haiti—must have seemed ever more distant.

But even as this symbolic and material state of dislocation shaped Firmin’s
position regarding the possibilities for creating a Caribbean federation, he
maintains in the end a fragile yet enduring faith in said project as a potentiality
that its leaders (including him) must at least contemplate if not actualize (v,
130). Firmin wagers on the pursuit of unity among the Antillean peoples,
envisioning the creation of what he calls “a greater homeland, in support of the
genesis of a sentiment of real and powerful sympathy between Antilleans,
above and beyond all distinctions based on race, origin, and nationality” (130).
For the most part, Letters from Saint Thomas is not couched in such affectively
charged language. Firmin positions himself as a detached authority on a wide
variety of historical, sociological, and literary subjects, citing the positivist
philosophy of Auguste Comte and his followers in order to develop his per-
sonal agenda of liberal progress in Haiti and the Caribbean. Firmin’s perfor-
mance of intellectual authority, which is continually marked by his signature
at the end of each letter, can be read as a spectacle of mastery through which
he strives to secure readers’ approval, validate himself as a “Western” intel-
lectual, and obtain support for his political project. Yet, as his call for a “sen-
timent of real and powerful sympathy” underscores, Firmin seeks a rationalist
way out of Haiti’s ongoing instability and puts into practice the emotional
power of Betances’s “dream.” For Firmin, Betances did not represent the last
“apostle” of the Caribbean federation, but the “first” one. Through the sacral-
ization of Betances as a “martyr of ideas,” Firmin projects the spirit of the
Puerto Rican revolutionary into the future as the symbol of a politics of sym-
pathy that would enable the “practical realization” of Caribbean unity (118,
130). Echoing the prophetic rhetoric of Betances, Firmin insinuates the cre-
ation and teaching of a secular gospel preached by analogous illuminated in-
dividuals, or “great men,” for the transformation of the Caribbean present.

In her analysis of Betances, Arroyo alludes to the “affective politics”
through which he articulated his discourse and actions. Reading his works as
performative acts, Arroyo notes: “Betances saw reading and active listening as essential tasks of the community, but understood himself to be the medium for the message” (96). One can further suggest that the practices of “reading” and “active listening” also enacted the transatlantic public Betances appealed to through his works. In the case of Firmin, the structure of *Letters from Saint Thomas* may also be interpreted as a performance of transatlantic community, with the Caribbean at the center: each chapter begins with an introductory essay followed by one or two letters addressed to different correspondents, ranging from Haitian intellectuals such as the members of the Society of Legislation in Port-au-Prince to members of the French elite, including the statesman Paul Deschanel. The letters interrupt the essays’ distanced rhetoric, performing a dialogue with the other. These dialogues, which vary in tone from the diplomatic to the affable, insinuate the community Firmin envisioned, a social space “above and beyond all distinctions based on race, origin, and nationality.”

What’s more, Firmin’s chapter on the Antillean federation incorporates an element not found in the others: a full letter from one of his correspondents, the Dominican intellectual Federico Henríquez y Carvajal. In giving a voice to Henríquez y Carvajal, the text generates an affective dialogue on the subject of Caribbean political unity. Echoing Betances, Carvajal imagines a Caribbean polity built on a “close, unbreakable bond of reciprocal love” (122). Firmin praises Henríquez y Carvajal for proposing such a “magnificent ideal,” but also considers the political obstacles it faces, which range from the ever-growing power of the US and the marginalization of liberals in the Caribbean to the colonial status of most islands in the region (128, 129). Firmin soberly admits these difficulties, yet warmly embraces the “spirit” of Henríquez y Carvajal’s project “with all his heart and soul,” sending him his “sympathetic and devoted regards” (130). Firmin’s exchange with Carvajal mirrors his inter-Caribbean friendship with Betances, reiterating a bond of sympathy among Antillean subjects. This connection represents a form of identification with the other that transcends the individual self, producing a sense of community around a set of shared moral and political ideals. For Caribbean elite subjects like Firmin, Henríquez y Carvajal, and Betances, the rhetoric of sympathy and fraternal love served to shape social networks where affect and politics often became indivisible.

Such visions of community are grounded in a homosocial, male-dominated discourse where dialogues are for the most part held between “great men.” In *The Politics of Friendship*, Jacques Derrida denounces similar instances of fraternal community as what he calls the “schematic of filiation” (viii). Asking what lies at the heart of friendship, Derrida goes on to deconstruct the different politics, from democracy to nationalism, in which “fraternization” takes form, pursuing the logic of “a fraternity beyond fraternity, a fraternity...
without fraternity (literal, strict, genealogical, masculine, etc.)” (236). Following Derrida’s thoughts in the context of Betances and Firmin, it becomes clear that their politics take form not only through a heavily gendered rhetoric based on male fraternity, but also in a cultural filiation that passes through the Haitian Revolution and ultimately is grounded in France. This was perhaps unavoidable in a time when most Latin American intellectuals romanticized Paris as the capital of so-called Western modernity. Both Firmin and Betances saw Paris as a strategic site for spreading their political messages and as a locus of community that brought together Latin American exiles alongside French liberals: for Firmin, France represents an “adoptive homeland” (98); meanwhile Betances describes it as a “saintly site” in an 1896 speech (“Discurso” 163).30

As was typical of Haitian intellectuals at the time, Firmin viewed French high culture as a model through which Haitians could learn the principles of “work, instruction, and liberty” and evolve consequently along the path of “modern civilization” (ix). Firmin considers his homeland to be inextricably linked to the metropolis on the basis of their alleged common linguistic and cultural heritage.31 Although at one point he intriguingly identifies Haitians as “Afro-lats,” in his view Haiti ultimately embodies “a separate but living branch” that extends from the French “tree” (91). Through this organic image, Firmin constructs a hierarchy of value that privileges the so-called “Latin” culture of France: the French nation is the center from which, despite their political separation, former colonial subjects should grow and cultivate themselves as citizens of the world.32

In Letters from Saint Thomas, a dichotomy between the Latin and Anglo-Saxon “races” surfaces in various instances, especially in Firmin’s discussion of the Society of Latin American Unity and its founder, the Colombian diplomat José María Torres Caicedo (1830–1889). French intellectuals like Michel Chevalier first formulated the ideas of Latin America and a Latin race in the mid-nineteenth century, deploying them to validate the imperial expansion of France: Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte and his supporters justified the invasion of Mexico in 1862 as a defense of Latin interests against the rising power of the US. Racial identity in this context was defined as a historical and cultural form of belonging that connected all Romance language speakers, tracing their lineage back to the hegemony of Latin and the Roman Empire. As Walter Mignolo notes in The Idea of Latin America (2006), Torres Caicedo and other Spanish American intellectuals gradually appropriated this form of identification as a way to distance themselves from the colonial past and a Hispanic culture that was increasingly perceived as backward (60). Building on the Bolivarian conception of a united Spanish America in opposition to the US, Torres Caicedo called in his writings for a union between “latinos” and “latino-americanos” that would safeguard, as he states in the 1879 inaugural
address of the Latin American Society, political sovereignty, equality, and individual freedoms for all people in the region, including Haiti (203–4).33

Betances, who succeeded Torres Caicedo as president of the Latin American Society, couched his anticolonial vision in a similar rhetoric. In his political pamphlet “A los puertorriqueños” (1868), Betances admonishes Puerto Ricans to rise up against Spain, avowing his “eternal and inalterable love for the freedom of all,” his “fraternal compassion for subjected peoples of all races and classes,” and the “veneration of republican principles” (23–4).34 As in the case of Torres Caicedo, this discourse is partly rooted in another type of veneration: the secular cult of Simón Bolívar and his republican project of Latin American unification.35 But Betances’s appropriation of republicanism is also connected to his intimate identification with France, where he lived almost half of his life. Betances wrote the majority of his literary and medical texts in French, including his romantic novella of indigenous rebellion, Les deux indiens (1857). By the 1890s he had become the first Latin American to be decorated as a Knight of the Legion of Honor, a prestigious distinction usually reserved for French citizens. Even though Betances always identified as a subject in exile and dreamt of returning to an independent Puerto Rico, his community was located in Paris and ingrained in French culture.

Reflecting on his revolutionary past shortly before his death, Betances avers in an interview that the Revolution of 1848, in which he allegedly participated while studying medicine in Paris, played a significant role in his formation as a political activist (“Recuerdos de un revolucionario” 150). In “Recuerdos” and in a series of speeches and articles he wrote in order to promote the Cuban War of Independence, Betances repeatedly avows his kinship with the French Republic, in particular its capital. For example, in an 1896 speech, Paris is represented as a site of inspiring modernity: “. . . for us, Paris is a sort of Sacred Site, where we come to find literary inspiration, scientific education, industrial progress, commercial relations, and, often, why not admit it, the facile joys of independence” (“Discurso del Dr. Betances” 163). For Betances, Latin Americans were not solely attracted to Paris because of its vaunted cosmopolitan reputation: its allure was further based on “the affinities of character between creoles and French people, affinities that can be found throughout all of Latin America” (161). Exile was not only a condition of suffering but also had its riches, as Betances stipulates in “Exile et Liberté,” an 1882 poem he wrote in French: “Glory to you! I love you / Exile and Liberty.”36

Like Firmin, Betances delineates a “Latin” identification that appears to situate France as a cultural template for a “modern” Latin America. Yet, Betances’s laudatory words point to a broader discussion in which the idea of the “joys of independence” takes on a revolutionary meaning: “The French Revolution of February 1848 is the Cuban Revolution of February 1895, as they descend from the same mother, and if they are not entirely sisters, they are at
the least first cousins” (161). This organic resignification of the Cuban revolutionary struggle traces its origins back to 1789, the “mother” of all modern revolutions. This passage points to the centrality of 1848 and the genealogy of French republicanism for Betances’s radical anticolonialism. Meanwhile, the Haitian Revolution does not play a role in this genealogy of revolutions; it is in fact not mentioned at all in Betances’s speech. In this final displacement, perhaps due to the swelling economic and political crisis in Haiti during the 1890s, Betances comes full circle to his days as a medical student reliving the effervescence of the cries for freedom, liberty, and fraternity that filled the streets of Paris. As he learned soon in both cases, the “joys of independence” were short-lived and another series of political dislocations would soon ensue.

“A los puertorriqueños” alludes mainly to Puerto Rican independence, but it enunciates a politics of emancipation that situates slavery and colonial conditions in Puerto Rico within a broader struggle for liberty. Through this movement from the local to the regional and the cosmopolitan, Betances’s passionate investment in the political future of Puerto Rico translates into a declaration against all subjection across the world and against all “tyrants.” In other words, the discourse of “freedom for all” is expressed explicitly against the other of tyranny, exemplified by the US, which he calls the “American minotaur” (24). It is through this political antagonism that Betances develops his arguments for a Caribbean federation most strongly. In such radical instances, as in Firmin’s “dream” of “intellectual and moral emancipation for all people whose development is impaired by any exterior force, national despotism, or colonial exploitation,” one can envision a perpetual reconfiguring of an open-ended anticolonial archive for and beyond the Caribbean, and also perhaps the “beyond of fraternity” imagined by Derrida, through a “revolution of love.” By looking back at the singularity of figures like Betances and the utopian futures they envisaged—while also taking into account their ideological limits—other lineages can be illuminated, alternative histories that can productively dislocate our perceptions of the past as well as the future.

Notes

1 I would like to thank Magali Armillas-Tiseyra and the peer reviewers for their helpful comments. They challenged me to refine the argument of the article, for which I am very grateful. Jossianna Arroyo’s work on Betances partly inspired this essay; I am indebted to her for her generosity throughout our exchanges. I would also like to express my gratitude to Annabelle Heckler for her valuable help during the final stages of revision.

2 Firmin met with Martí in Cap Haitien in 1893. As head of the Cuban Revolutionary Party, Martí was seeking financial and military support for the independence movement against Spain, with which Firmin sympathized (Plummer 1988).
Betances also served as a French diplomat to the Dominican Republic from 1883 to 1884 and represented the Cuban Revolutionary Party in France as the Cuban War of Independence (1895–98) took form. Unless noted, all historical details about Betances in this article are extracted from Suárez Díaz’s *El antillano* (*The Antillean*, 1988) and Ojeda Reyes’ *El desterrado de París* (*An Exile in Paris*, 2001). Both are excellent political biographies, but an intellectual biography that draws a critical map of the heterogeneous cultural production of Betances—his literature, medical writings, personal letters, and political pamphlets—still waits to be written.

Besides unveiling the false arguments behind biologistic defenses of racial hierarchies, particularly Arthur de Gobineau’s influential *The Inequality of Human Races* (1855), Firmin also approached cultural difference through an open-ended framework. For instance, he did not minimize or propose to eliminate Vodou culture in Haiti, as many of his fellow intellectuals did. Sadly, Firmin’s contribution to cultural and historical anthropology has been largely ignored in academic circles and was only recently translated into English in 2000. Fluehr-Lobban has discussed the relevance of Firmin for the history of anthropology, while Michael J. Dash has interpreted Firmin through the theories of Édouard Glissant, reading *Letters from Saint Thomas* as a work that enacts “a nonpolarized, postcolonial self-consciousness” (“Nineteenth Century Haiti” 46). Meanwhile, Gérarde Magloire-Danton has focused on Firmin’s anthropological thought through the framework of intellectual history. Jean-Price Mars’s *Joseph-Anténor Firmin* (1964) still remains the best biographical account of Firmin, especially for its detailed exploration of his role in the political history of Haiti.

The original reads: “Le martyre de la pensée est d’ordinaire muet. Il a une amertume concentrée que l’âme subit avec impassibilité, lorsqu’elle est vaillante et forte, mais dont la vertue corrosive la ronge et la mine, tel le bec de l’aigle jupitérien déchiquetant le foie e Prométhée. Il ne parla pas, non plus; mais il souffrait horriblement, lamentablement. Aussi bien, son agonie morale ne dura pas longtemps. Le premier apôtre de l’évangile antillien séteignit silencieusement dans l´etreinte d’une suprême angoisse.”

For instance, two years into the Cuban Ten Years War, he wrote a letter to fellow Puerto Rican separatist José A. Basora, where he alluded to “how the famous Yankee sympathies, like the boa constrictor’s relationship with the deer, have not only strangled us here, but have also blinded the sympathies that could grow toward us from other peoples” (100).

The quote is from an 1896 speech Betances delivered in Paris in order to seek support for the Cuban revolutionary army.

Both Arroyo and Reyes-Santos point to this key difference between Betances and the likes of Martí and Hostos. Martí and Hostos’s exclusion of Haiti from their political vision was probably due to the creole elite’s fears surrounding the possible emergence of a “black” state in the colonies and perhaps to their own racial anxieties as white creoles. Another possibility that scholars have not explored is Haiti’s increasing political and economic instability as the century waned. Two historical figures that voiced ideas similar to those of Betances were the Dominican Gregorio Luperón and the Cuban Antonio Maceo. As Reyes-Santos documents, Luperón, the most prominent military leader in the War of Restoration against Spain (1863–1865) and the subsequent liberal revolution against Báez, supported the inclusion of Haiti in a Caribbean federation of states. Maceo, a renowned general who led part of the Cuban revolutionary army in the Ten Years War and the War of Independence, favored the same idea (Zacair). Both Luperón and Maceo were, like Betances, of African descent.

Pétion ruled as first president of the Haitian Republic from 1807 until his death in 1818. He fought for the French army before joining forces with fellow generals Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henri Christophe in the rebellion that led to the independence of Haiti in 1804. After Dessalines’s brief rule as emperor ended with his assassination, Haiti became divided into two sovereign regions: the monarchy of Christophe in the north and the republic under Pétion in the south. Popularly known in Haiti as “Papa bon cœur” (good-hearted father), Pétion’s most famous accomplishment was the redistribution of the plantation lands into smaller plots, mostly among the military. Ever since they rose to power, much discussion has surrounded the historical legacies of Pétion and Christophe. In the case of Pétion, sympathizers tend to celebrate his republican virtues and pragmatic approach to
politics, while detractors highlight his autocratic tendencies (for instance, he established himself as president for life through the constitution of 1816) and his alleged preferential treatment of the mulâtre elite (Pétion formed part of the free people of color class before the Haitian Revolution). Unless otherwise noted, here and in other historical references to Pétion I follow Nicholls and Dubois (Haiti).

10 I utilize the spelling of Louverture's original signature when I refer to the actual historical figure, following contemporary historians such as Dubois.

11 To my knowledge, the only document where Betances mentions his racial identity is in a letter to his sister Demetria where he embraces his family's mixed racial background and identifies his family as "gente prieta" and "prietuzcos," which literally signify "of dark color." This form of identification was rare in Puerto Rico, a highly racialized society where any marker of racial intermixture was hidden, if not erased, for the sake of social status. The letter offers a short yet illuminating glimpse into the question of race in the colony: it alludes to how Betances's father had to contest in court the accusation that they were not white, which was presented in order to disparage the marriage of one of his sisters with a Spaniard. Thus, like other well-to-do racially mixed families did in Cuba and Puerto Rico, Betances's family felt obliged to pass as "white" and hence forge their purity of blood.

12 Reyes-Santos alludes to Stephens's work, but only to suggest that Betances was a predecessor of the black internationalist figures Stephens explores, such as Marcus Garvey and C.L.R. James. Arroyo does allude to the important role of masculinity in the Caribbean imaginary of Betances in connection to his essay on Alexandre Pétion (99).

13 The original reads: “Cuba ante los puertorriqueños inmóviles y silenciosos están probando al mundo la verdad de este formidable pero imprescindible principio: sólo con la sangre se lava el hombre de las ignominias de la tiranía: sólo por los esfuerzos del heroísmo y del sacrificio, puede arrancarse de manos impías la Independencia de la Patria.”

14 The formal title of the committee was Junta Central Republicana de Cuba y Puerto Rico (Central Republican Committee of Cuba and Puerto Rico). It is impossible to establish who actually read La Revolución, which began in 1869 and ended in 1875. But the letters section—which included correspondence from Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Madrid—reveals that the newspaper reached a transatlantic public. As Gerald E. Poyo observes in his landmark study of Cuban exiles in the nineteenth-century US, the title and editorial committee of the tri-weekly revolutionary publication were altered according to shifts in the political leadership. At first it was called La Revolución. Cuba y Puerto Rico, then only La Revolución, and finally La Revolución de Cuba in 1874, which reflected the diminution of power held by Puerto Ricans in the revolutionary elite. José A. Basora never returned to New York after leaving for Haiti with Betances. Betances did remain an agent of the revolution, but also never returned to New York.

15 Jossianna Arroyo observes that the essay was originally read aloud in Port-au-Prince. (96). However, I have not found any primary or secondary evidence suggesting that Betances wrote it with the Haitian public in mind. In fact, the pamphlet is explicitly dedicated to Cubans, whom he addresses at the beginning of the text (62).

16 In some cases, the possibility of an analogous insurrection in the United States was constructed as an unavoidable yet positive occurrence. For instance, in a popular lecture, “St. Domingo: Its Revolutions and its Patriots” (1854), Brown invokes the spirit of the Haitian Revolution as a source of inspiration for rebellion in the US: “The spirit that caused the blacks to take up arms, and to shed their blood in the American revolutionary war, is still amongst the slaves of the south; and, if we are not mistaken, the day is not far distant when the revolution of St. Domingo will be reenacted in South Carolina and Louisiana” (32). As Brown eulogizes the generals of the Haitian Revolution, he delineates a transnational narrative of black insurgency. In contrast to Phillips, who depicts Louverture as Haiti's sole founding father, Brown includes positive portrayals of Henri Christophe and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, representing them as exemplary military heroes in a struggle for freedom that connects with his present. As Ben Fagan puts it, "he casts 'Toussaint as only one among many black revolutionaries operating in the United States as well as Haiti—some as yet undiscovered"
At the same time, Wells Brown situates this genealogy of rebellion within the filial politics of US nationalism and identifies it with the ideology of liberty for which blacks sacrificed themselves when “they shed their blood in the American revolutionary war.” Agitating in a time rife with social crisis, radical abolitionists placed their calls for emancipation alongside the ideals of the US Revolution and, in the process, rendered black masculinity through “the classical mold of a republican civil soldier” (Clavin 22).

For all details regarding Phillips, I have used James Brewer Stewart’s account.

Agreeing to meet with Leclerc, Louverture was captured and subsequently imprisoned in France, where he died shortly after. For all historical details regarding Louverture and the Haitian Revolution, I have followed Dubois (Avengers of the New World).

Dessalines ruled from 1804 to 1806 as emperor of Haiti. He defended the massacre of whites in Haiti as an act of anticolonial resistance against the history of oppression in the Americas: “I have avenged America” (qtd. in Jenson 338).

As documented by Dubois, slave revolts exploded in the Northern Province of Saint Domingue beginning August 21, 1791. Although thousands of slaves later fought for the French republican forces under the leadership of Louverture and other black and mulatto generals, there is no proof that slaves had the interest of the colonial government in mind. The fact that in its first months the insurrection involved killing thousands of whites and destroying dozens of sugar, coffee, and indigo plantations clearly belies Phillips’s suggestion.

Ada Ferrer’s Insurgent Cuba (1999) remains the most balanced, comprehensive account of the relationship between race and revolution in late-nineteenth-century Cuba.

Luperón also supported the creation of a Caribbean confederation. Reyes-Santos has explored the racial politics of Luperón, arguing that he “imagined Haiti and the Dominican Republic as places undergoing the same process of racial mixture. He questioned the racial basis of Dominican national narratives that referred to Haiti’s blackness as entirely antithetical to the demographic constitution of the Dominican Republic. According to Luperón, demographically, both countries were inhabited by a mixed race, a product of miscegenation between Europeans and Africans” (148).

The article appears in the April 2, 1870, issue of the newspaper. The almost comical repetition of Bolivar’s patriotic virtues underscores the Cuban and Puerto Rican revolutionary elite’s need for finding models of political liberation for their vision of emancipation from Spain.

These racial constructs can be traced back to the eighteenth century, when Saint Domingue’s free colored population (affranchis or anciens libres) constituted a privileged class. The black elites were mostly descendants of slaves who became military leaders during the Haitian Revolution (nouveaux libres). David Nicholls argues that the difference between mulattos and blacks was deeply entrenched in Haitian politics throughout the nineteenth century, to the extent that there was evident racism, especially from mulattos towards blacks. Among others, Dubois has challenged Nicholls’s assertion, suggesting that it does not take into consideration how socioeconomic and cultural issues play a role in the construction of mulatto and black identities in Haiti.

Arroyo links the fraternal discourse of Betances to his identity as a Freemason, which is more than reasonable: as she states, Betances participated in and benefited from these social networks, which connected intellectuals from disparate countries (or colonies) of origin. But in my view, Freemasonry does not stand for a specific politics in the second half of the nineteenth century. Arroyo suggests this in her analysis of Albert Pike, a Freemason leader in the US who supported the imperialist cause. More importantly, due to the organization’s secrecy, the extent to which Betances and his fellow revolutionaries projected the Masonic ideals of brotherhood onto their visions of community is hard to determine. Historian Eduardo Torres Cuevas has examined this difficulty in the case of José Martí and his fellow Cuban revolutionaries in the years preceding the War of Independence.

The Haitian Liberal Party identified with the French tradition of liberal republicanism and was a predominantly mulatto party, although Firmin and other leaders were black. From 1908 to 1915, the
Haitian government changed hands six times and rebellions in the countryside were frequent, as inflation and famine escalated. Economic and political instability reached its climax when the United States invaded in 1915, an occupation that would last nineteen years. US capitalists’ interests were the essential force behind the invasion: the US government sought to protect its citizens’ investments in the island against the alleged threat of ongoing rebellions and, perhaps more significantly, to assert its authority in opposition to growing German and French economic presence in the island. Plummer (1988) and Nicholls remain the best historical sources on this period.

27 Arroyo points out that the Freemasons’ “main philosophical motto” was self-mastery (27). It is quite possible that Firmin might have been a Freemason, which was a common form of association among the Haitian elites (Plummer 1988).

28 Known mostly for his liberal approach to education, Henríquez y Carvajal (1848–1952) collaborated closely with Eugenio María de Hostos in the development of universities in the Dominican Republic.

29 In Public Sentiments, Glenn Hendler gives an excellent definition of sympathy in connection to nineteenth-century US cultural discourse: “Sympathy . . . is an emotional response to reading or seeing an expression of another’s feelings. It is thus at its core an act of identification. To feel compassion, as opposed to mere pity, one must be able to imagine oneself, at least to some extent, in another’s position” (3).

30 I differ here from Arroyo, who reads Betances’s relationship with France as exclusively strategic: “veneration of the French republican and revolutionary tradition in his texts can be interpreted as one of the many rhetorical strategies he used to push his political agenda” (75–6). The same mixture of sentimental attachment and strategic politics she correctly reads in Haiti’s role in his work can be found in how Betances imagines France.

31 Firmin dedicates a full chapter of Letters from Saint Thomas to the French language, privileging French letters as essential for the “moral and intellectual development” of Haitians (92). Aside from strengthening Haitian civil society, Firmin’s liberal-minded vision for Haiti included the elimination of the Haitian Constitution’s ban against the foreign ownership of local property. Letters from Saint Thomas in fact begins with a discussion of this proposal, which, according to Firmin, would eradicate Haiti’s culture of intransigent isolationism (4–5).

32 In this regard my approach differs from Dash’s reading of Firmin’s work as “a practice of Glissantian errancy” (50). There is much symbolic and material errancy in Firmin, but France stands at the center of his discursive politics.

33 According to Mignolo, by privileging France and European culture such views perpetuated an “internal” form of colonialism that excluded “Indians and Blacks” (86). Yet, Torres Caicedo included Haiti within his vision of Latin America and Haitian exiles such as Firmin participated actively in the Latin American Society. Although grounded in Eurocentric cosmopolitan and republican values, Torres Caicedo’s political discourse was emphatically anti-racist: “In truth, all humanity is one, men everywhere should have the same rights, the same duties, the same responsibilities” (203).

34 1869 was also the year of the Glorious Revolution in Spain, which gave power to the Spanish republican elite (the First Spanish Republic only lasted from 1873 to 1874). Yet, unlike the majority of the Puerto Rican creole elite, Betances had no faith in what Spanish republicanism had to offer to the Caribbean.

35 In “A Cuba libre,” Betances celebrates Bolivar’s visit to Haiti and his encounter with Pétion, who assisted the Spanish American armies with weapons and capital. Christopher Conway has addressed the myth of Bolivar in the Latin American imagination: “In modern Latin America, the symbol of Bolivar has been charged with the defense of the promise of tomorrow. History is plotted through continuities and Bolivar is a powerful wellspring of myth capable of joining the past to the present and to a providential future” (3).

36 Unlike José Martí, who famously decried in melancholic fashion his condition of exile in the US
through poems such as “Dos Patrias,” Betances celebrated the freedoms that his life in Paris offered.
Carmen T. Vásquez has examined the poetry of Betances and its roots in French romanticism; according to Vásquez, “Exile and Liberty” echoes Victor Hugo’s “Stella” and its verses on freedom.

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