

Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing new Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:

Joining us today is GC alumni, Dr. Allison Guess, an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation post-doctoral fellow and a professor of Africana studies at Williams College. Guess is also a research fellow at the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute. She earned a PhD in earth and environmental sciences at the Graduate Center. Ramona Hernandez is the Director of the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute and a professor of sociology at City College and at the CUNY Graduate Center. Her research interests include the mobility of workers from Latin America and the Caribbean, the socioeconomic conditions of Dominicans in the United States and the re-structuring of the world economy and its effects on working class people.

Tanya Domi:

Under her leadership, the CUNY Dominican Institute is home to a research unit, Dominican Library and Dominican Archives has distinguished itself as a world class institute of research known for its groundbreaking scholarship on the history of the Dominican people in the United States and elsewhere. In 2021, in the continuation of the institute's research on the first blacks in the Americas and in commemoration of the first rebellion of enslaved black Americans in the Americas, the CUNY Institute undertook the first archeological survey in the Dominican Republic locating the site of the sugar mill where this slave rebellion took place 500 years ago.

Tanya Domi:

The story Guess and Hernandez discuss in this podcast is the earliest history of black people in the Americas and their scholarship and research that documents this history. They discuss the events that took place during the Christmas Holiday of 1521 on the Island of Hispaniola, the Dominican Republic and Republic of Haiti contemporarily. In the United States, Christmas festivities dominate the culture during December. A good number of public media in writing this time of year highlights Christmas as a holiday to be enjoyed. None, however, highlights Christmas as oppositional black history, which includes lessons on what freedom and democracy look like then and how it appears today. They address this gap, bringing into bear a short and informative story about long history of black resistance during Christmas time dating back to the Santo Domingo Revolt of 16th century Hispaniola, also known as the Christmas Rebellion. Its 500-year anniversary was commemorated last year in a national conference at CUNY led by Professor Hernandez.

Tanya Domi:

They also discussed the anti-black slave laws that corresponded to this early rebellion written by Diego Colon, Christopher Columbus's very own son, which also just had a quincentennial observation on January 6th, 2022. As these are early slave laws relate to other laws throughout the history of the United States that have limited black people's freedom, including the black codes of the US south in more contemporary practices such as stop and frisk and broken windows policing in New York city as an example. It is important to highlight this history, it's tortured legacies of the first slave rebellion. Welcome to the Thought Project, Allison Guess and Ramona Hernandez. Thank you for being with us today.

Allison Guess:

Thank you for having us.

Tanya Domi:

The earliest history of black people in the Americas is one of enslavement and resistance. Ground zero for this history of slave resistance begins in 1521 during the Christmas holiday on the Island of Hispaniola, present day Dominican Republic and the Republic of Haiti. You have co-authored an essay about the 500th anniversary of the Christmas slave rebellion in Hispaniola published on the Thought Project meeting page. What can you tell us about this uprising? Can I start with you, Allison?

Allison Guess:

Sure, absolutely. Well, the earliest history of black people in the Americas is certainly one of rebellion of resistance, but I should also say that all black people in the period were not enslaved themselves. So, the earliest group of black people of African descent that came into the Americas were a mixed band of unfree and enslaved labors. This group, which is referred to in late 15th and 16th century documents that pertain to La Hispaniola were referred to as Latinos or in some cases, Latino natives. So, the earliest black population to end up in La Hispaniola actually came from Iberia. These black people were literate, they were very well versed in the languages spoken in Iberia such as Spanish, Portuguese, and perhaps even Italian. And they were likely Christianized or at the very least, they at least purported to be Christian.

Allison Guess:

We must remember that for the several centuries, Spain actually was also controlled in some ways by people who were described as the Morise. And so, this would also mean that in the Iberian Peninsula, there was a black population as well as people from various religious and various other ethnic backgrounds 800 years before were even getting into the place that would eventually become the Americas. So, I think it's quite early in the alleged conquest of what would become the Americas of people of African descent living in Iberia were identified by Imperial Spain as kind of a sort of convenient labor force that could be used in the extraction of the land of La Hispaniola. And I often refer to these early black ancestors as unfree because it's not exactly accurate to think of these people as necessarily free. And I think also there's need for an understanding of their subject position that goes beyond a free and enslaved binary.

Allison Guess:

So, I refer to these ancestors in my work as unfree, unless they're explicitly stating as being enslaved. And I think oftentimes when we think about the narratives surrounding black people in this time, it limits in regards black subjectivity to Conquistadors and settlers and slaves and even in some instances, kings. These figures are almost always stories about adult black men in this early period. But we hardly ever hear about black revolutionaries and liberators in this early period. So, I think that's quite odd, and I think that's something to think about critically in terms of early modern historiographies that center black peoples. To go back to your question, I'd also like to say that La Hispaniola more broadly is the fertile ground, or as you say, the ground zero for black resistance in the Americas. But this resistance didn't actually inaugurate with the 1521 Christmas rebellion.

Allison Guess:

In my work, I simply like to think of the 1521 rebellion as the climax of a longer and larger liberation struggle carried out by black people on the island. We know that as early as 1503, a correspondence existed with a complaint of black led [inaudible 00:08:33] on the island that quite possibly responded to the initial correspondence, which may have been written in 1502. And I think that that came from Governor Nicolás de Ovando, and so we know very little about that time period. But I think to go even further back, we know that even before 1503, there was rebel activity in 1493 at the Navidad settlement, which was burned to the ground. This was actually the earliest settlement of Spaniards or Europeans; I should say more broadly on La Hispaniola.

Allison Guess:

And when they returned back, they found the settlement burned down. This is often regarded as an act of resistance carry out by the people indigenous to La Hispaniola known as the Tainos. But there is some research that suggests that the remains of some people that were found near that settlement might have been from people of African descent. So, I think it's important to think about these blended histories. I think it's important to think about rebellion, not as a single alert event, but a long and enduring process just as dispossession and conquest is also a process.

Tanya Domi:

Thank you. Dr. Hernandez, you have made a considerable focus in your career on the Dominican Republic and its history, and you actually advanced an archeological project to document this rebellion. What are your thoughts about this anniversary and about just the context of what actually transpired there? And certainly, I'm not diminishing 100 years before, but for the purpose of this podcast, and I appreciate all the clarifications, this seems to be a significant event, nonetheless. I know that the world did not start there, but certainly, your contribution, Dr. Hernandez.

Ramona Hernandez:

It's important for us to actually document as much as possible and bring so much flesh to the history of the rebellion of 1521 precisely becomes when people think about black African people in the new world, enslave, that system, we often think of the 19th century as the time when this happened. And to us, it was important for people to know that that history or birth organized clear manifestation against a system of oppression happened much early. This time is 1521. So, it was important to document this. The second thing for us that was important is to try to reconstruct the site where this Rebellion took place as much as possible, because this is an event that hasn't been studied enough, actually, very little. And whatever study has been done about this event had happened outside of the US. So, it was not only a conversation among us that we needed to do more of this, but it's also a conversation with the US where we have over 50 million people of Hispanic ancestry [inaudible 00:12:09] these types of things.

Ramona Hernandez:

So, the archeological site, we still do not know with precision where this historical event happened. That is so important to us because it is, yes, Allison is quite correct, there has been resistances, this is what we say, since the first day they were brought in with their hands on the back high. Since that moment, we know that there was resistance in that place. So, this is the one that we have evidence as of this moment. So, we don't know whether it was in the immediacy of [inaudible 00:12:52] or it a little bit further where this rebellion happened. For us to find the exact site, it's important because it will give much more the historicity that is needed for people to remember this thing. It will come to substantiate that this is why it was important for us to accompany this 500-year anniversary with the beginning of

the archeological work that we are going to continue to do, because we went there, we found what we think is the site now.

Ramona Hernandez:

It's interesting because immediately there was a reaction by historians in the Dominican Republic were saying, "No," but they speaking to the place that they think where this event happened in a few miles away from the original site. So, this work had just begun and that we need to make sure that we go through this by finding the place where it happened. And I think that this is possible now with the kind of technology and the kind of knowledge and the kind of multidisciplinary team, academics that we have in place. I think it's possible to determine the exact place.

Tanya Domi:

Really remarkable historical facts that you have presented both of you, your work together, the archeological potential findings of artifacts, these sort of things, it's a remarkable story, one that I personally never read about, to be totally honest with you. I actually have worked in Haiti in 1995. I was there when Aristide was returned to the country. I've experienced ... It had such a significant impression on me that it will never leave me, but your historical findings and your scholarship is very significant. And I just want to say that the other thing that really struck me about your findings is that the rebellion there that took place in 1521 actually planted seeds for maybe. The larger rebellions, or further rebellions that are really part of a Christmas narrative for black people. That's actually devoid in the culture of the United States and some of these rebellions include Jamaica's Christmas Day Rebellion also known as the Baptist War in 1831 to 1832. And I was also struck by the mention of Harriet Tubman Led Resistance on Christmas day. Can you elaborate on that, Allison?

Allison Guess:

Sure. Well, we might say that unfree people of African descent strategically use the holiday season to liberate themselves. So, I think if we're talking about the 16th century, you have to acknowledge that. In this time, period, Christmas was not just Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. It wasn't just a two-day affair, but it actually lasted quite longer in the Catholic religion in that time period. So, Christmas militancy is something that at is kind of talked about amongst people of African descent as a time in which many people would often plan their liberation. We know in the case of Harriet Tubman, that she would often go back and forth during Christmas time, because it was just thought that in this time period, the oppressors would be busier attending to their festivities. So, the 1521 rebellion, I see it as a time that kind of inaugurates that longer tradition of black militancy during the Christmas holiday.

Allison Guess:

I think that we can also link this to more contemporary efforts that have kind of looked at Christmas as a time in which consumption in accumulation is rampant. And to think that with consumption and accumulation that therefore there must also be traction. I think if we think about what must have been the position of those who were deemed as the black laborers, then we can see clearly not only was it advantageous to plan your escape and your liberation during a time in which people would've been busy looking elsewhere, but it might have also been a time in which the extraction of your labor would have been perhaps even at its height in the beginning of the Christmas holiday or leading up to it so that people could take that time to supposedly rest.

Allison Guess:

So yeah, the Baptist War in Jamaica is another example. Hercules Posey, he also allegedly started at the very least to plan his escape during the Christmas holiday. Yeah, I think that this is something I think more generously about and contextualize it within the history of La Hispaniola.

Ramona Hernandez:

It also makes sense because this is a moment which Spaniards are concentrated, extremely focused on communicating with the [inaudible 00:17:59]. And I think it shows how the enslaved population was watching and trying to find the right moment, a moment in which they knew the eyes were not that focused on them because the eyes and the mind and everything was focused on the [inaudible 00:18:19] people. When we go back and ask about importance of remembering and reading the history of 1521 back to the table, one of the things that I share with the students is that for some reason, there are people who like to insist that black people, that some of us liked it, the business or enslaved. We didn't do much because we had a history for of that.

Ramona Hernandez:

This is some of the anatomy that are put on the table to justify the slavery and enslaving human being. And what this event shows is that in all of the other accounts that Allison spoke about before is that that wasn't the case, at least not those who came to La Hispaniola. The very first day they came in, the very first day that they began to resist and said, "This is not right. I oppose this thing." And that helps to undermine that narrative that slavery lasted all that long and all that kind of thing, because somehow, we were participating, we liked it.

Tanya Domi:

Very remarkable. I really hope this podcast advances knowledge and awareness. And secondly, not only is this very chilling in my view, but Christopher Columbus' son, Diego Colon, played a nefarious role in the subjectivity of these slaves, ultimately creating a judicial infrastructure for subsequent and consequent anti-black laws and practices, much later on called black codes, commonly referred to as black laws in the US south of 1865 and later Jim Crow laws which followed the post anti-rebellion reconstruction in 1877. I find this really chilling. You draw an analogy into present day, including stop and frisk and broken windows, many of our colleagues at the Graduate Center have really documented quite a bit on these practices of the NYPD. And I found this one of the most disturbing findings, but yet very important. And my only awareness is because of my work on the Holocaust is that the Nazis really followed the Jim Crow laws and found them quite useful in their mass killing of Jews in Europe. Allison, please elaborate here.

Allison Guess:

Yeah. Christopher Columbus's son, Diego Colon was actually the author of the 1522 laws, which are known as [foreign language 00:21:10] and it was a decree that directly responded to the 1521 rebellion. As you all know, the 1521 rebellion happens during Christmas time and then on January 6th, these laws emerge, and they are the earliest known set of documented anti-black slave laws in the Americas. So, in addition to Diego Colon him writing these laws, but he was actually also the master of the enslaved rebels who we rebelled. And I should clarify that not all the rebels who were involved in this rebellion were enslaved, but there was a subset that were absolutely enslaved, and they came from Diego Colon's sugar plantations. This is why kind of what Dr. Hernandez was saying earlier, it's really important for us to kind of locate where this rebellion took place, where was the initial starting place? That's something that is still to be determined.

Allison Guess:

So, I think it's very interesting that we think about this response as a black response to the Colon family directly, and also the establishment of slavery in the America's, conquest, colonialism and I would also add capitalist extraction. We often think that capitalism wasn't an operation in this time period, but you can kind of see through the archival document that it was full and well as a full running operation. One thing that I often like to think about is a work by Tiffany King, and she writes about how in 2015, there was a statue of Christopher Columbus in Boston's Christopher Columbus Park that was defaced, and it was smeared with red paint. And then the words Black Lives Matter were written at the base of the statue. And so, King kind of interrogates what we can think of as a surprise of black people's critique of Columbus.

Allison Guess:

And she thinks about it as an unthought black discourse of conquest. But I think that the black led 1521 Christmas rebellion elongates that black critique of the Columbus and the Columbus family as an earlier 16th century black discourse on conquest. In my work, I actually zero in on this event and I also focus on an earlier black anti cologne event and sentiment that emerges in the archive. So, I think it's really important that we think about the relationship that black people have with the Colon's and the Colon family more broadly, and to think not only about how this decree in 1522 is really foundational to it, but also just really highlights a longer tradition of black people and their critique of Columbus.

Ramona Hernandez:

And if I may add-

Tanya Domi:

Please, please-

Ramona Hernandez:

.. to what you're saying, an incident terms of importance or way of this rebellion took place. The son of Christopher Colon had acquired the title of this strain of entire Spanish operation. It's interesting that the enslaved population and the others that are not enslaved participant of this event decided to attack precisely the highest center of power. So, this is why this rebellion, Tanya, is so important. It shows planning. It shows the unity of people that were of different roots, if you wanted to, people who were enslaved and people who were not. And somehow, sometimes people have said that because black people who came from Africa spoke different languages, who were not able to get together because we couldn't communicate. Well, it happened that they were able to communicate in that moment, though. they were from different places.

Ramona Hernandez:

And we do have evidence that they came from different places. Actually, later on in 1502, there is this Governor Nicolas de Ovando that Allison made reference who wrote to the king and said, "Well, I'd like to receive enslaved people from this particular area, not from this area, because the Africans who come from this area, they simply don't listen. They don't behave properly. They never learn how to do what they need to do. So, I want you to send them from here." Obviously, there were different kinds of the Africans that were there. The black Africans that were there came from different places. And the point is that they found the way to communicate, such a remarkable event. And do it not to any master, not to

any plantation, but to the plantation, the master. I think we need to take all of that into account when we look at the significance of this rebellion.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. I mean, it's really quite remarkable. It says something about how all human beings yearn to be free. And freedom is liberation. As Allison has pointed out over and over, again, this Tiffany King discourse and deconstruction, I mean, I have not heard anything in public discourse. I'm talking about mainstream now. I'm not talking about within communities. And I'm sorry, I didn't know about this Columbus statue in Boston with Black Lives Matter. I hope it was spray paint on the base the foundation of the statue, because there would seem to be ... There was like a public discourse across solidarity that there would be a lot of support between black and Latino communities depending on which ones, because there are many different subset of Latino communities in this country to really oppose the public expression of Columbus, the exalted public expression. And so that to me is just incredible, as you both say, 1502, all the way into this contemporary history right now in America, that has been animated by protests and demands for equality and freedom and liberation.

Tanya Domi:

I just want to say that. So, in that vein, it becomes really obvious to me your scholarship is so, so important. I think it's a big chunk of missing from people. Some people who are quite educated and just don't know this history and how can you shape this history into public discourse? I mean, we're doing it here on this podcast and you're doing in the Medium page. And I want to give credit to Dr. Hernandez for her leadership, for her academic scholarship leadership in hosting this national conference last December on this Rebellion itself. When I read about the participant's list, it was people from the IVs, the Publix from all over the country, just incredible gathering and convening authority that you brought together. Dr. Hernandez.

Ramona Hernandez:

Thank you. Thank you for mentioning this. We were [inaudible 00:28:46] surprised when we put out the call for people and then received such an enormous amount of people who wanted to participate, we did two day and this is the first time, I think, in the history of the institute that we had to tell people, "We apologize, but we cannot accommodate your paper," and with the promise that they can present for coming Dominican Studies Association Conference that is coming next year, there were so many people who wanted to participate in this. It was a pleasant surprise. This is a very specialized theme, and we asked people to focus and concentrate on the repercussion and the ramification of the 1521 rebellion, and the response was overwhelming, 1,217 people reached-

Tanya Domi:

That's really commendable.

Ramona Hernandez:

Yes, this was the first time. I think credit has to be given to the people who earn that credit, and Allison. I mean, having young researchers, new scholars that are embracing this history and going out and speaking and disturbing the peace and questioning it and adding, I think that this is what really made the difference here, because we have been talking about this for a long time. The Dominican Studies Institute have the largest number of historical records pertaining to the 16th century in the US, and we are there for a long time, and still, I think it's a ... We are grateful and endeavor to the young scholars,

and Allison Guess is obviously that the key was for all kinds of reasons, and one of those reasons is also that is African American and that connection that was needed between this world, and that world, [inaudible 00:30:48].

Ramona Hernandez:

Scholars [inaudible 00:30:50] are this bridge, which was new. To connect the history of a people that had been resisting oppression since day one. If you ask me, "What is it that you wanted to do, Ramona?" That my son knows, for instance, who born and raised here, that he's resistant to his oppression didn't begin to race, but he began exactly the minute that his ancestors were brought here with their hands on the back. And that only began there, not here. This come to begun 170 years after this history was already there. Scholars like Allison that are capable of maneuvering both worlds, I think it's key.

Tanya Domi:

Allison, what are your thoughts?

Allison Guess:

Yeah. I mean, I think that I began to interrogate the history of people of African descent in this part of the world through Latin American and Caribbean studies. That's where I got my undergraduate, concentration was in Latin American studies. That's kind of the way in which my curiosity was invigorated. And I think the onus is on us to really look at these earlier histories because in comparison to places in the Caribbean and in the Atlantic world more broadly, the United States is fairly new.

Allison Guess:

So, I think if we want to understand our history, I often think that it is about the argumentation of the past, so we understand the future. I think that it's important that we're looking at those deeper histories. I'm really encouraged by scholars who are really taking up black studies and early modern studies. I think that's absolutely crucial. I think we need more of it. And I hope that some of the research that's coming out of the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute can really be kind of a spark in many people's imagination because I think the work is phenomenal and I really have been supported and encouraged by it. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for their support.

Tanya Domi:

That's wonderful. And I have to say that I've been at the Graduate Center for nine years and I have never seen an event publicized by the chancellor in CUNY Central as much as your conference was promoted. I congratulate you Dr. Hernandez for leadership, for your scholarship. And Allison, it's very clear, you have a trajectory. You've been honored by a Mellon Foundation fellowship, and your work is very, very interesting. And it's new in my view, what do I know? I do human rights; I teach human rights.

Tanya Domi:

But I have to say as an American who grew up during the '60s here in the United States and having experienced what happened during the racial equality, civil rights movement personally, along with Second Wave feminism and LGBT, this knowledge, this scholarship is very important at this moment in America. I urge both of you and your colleagues to get out there and tell the stories, tell the stories. I want to congratulate you. I also want to thank you for coming onto the Thought Project in particular, as

we begin to enter Black History Month. This is an important story for every month of every day of the year. Do you have anything else you'd like to add Dr. Hernandez?

Ramona Hernandez:

Yes. Emphasize what you just said before, importance of the kind of work that Allison is doing, speaking about this rebellion and what happened in the rest of the Americas, it brings people together. The current unity that we have been talking about that is necessary for us to actually achieve that liberation, we need to bring together, we need to come together. This is, I think part of the evidence that we have need to have, that we have done it before and that we have begun together. There's no reason why we cannot do that, liberation cannot happen only in one place and not the other. We know that we've seen this. So, the kind of work that we are doing and the kind of work that Allison is doing, I think it's key for bringing us together.

Tanya Domi:

Thank you. Allison.

Allison Guess:

Yeah. I just to piggyback on what Dr. Hernandez just said about this work bringing so many people together, I don't want to end this podcast or this conversation with us not also acknowledging that the 1521 rebellion and rebel activity on the island in this early period is also often bound up with native struggles for liberation in this land. And I think one of the things that we saw in many of the protests of 2020 was not just black people who were out in the streets talking about liberation, but we also saw a lot of our native indigenous comrades who were also out there in the streets. Who've been fighting also since the moment the Europeans showed up at their door. I think that that's something that I want to make sure that our listeners are left with, that we're also talking about a combined struggle of black and indigenous liberators who are venturing out here to free this land and risking their lives for the liberation of everyone on the planet.

Tanya Domi:

Thank you both. Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project, and thanks to our guest, Dr. Allison Guess, a Graduate Center alumna and professor of Africana studies at Williams College and an Andrew Mellon Foundation, post-doctoral fellow, and Ramona Hernandez, Professor of Sociology at City College and the CUNY Graduate center. The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolf of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.