



## COLUMBUS LIGHTHOUSE

### Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

18.4785672, -69.8703427



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### Executive Summary

The Columbus Lighthouse of Santo Domingo is an enormous mausoleum which is said to contain Christopher Columbus' remains. The first plans to build a monument to Columbus date back to the mid-nineteenth century, and a competition to decide the design of the project was launched in 1928. The final project began in 1986, and was opened in 1992. The Lighthouse was controversial since its construction, as it meant the relocation of thousands of families from the area and the construction of a 'Wall of Shame' to hide the view of the closer poor neighbourhoods. In recent years, inspired by the global anti-Columbus and Black Lives Matter movement, there has been a gradual Indigenous and Black activism that is starting to contest the country's colonial past and monuments. This case study explores the difficulties that emerge when trying to find a resolution for a contested monument of such large dimensions.

## Introduction

The Columbus Lighthouse in Santo Domingo was contested since the planning of its construction in the 1920s. Due to the Dominican Republic's complicated history during the 20th century, the project wasn't finished until the early 1990s. That is why, for many, at the end of its erection it did not retain the original significance of when it was planned decades earlier. It is a monumental construction, both a symbolic lighthouse and a mausoleum to Columbus. The former is because of the light given off by the hundreds of light bulbs on its roof, and the latter is because the building contains the alleged remains of the explorer. Its construction further increased the social inequality of the citizens of Santo Domingo, as many were evicted from their homes while others suffered power outages in order to supply the lighthouse's lantern.

## Background<sup>1</sup>

The Columbus Lighthouse was inaugurated on October 6, 1992 to mark the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus to the Americas.<sup>2</sup> Even though it is referred to as a lighthouse, it is a mausoleum to Columbus himself, who in 1506, before dying, arranged to be buried in the 'New World.' His body was taken to the Cathedral *Santa María la Menor* (Cathedral of St. Mary Minor) in Santo Domingo several decades later, where he remained until his remains were moved to the Lighthouse in 1992, Dominicans claim. However, whether he is buried in the Lighthouse remains contested as the Spanish claim that his remains were moved to Havana after ceding the colony to France in 1795. After Cuba won its independence from Spain, this version of the story claims that the bones were transferred to the Cathedral of Seville in 1898.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1: "Columbus Lighthouse from the side." Image by Epizentrum via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 4.0

The idea to build a lighthouse-monument to Columbus in Santo Domingo can be traced as far back as to 1852, when Antonio del Monte y Tejada, a Dominican historian, proposed it. However it was not until 1923,<sup>4</sup> during the Fifth International American Conference - precursor of the modern Organisation of American States - meeting in Chile, when its members unanimously committed to fund the construction of the monument in Santo Domingo. To decide how it would look like, a contest was held and won in 1931 by Scottish architect Joseph Lea Gleave.<sup>5</sup> The foundations of the building were laid shortly after, but the withdrawal of the funds together with Dominican Republic's political history<sup>6</sup> halted

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the historical background please see Cowan, Mairi and Christoph Richter. "The Faro a Colón in Santo Domingo: Reinterpreting a "More Nearly Perfect" Memorial to Christopher Columbus." *The Public Historian*, vol. 43 no. 2, 2021, p. 63-80. Project MUSE.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Farah, "Curse of Columbus?," *Washington Post*, October 7, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Fernando Orgambides, "Dónde está enterrado Colón?," *El País*, October 6, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Delia Blanco, "El Faro a Colón en dimensión universalista," *Hoy*, May 31, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Robert González, "The Columbus Lighthouse Competition: Revisiting Pan-American Architecture's forgotten memorial," *Concursos de arquitectura* 67 (2007).

<sup>6</sup> From 1930 till 1961, there was the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo, one of the longest and cruelest in modern times. Trujillo maintained complete control of the military, appointed family members to key offices, strictly enforced censorship and conformity laws, and ordered the murder of political opponents and the massacre of thousands of Haitian immigrants. In May 1961, Trujillo

construction until 1986.<sup>7</sup> That year, President Joaquín Balager took office for the third time and championed the project as part of the Columbus quincennial celebrations.<sup>8</sup>

The finished monument took the form of a concrete cross, 210m long and 59m tall, described by the *Lonely Planet* travel guide as ‘a cross between a Soviet-era apartment block and a Las Vegas-style ancient Mayan ruin.’<sup>9</sup> The floor inside the monument is made of Italian ceramic, the fittings and lamps are solid bronze. Another important details of the lighthouse is that the main entrance faces West, ‘the cardinal point towards which Columbus departed.’<sup>10</sup> Further, the Biblical and philosophical inscriptions on its façades combine quotes from Aristotle and the book of Genesis, (Cover Image).



Figure 2: 'Mausoleum to Colon inside the Lighthouse.' Image by PilotGirl via Flickr CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

The monument is located in eastern Santo Domingo, in the *Parque Mirador Este* (East Viewpoint Park), just over a kilometre from the coast; as well as serving as Columbus’s tomb, the monument plays host to a museum of American cultures. The president hoped that the monumental lighthouse would bring tourism to the city, which ultimately it did as the lighthouse is now one of Santo Domingo’s most visited attractions (in 2018, it was reported to have received around four thousands visitors per month).<sup>11</sup> One of its main elements are the 150 lights which project a cross onto the sky. It is said it is visible from Puerto Rico and



Figure 3: 'The Light of the Lighthouse.' Image by N i c o\_ via Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

was assassinated on a highway. His heirs and followers attempted to remain in power, but they were driven out and the country embarked on a more democratic course. Juan Bosch was the first president democratically elect in 1963, however, after his enmity with the US he was overthrown. The US occupied the country again in 1966 and organised their own elections, the winner was Joaquín Balager until 1978, and he won the elections again in 1986. (Howard J. Wiarda, “Dominican Republic,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 1, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Fernando Orgambides, “Joaquín Balaguer, el eterno cáudillo,” *El País*, May 16, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Lonely Planet, “Faro a Colón.”

<sup>10</sup> Delia Blanco, “El Faro a Colón en dimension universalista,” *Hoy*, May 31, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Abraham Méndez, “Museo Faro a Colón listo para recibir visitantes,” *El Caribe*, November 9, 2018.

which has caused regular power outages in the city.<sup>12</sup> However, most criticism arose because of the 'Wall of Shame', a wall meant to hide nearby poor neighborhoods.<sup>13</sup>

### *Columbus Must Fall?*

The memorialisation of Columbus and the erection of statues and monuments to celebrate his figure and heritage were very popular in the 19th century, to such an extent historians have often termed this period as one of 'Columbus-mania.'<sup>14</sup> October 12 was established as an official holiday in Latin America between 1915 and 1928, in some Latin American countries it was known as the *Día de la Raza* (Day of the Race), like Argentina, Colombia, Venezuela or the Dominican Republic.<sup>15</sup> In this period, the celebrations were accompanied by erecting statues and monuments to honour Columbus, together with naming streets and squares after him, 'to perpetuate his memory.'<sup>16</sup>

In 1984, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and several associates advocated that the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the arrival of the Spanish explorers to the Americas should seek to include the voices of 'the original inhabitants of the American continent' calling it the Meeting of Two Worlds.<sup>17</sup> Parallel to the UNESCO celebrations, other initiatives asked for the 'historical reparation, recognition of the violence of the Conquest and critical distance with the 'Meeting of Two Worlds' as 'the commemoration of the Fifth Centenary constitutes a unique opportunity to rescue the regional identity that marks Ibero-America.'<sup>18</sup> Apart from these official celebrations, Indigenous people started to organise in different countries. Their foci were the narratives of resistance of the Indigenous groups and their cultural claims against the colonial interpretation of the past.<sup>19</sup> For example, in Bolivia they inaugurated the First Assembly of Native Nations and marched for peace to express their rejection of the celebrations of the centenary, and in Mexico, in 1992, a crowd toppled down the statue of Spanish colonizer Diego de Mazariegos in San Cristobal de las Casas (Chiapas) to make the State listen to their demands.<sup>20</sup> The Fifth Centenary marked an increase in contestation of the figure of Columbus as 'discoverer' of the Americas, as different interpretations of the past were openly confronted in the public space and social movement won the commemorative space in the streets and squares, where they gained recognition and legitimation.<sup>21</sup>

These anti-Columbus campaigns have been highly influenced in recent years, largely propelled by the global Black Lives Matter movement and the emergence of campaigns aimed at decolonising public spaces across the world. Within this transnational activism sphere many depictions of Columbus have come under scrutiny and removal, including a

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<sup>12</sup> Robert González, "The Columbus Lighthouse Competition: Revisiting Pan-American Architecture's forgotten memorial," *Concursos de arquitectura* 67 (2007).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Stéphane Michonneau, "Why is there a Columbus Monument in Barcelona?," Lecture, Saló del Tinell, Barcelona, November 7, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Marta Maroto, "Día de la Hispanidad, Día de la Raza, Día de la Resistencia Indígena: la batalla cultural del 12 de octubre en América Latina," *El Diario*, October 11, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Sandra Patricia Rodríguez, "Commemoraciones del cuarto y quinto centenario del "12 de octubre de 1492"," *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, 38 (2011): 67.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Jesús Ramírez Cuevas, "El día de la resistencia indígena," *Masiosare* 407 (2005).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.



statue in the Bahamas<sup>22</sup> and one in Buenos Aires<sup>23</sup> among a myriad of popular calls to remove Columbus statues from public spaces. The different national movements have also increasingly collaborated together, for example, the Caribbean-based Cross Rhode Freedom Project (CRPF) ‘Columbus Must Fall.’<sup>24</sup> Similar campaigns across Latin America have forced various local and national governments to engage in highly contested debates about what is the best way to commemorate Columbus’s legacy, or even whether it should be commemorated at all.<sup>25</sup>

The CRFP made their position very clear, claiming to be correcting ‘the founding lie of the Caribbean,’<sup>26</sup> seeing Columbus as a symbol of widespread historical expropriation and genocide in the region, and Latin America more broadly. Volunteer Yorley Alejandra Méndez characterises the campaign as more than just condemnation of historical events, but also a challenge to the ongoing realities of indigenous erasure and colonialist glorification: ‘for too long now Columbus has usurped the place of our heroes and heroines in our public spaces as well as our collective imagination.’<sup>27</sup>

Before Columbus’s arrival, the island of Hispaniola (today comprising the Dominican Republic and Haiti) was populated by the Taíno people, who were quickly overrun and obliterated by the Spanish forces, as well as by the pressures of disease and forced labour. Large populations of African slaves were brought to the island to replace them, and before long the Taíno were thought to be extinct.<sup>28</sup> However, this narrative has long been controversial, with various communities on Hispaniola and Puerto Rico continuing to identify as Taíno, and recent scientific studies showing considerable genetic links between modern residents of these islands and historic Taíno DNA.<sup>29</sup> Taíno activists talk of a ‘genocide in paper’, meaning that the Indigenous population of Dominican Republic went from a thousand in 1797 to zero in 1802 because the census did not longer consider the Indigenous identity, only allowing for the categorization of White, Black or *Mestizo* (racially-mixed) but not Indigenous.<sup>30</sup>



Figure 4: ‘Inside of the Lighthouse.’ Image by LifeAsIPictured via Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

This only adds fuel to the fire of the Columbus debate in the Caribbean – while the majority of the Dominican Republic’s population are of mixed ethnic heritage, some identify closely with the island’s Indigenous people, while others feel more connected to Spanish culture and identity. Africans have also had a tremendous impact in Dominican history and culture, first

<sup>22</sup> Tribune, “Man Damages Christopher Columbus Statue with Sledge Hammer,” *Tribune*, October 11, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Contested Histories Initiative, “Columbus Monument in Buenos Aires,” *Contested Histories Case Study #4*, (October 2021), retrieved from <https://contestedhistories.org/resources/case-studies/columbus-monument-in-buenos-aires/>.

<sup>24</sup> Cross Rhodes Freedom Project, “Columbus Must Fall.”

<sup>25</sup> Julien Neaves, “Petition launched to remove Columbus statue,” *Trinidad and Tobago Newsday*, August 1, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Cross Rhodes Freedom Project, “Columbus Must Fall.”

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Nicanor Leyba, “Columbus’ legacy haunts the New World,” *Caribbean Net News*, May 17, 2006.

<sup>29</sup> Katherine Hignett, “Taíno: ‘extinct’ indigenous Americans never actually disappeared, ancient tooth reveals,” *Newsweek*, February 20, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Jorge Baracutei Estevez, “Conoce a los supervivientes de un “genocidio sobre el papel,” *National Geographic*, October 15, 2019.

arriving as slaves, but over the years and centuries obtaining their rights and integrating into the Dominican society, all while bringing their way of life and tradition.<sup>31</sup> The *Música de Palos*, or music of sticks, has a clear African sound. Relating to food and agriculture, the communal presence of farms, and a lively attitude to working the land.<sup>32</sup> This was clearly manifested in the debate over the Columbus Lighthouse, with one of former president Balaguer's political rivals criticising his 'deep admiration for Spain', and 'defence of Spanishness.'<sup>33</sup>

Controversy around the memorialisation of Columbus is by no means limited to Latin America, and he is often considered to be a figurehead for Spanish persecution of all the peoples of the Americas, celebrated as an 'explorer' while his legacy of violence is ignored. A high-profile example came in November 2018, when a statue of Columbus was taken down in Los Angeles, following the decision by the city government to replace 'Columbus Day' with 'Indigenous Peoples Day.'<sup>34</sup>

However, campaigns against monuments to Columbus in Latin America have had varying degrees of success. For example, the statue in Buenos Aires (Argentina) was moved away from its central location outside the country's presidential palace but remained on public display elsewhere in the city. The CRFP campaign in Port of Spain (Trinidad and Tobago) has been met with resistance by the country's government.<sup>35</sup> Another notable example is New York, where various statues of Columbus have been condemned or vandalised, but the city has insisted on keeping them in place.<sup>36</sup> It is also worth mentioning that since the 19th century, memorials to Columbus were also connected to Italian-Americans' sense of belonging.<sup>37</sup> The historical legacy at stake here clearly extends beyond the Dominican Republic, and even beyond the Caribbean, making comparison of government decision-making processes a necessary element of this case study.

## History of the Contestation

During construction of the *Faro a Colón* in the early 1990s, there were substantial protests in the Dominican Republic against the project. Most notably a general strike in three cities, organised by the Collective of Popular Organizations (COP), that led to demonstrations which, according to newspaper reports at the time, involved 'homemade bombs', the toppling of a Columbus statue in Santiago (the Dominican Republic's second-largest city), and a violent police response that led to at least one casualty.<sup>38</sup> A police statement from 1992 pledged 'to uphold order at any cost', while COP spokesman Ramon Almanzar committed to

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<sup>31</sup> For more information see Andujar, Carlos. *The African Presence in Santo Domingo*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Tribune Online. "From sideline to mainstream: African heritage permeates Dominican Republic". Nigerian Tribune. December 27, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Tarr, "Extravagant Columbus Lighthouse Mired in Dominican Controversy," *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 9, 1992.

<sup>34</sup> Gabriel Gonzalez Zorrilla, "Christopher Columbus statue removal sparks genocide row," *DW*, November 15, 2018. Samantha Schmidt, "In Los Angeles, Columbus Day is toppled like a Confederate statue," *The Washington Post*, August 31, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Telesur, "Argentina Replaces Columbus Statue with Indigenous Heroine," *Telesur*, July 15, 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Edward Helmore, "New York mayor considers Christopher Columbus statue removal," *Guardian*, August 25, 2017. Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers, "Report to the City of New York" (2018).

<sup>37</sup> Gabriella Angeletti, "As monuments to Christopher Columbus come down across the US, Italian-Americans campaign to protect a symbol of 'culture heritage,'" *The Art Newspaper*, August 13, 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Deseret News, "Foes of Columbus celebration vow to continue protests," *Deseret News*, September 24, 1992. Independent, "Protests at Columbus Plans," *Independent*, October 2, 1992.

continuing the protests at the monument's inauguration, 'because our country has no reason to celebrate the anniversary of the conquest and oppression of our continent and its native people.'<sup>39</sup> During the inauguration there was a strong police presence to avoid any confrontations, but it also prevented it from becoming the tourist event that the government had envisioned, and few foreign dignitaries took up their invitations – even Pope John Paul II, visiting Santo Domingo for the Columbus quincentenary in 1992, publicly distanced himself and the Church from the project,<sup>40</sup> stating that: 'evictions, official high-handedness, and extravagance - that's what the lighthouse symbolizes.'<sup>41</sup>

Contemporary criticisms of the *Faro a Colón* were not exclusively grounded in issues of historical memory, but also in more immediate concerns, such as the cost of construction. In the context of the Dominican Republic's struggles with poverty, the \$35m budget was always a point of contention, and critics suggested the end total reached at least \$70m. The quincentenary celebrations in general cost as much as \$200m, despite parts of the country facing food and water shortages at that time, and hospitals and schools having to close. The project was also considered by many to be an eyesore, an enormous concrete construction in a largely residential area. In the years that have passed, some have further accused the government of failing to properly maintain the monument and its surrounding park, which has become a popular spot for dumping rubbish.<sup>42</sup>

The cost of construction was undoubtedly significant, but the language of protesters, as well as the government's determination to see the project through, suggest that this contestation was centred primarily on the issue of historical legacies, and the memorialisation of Columbus. The Dominican Republic was, and continues to be, a nation divided by this question. Many in the country consider it bad luck to even speak Columbus's name, and some saw the monument's struggles as evidence of the 'curse of Columbus.'<sup>43</sup> Historian and sociologist Jose Antinoe Fiallo highlights the connection between Columbus's legacy and social divisions in the modern Dominican Republic. He suggests that while the Spanish-aligned upper classes see Columbus as symbolic of Dominican modernity and 'seek to follow his example of domination,' poorer elements of society feel a greater affinity with the island's Indigenous population and an alienation from Columbus.<sup>44</sup>

The problems caused by the *Faro a Colón* are most obvious where historical and modern oppressions are felt to overlap. One of the narratives behind the protests was the perception that Columbus was attacking the island's vulnerable communities even from beyond the grave as 8000 families from the impoverished Maquiteria neighbourhood were removed from their homes in order to make space for the monument.<sup>45</sup> The displaced communities spoke of being moved to settlements as far as 30km outside the city, without electricity, water, or transport. Edmundo Morel and Manuel Mejia's 1998 study of evictions in Santo Domingo trace the government's decision-making process, noting that vague efforts were made at relocation, but ultimately seeing the 'beautification' of the city for the benefit of tourists as the

<sup>39</sup> Deseret News, "Foes of Columbus celebration vow to continue protests," *Deseret News*, September 24, 1992.

<sup>40</sup> Douglas Farah, "Light for Columbus dims," *Washington Post*, September 1, 1992.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Tarr, "Extravagant Columbus Lighthouse Mired in Dominican Controversy," *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 9, 1992.

<sup>42</sup> *Diario Libre*, "Fuego consume el lado sur del Faro a Colón," *Diario Libre*, March 3, 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Nicanor Leyba, "Columbus' legacy haunts the New World," *Caribbean Net News*, May 17, 2006.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Michael Tarr, "Extravagant Columbus Lighthouse Mired in Dominican Controversy," *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 9, 1992.

key objective.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the poverty of those who were left in place was also not addressed, instead of improving their condition the government built a wall to prevent visitors from seeing the neighbourhoods.<sup>47</sup>

Historian Frank Poya Mons described the monument as ‘a cross planted on the back of the Dominican people’, seeing a metaphor for subjugation and exploitation in one of the project’s most notable failings.<sup>48</sup> The enormous cross projected into the night sky by the lighthouse is an impressive sight, but draws its power from the local electricity grid, leaving the surrounding neighbourhoods in darkness. As a result the lights are typically turned on only once a year.

At the time, president Balaguer insisted that the monument would outlast his critics. Thus, the government never showed any signs of backing down and strongly supported the police response to protesters. In some ways, he has been proven to be right. The *Faro a Colón* is not a monument that can be easily removed. Thus, it occupies a unique position in the broader context of the anti-Columbus campaign. People in the Dominican Republic still view the monument as an expensive white elephant, as several online users have posted, but no major organised campaign exists for its removal or renaming, and as such the government today faces relatively little pressure over the historical legacy of the monument. But this is not to say that the anti-Columbus movement that has taken the rest of America does not exist today. This contested monument is still producing discord and division in society, and while the government is not being pressured into any urgent action, it should nonetheless consider the social impacts of the controversial monument. In the context of a growing movement that spans the entire hemisphere, comparing the *Faro a Colón* case with other manifestations of Columbus’s controversial legacy can help determine how best to negotiate the contestation of such an enormous entity, that is not just a feature of a public space, but a public space in its own right.

## Decision-Making Processes

The Columbus statue in Port of Spain is a helpful starting point for comparison. It is in the Caribbean, like the *Faro a Colón*, and despite being defaced by protestors<sup>49</sup> no apparent action has been taken by the government of Trinidad and Tobago against the statue. In fact, another statue was put up in Moruga, another part of Trinidad, in 2010.<sup>50</sup> One element that distinguishes this case from the *Faro a Colón* is the existence of the CRFP campaign, an organised and clearly articulated challenge to the existence of these monuments. The absence of such a movement in the Dominican Republic can most likely be explained by the practical impossibility of removing the *Faro a Colón*. But by recognising the divided nature of public opinion in Trinidad and Tobago, it can reasonably be assumed that, despite the differences in the two countries, a similar division may be present in the Dominican Republic without an organised expression of the discontent. It may therefore be helpful for the government to be more proactive in its reconciliation efforts, to address potential

<sup>46</sup> Edmundo Morel and Manuel Mejia, “The Dominican Republic: Urban Renewal and Evictions in Santo Domingo,” in *Evictions and the Right to Housing*, Antonio Azuela, Emilio Duhau, and Enrique Ortiz (eds.) (1998).

<sup>47</sup> Douglas Farah, “Light for Columbus dims,” *Washington Post*, September 1, 1992.

Risk McDaniel, “The curse of Columbus,” *New Internationalist*, December 5, 1991.

<sup>48</sup> Deseret News, “Foes of Columbus celebration vow to continue protests,” *Deseret News*, September 24, 1992.

<sup>49</sup> Sharleen Rampersad, “Columbus statue defaced,” *Trinidad & Tobago Guardian*, June 17, 2020

<sup>50</sup>Carolyn Kissoon, “Moruga wants Columbus to stay,” *Daily Express*, June 23, 2020; Julien Neaves, “Petition launched to remove Columbus statue,” *Trinidad and Tobago Newsday*, August 1, 2018.



contestations before the transnational anti-Columbus movement is established in the country.

New York's response to various Columbus statue protests offers a useful example of how a government can engage with such campaigns. The 2018 'Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Arts, Monuments, and Markets' stated its desire to 'move beyond an all-or-nothing choice between keeping or removing monuments', deciding against relocation, but offering alternative solutions for reconciliation where relocation is impossible.<sup>51</sup> The report's recommendations centred on the idea of providing representations of alternative histories and cultures, to diversify the city's public spaces. This is only a partial solution, but given the immovable nature of the *Faro a Colón*, it is a highly salient example for the Dominican case. Opposition towards the celebration of Columbus is often not just about hostility towards him as a historical figure, but a resentment of the associated erasure of alternative histories. The issue of collective memory is always complicated, but especially so when the memory in question spans an entire hemisphere – the fundamentally transnational nature of the Columbus question undoubtedly influences its local manifestations.

The examples from Buenos Aires and Los Angeles are less useful for the Dominican Republic as the replication or removal of statues is not possible for the Lighthouse. However, the similarities between two such distant case studies offer an important indication of the increasingly transnational nature of the anti-Columbus movement; the shared nature of the historical legacy of colonisation means that no single monument or statue can be considered in isolation. The indigenous movements that lead successful campaigns in Los Angeles and Buenos Aires were characterised by transnational unity, drawing on support from Mexico and Bolivia respectively. The statue in Buenos Aires was replaced by one of the freedom fighter and indigenous ally Juana Azurduy, while the removal of the Los Angeles statue coincided with preparations for the city's first 'Indigenous Peoples Day', instead of 'Columbus Day'.<sup>52</sup>

While the official narratives may still erase the violent erasure of Indigenous people from the Dominican Republic, the growing presence of Taíno-identifying groups should not be ignored, nor the increasing transnationalization of the indigenous and anti-Columbus movement. Even though there is a general indigenous movement in Latin America we must emphasise that this movement developed differently in each country, and this development and social visibility is largely linked to the proportion of indigenous people and the degree of ethnic heterogeneity. For example, countries such as Bolivia are ahead of the Dominican Republic because indigenous make up 60% of the population, while the Dominican indigenous population was marginal. The most prominent and visible countries of the indigenous movement have been those with a larger indigenous population like Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Peru and Mexico, which together account for more than 90% of the total indigenous population of Latin America.<sup>53</sup> Going forward, indigeneity is likely to be a key factor in the Dominican Republic's discourses of historical memory and collective identity as

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<sup>51</sup> Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers, 'Report to the City of New York' (2018).

<sup>52</sup> 'Argentina Replaces Columbus Statue with Indigenous Heroine', *Telesur*, 15 July 2015.

Gabriel Gonzalez Zorrilla, 'Christopher Columbus statue removal sparks genocide row', *DW*, 15 November 2018.

Samantha Schmidt, 'In Los Angeles, Columbus Day is toppled like a Confederate statue', *The Washington Post*, 31 August 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Victoria Ontiveros, "El indigenismo latinoamericana: la construcción moderna de Abya Yala," *El Orden Mundial*, April 21, 2019.

the Taino population is starting to gain media and international visibility - even the Smithsonian organised an exhibition about their history and culture in 2018.<sup>54</sup>

## Summary and conclusions

The case of the Columbus Lighthouse is notable for the scale of the issue. First, the physical size of the monument makes it more difficult to find a resolution than in the cases of the Columbus statues around the world, and secondly, the monument's position in the national consciousness of the Dominican Republic cannot be properly understood without reference to its position in a broader American historical memory. The quincentenary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas has long since passed, but the social divisions that drove protests against the *Faro a Colón* in 1992 remain part of the lives of Dominicans today. Indeed, resurgent indigenous identity in the country, along with the growing momentum of transnational anti-Columbus campaigns, suggest this debate is soon to return to the Dominican Republic.

The impracticalities of protest against the removal of such an enormous monument mean campaigns against the *Faro a Colón* have been few but the divisive effect on Dominican society is likely just as strong as in other cases across the Americas. The country's government is not currently facing the same pressures as are visible elsewhere, but the extent of protests in 1992 indicates a deep-lying division, and makes clear the importance of constant community engagement and pre-emptive efforts at reconciliation, rather than simply waiting for a moment of crisis. Any future decisions remain unclear, but given the infeasibility of removing or relocating the *Faro a Colón*, and the lessons drawn from a comparative study with responses by other governments in the Americas, suggest that viable actions may include efforts to place the monument in proper historical context, or to work towards a broader recognition of indigenous Dominican identity in the country's public spaces - both options that can be pursued *before* the re-emergence of the public contestation and crisis of 1992.

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<sup>54</sup> Ronal Woodman, "Bringing Taíno Peoples Back Into History," *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 28, 2017.

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## About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

## About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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