



Antihaitianismo: Systemic Xenophobia and Racism in the Dominican Republic

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Despite their shared heritage, Haiti and the Dominican Republic have existed in a quasi cold war for centuries largely due to the rampant systemic racism that plagues the Dominican government and is cultivated by many Dominican citizens. *Antihaitianismo* is the present manifestation of racial prejudice, selective interpretation of history, and nationalistic Dominican false consciousness.ⁱ This *antihaitianismo* was bred and cultivated in the historic colonialism in both Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

The Historical Conflict on Hispaniola

There has been division between the two countries for many years. Originally, the Spanish took possession of the entire island, but only controlled the eastern side. The French progressively settled the western side. In 1797, Spain ceded the entire island to France. In 1791, Toussant Louverture initiated a slave revolution and conquered Santo Domingo in 1801, uniting Hispaniola. In 1808, Dominicans rebelled and rejoined Spain, returned the eastern side of the island to Spanish control. In 1822, however, Haiti reclaimed the entire island as the Republic of Haiti, initiating an occupation that led to Dominican hatred of Haitians that lasts until this day. In 1844, the Dominican Republic received independence from Haiti.ⁱⁱ Eventually, a “white is prime” ideal flourished during the United States’ occupation of Hispaniola beginning in 1915 in Haiti, then 1916 in the Dominican Republic. Some scholars believe that the United States helped the white elite to consolidate power by bringing institutionalized racism, amidst the United States’ own Jim Crow years, to the island and by importing Haitian labor to the Dominican Republic’s sugar cane fields.ⁱⁱⁱ The conflict rose to its height in 1937 during what is now called the Parsley Massacre, when Dominican Dictator Rafael Trujillo aimed to “whiten” the

Dominican Republic by driving out the darker skinned Haitians. Trujillo, who was known to lighten his own skin with makeup, ordered the deaths of Haitians living in border cities. These Haitians were identified by their ability to pronounce the word *perejil*, Spanish for “parsley” – most Haitians could not pronounce the “r” sound as the French “r” was distinctly different.^{iv} This massacre killed anywhere between 9,000 and 30,000 people.^v

This massacre became known as *el corte* or “the cutting.” Any persons suspected of being Haitian or of Haitian descent were at risk. They were often rounded up to be beaten and killed. Even dark-skinned Dominicans were at risk. The United States under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who had been a supporter of the Trujillo regime, called the massacre a “systematic campaign of extermination,” and required the Dominican government to pay reparations. However, there is no evidence to suggest those payments ever occurred.^{vi} The massacre was so tragic and central to the history of both nations that it was portrayed in Edwidge Danticat’s historical novel, *The Farming of Bones*, and Rita Dove’s poem, *Parsley*.

Dominican Immigration Policies

In 2010, the Dominican constitution was rewritten to strip citizenship from Dominican-born children of undocumented Haitian immigrants.^{vii} In 2013, a lawsuit was mounted against the government to validate the citizenship of Dominicans born to undocumented Haitian parents, at least before 2010. The provision would allow those who had already been granted citizenship to retain it, but not to grant citizenship moving forward. Instead, in a move filled with significant political animosity, the Dominican Supreme Court ruled that anyone born to undocumented immigrants after 1929 was no longer a citizen.^{viii} This already marginalized class could no longer legally own property or work.^{ix} Due to criticism from neighboring Caribbean countries, in 2014, the Dominican government tried to include a “fix” for Dominicans of Haitian descent to reclaim their citizenship and those rights that come with it.^x

The process of reclamation was quite arduous. It required that affected individuals prove their birth in the Dominican Republic. This could be done quite easily if their births were registered in the civil registry. If their births

were recorded, they could obtain a *cédula*, a document that details each person's ethnicity, race, and immigration status and allows them to receive a Dominican passport if legally qualified through citizenship. However, most Dominicans of Haitian descent did not have their births registered in a civil registry due to births outside of hospitals, language barriers, or fear of deportation.^{xi} The means to reclamation were unclear and quite difficult; almost every source has different requirements listed. Dominicans that could not prove their births instead had to collect multiple^{xii} identification documents, notarized testimonies from Dominican citizens attesting to their birthplace, and a two-year wait to apply for citizenship.^{xiii} The law divided Haitian immigrants into “documented” and “undocumented” categories, calling the undocumented ones “foreigners.”^{xiv}

Numerous organizations and activists claimed that the law only existed to identify and reveal undocumented immigrants and justify persecution and deportation. Many previously documented Dominicans who were adversely affected by the law did not have their citizenship restored, as most could not financially afford the process or have the time to dedicate to registration.^{xv} Furthermore, immigrants that were actually undocumented and wanted to become legal immigrants (that is, not claim citizenship but merely become documented) had to prove their identity, the length of time they had been in the country, their ties to Dominican society, their work, and their socio-economic condition.^{xvi} To prove their identity, they had to attain a passport or birth certificate from Haiti, which involved both monetary and time costs. It was possible to attain legal status without identification but it required seven sworn statements from Dominican citizens testifying to the immigrant's life in the country. If immigrants managed to compile these necessary documents, they then had to face long lines that extended from dawn until dusk.

It is not unfair for a nation to want to know who resides within its boundaries. Dominican Republic officials asserted that they wanted to help solve the problem of statelessness on Hispaniola by giving all persons a “legal identity” through documentation.^{xvii} Being undocumented leaves individuals vulnerable: they do not qualify for state benefits (like healthcare or education), they can be deported, and in times of unrest, they have no protections under the law. However, the Dominican government made it exceptionally difficult for undocumented Haitians to become documented,

which is surprising considering that the Dominican Republic benefits from Haitian migrants who form a steady source of low cost construction, agriculture, and domestic labor.^{xviii} As such, it appears as though this entire proceeding was based on deep-seated racial stigmas of fairer-skinned Dominicans about dark-skinned Haitians rooted in the historical cultural conflict between the two nations resulting in a rampant *antihaitianismo* culture.

The remnants of these policies have left at least 210,000 people stateless, though the Dominican government claims only 13,000 belonging to no country.^{xix} Since 2015, many Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent are “voluntarily deporting” themselves out of fear that they will be forcefully removed; more than 70,000 have fled across the border. Because of the lasting effects of the 2010 earthquake, Haiti faces a housing crisis and is unequipped for a mass influx of people from across the border. As such, tent cities are growing on the Haitian border where deportees face malnutrition, poor sanitation, and a lack of clean water; frequent outbreaks of diseases have already claimed hundreds of lives. Though these policies are clearly detrimental for Haitians, because of rampant anti-Haitian racism, the Dominican Republic has not increased efforts to help Haitian immigrants or Dominicans of Haitian descent.

***Antihaitianismo* Rhetoric in the Present Day**

Despite efforts from international organizations like Amnesty International to stem the hate seeping from the Dominican Republic, cultural xenophobia has only blossomed. This ingrained racism is learned at a young age and reinforced as citizens grow into adults. Analysis of textbooks from the early 20th century reveal that what Dominican children learn about their national history is blatant, discriminatory lies about Haitians and the Republic of Haiti.^{xxi} Dominican history textbooks portray Haitians as the “eternal enemies of the Dominican people.”^{xxii} Haitians are portrayed as savage, beast-like creatures who exist only to destroy the Hispanic traditions in the Dominican Republic.^{xxiii} Images of Haitians are typically portrayed with crude, ape-like features, perpetuating rhetoric that Haitians are animals, not humans with inherent dignity.^{xxiv} Students are, quite literally, educated to hate.

Though those textbooks were written in the 20th century, *antihaitianismo* is still extremely present in the Dominican elite. Rhetoric from the government and from Dominican citizens suggests *antihaitianismo* ideals are still widely believed and practiced. It is present in modern political discourse (as evidenced by the unreasonable immigration policies in place today). It is present in the nation's elite's literature; Joaquín Balaguer's *La Isla Revés* became a national bestseller though it detailed the "historical misfortune of [having to live] next to Haiti."^{xxv} Balaguer, who was president of the Dominican Republic six times and as such had significant cultural influence, perpetuated the idea of white Dominicans, beguiling that there is no black heritage or ancestry in the Dominican race.^{xxvi} Manuel Núñez's *El Ocaso de la Nación Dominicana* details that decisive steps must be taken against Dominican revisionists who hope to reveal the truth about Dominican history in order to retain the cultural identity of the Dominican Republic in the face of Haitian aggression.^{xxvii} He calls the revisionists "anti-Dominican" and thus, pro-Haitian.

This hate is evidenced broadly by the government as well. The government blames the documentation problem and its inability to help more people from the immigrant population. Dominican law prohibits undocumented children from continuing in school past grade eight.^{xxviii} They require Dominicans of Haitian descent to constantly carry a *cédula*. Though some might compare these to the United States' permanent resident "green" cards, they more closely resemble South African apartheid "passes." Requiring testimony from Dominican citizens to receive documentation is prejudicial. It states that valid testimony can only come from Dominicans – that Haitians cannot be trusted to give truthful testimony. Furthermore, it makes it almost impossible for Haitian immigrants to become documented because there are few Dominicans willing to testify for Haitians, both out of their own xenophobic prejudice and out of fear of persecution for supporting Haitians. Though the government promised there would be no mass deportations as a result of the immigration laws, by the end of 2015 there had been at least 10,000 deportations with more to follow.^{xxix} Most frighteningly, Dominicans of Haitian descent who voluntarily deported themselves after the controversial immigration laws claimed that they were more afraid of aggression from Dominican citizens than from the Dominican government. In the Dominican Republic, hate isn't restricted to the government or the elites; hate is spewed on the radio, at domino tables,

and on the streets. Narratives such as “Haitians eat dirt,” “Haitians are unsanitary,” “Haitians are ungrateful traitors,” are common amongst radio show hosts and civilians alike.^{xxx} In response to a Haitian boycott of Dominican products, Dominicans asked what the Haitians would eat “since they produce nothing,” and that the Dominican Republic is the only nation that supports Haiti, although until very recently, the United States has overwhelmingly supported Haiti.^{xxxii} Newspapers in Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic, print messages of the “invasion of a dark army whose greatest weapon [is their] high birth rate...” and the need to “defend the fatherland against uneducated savages.”^{xxxiii} Kreyol (Haitian) stations close to the border warned of ethnic violence against Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent by gangs, which some deportees have taken to calling *tiguères*, thugs or tigers, and who were credited with having burned down homes, stabbed and victimized, and even on occasion killed Haitians. Threats to burn down Haitian homes come from employers, coworkers, and even neighbors. Haitians now living in the tent cities on the Haitian border tell stories of being chased from hills to live in poverty, but even then they would rather live without regular food than with the dangers that lurk across the border.^{xxxiii}

Conclusion

The *antihaitianismo* rhetoric that exists in Dominican culture will not end on its own. There needs to be more involvement from human rights organizations, both national and worldwide, before this systematic xenophobia leads to another mass genocide on Hispaniola. We Are All Dominicans (WAAD), a United States based human rights organization, fights to raise awareness about persecution in the Dominican Republic and build a Dominican identity that is not based on *antihaitianismo*. However, even in United States, they receive much criticism for being anti-Dominican.^{xxxiv} In July 2015, Haitians in Port-au-Prince, Haiti and Little Haiti, Miami marched in protest of the Dominican government for the Dominicans of Haitian descent that faced deportation.^{xxxv xxxvi} In 2015, the Coalition for Human Rights in the Dominican Republic led several protests of the laws in New York City.^{xxxvii} There has not been enough investigation into this topic. The Dominican Republic needs to be called out globally for its treatment of Haitian immigrants.

Ignoring this systemic racism in the Dominican Republic makes a statement that xenophobic rhetoric can remain unchallenged, potentially encouraging other nations' xenophobic groups through the message that racial victimization is not a serious issue. We cannot continue to believe that racial stigma is a thing of the past. It is very real and very present in the Dominican Republic and worldwide.

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ⁱ Ernesto Sagás, "A Case of Mistaken Identity: Antihaitianismo in Dominican Culture," <http://faculty.webster.edu/corbetre/haiti/miscopic/dominican/antihaiti.htm>.

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^{xii} I could not ascertain exactly how many in my research as no other thinktanks had it listed, and the official government publications on the law were difficult to understand.

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