

The Weaponization of Language against Ethnic Haitians in the Dominican Republic

MADELINE SOINEY

ABSTRACT: In the Dominican Republic, Haitian immigrants and Haitian-Dominicans are marked by an “Otherness” that deprives them of cultural and legal Dominican identity, or *dominicanidad*. This paper explores the link between language and power in the Dominican Republic, demonstrating how language has been weaponized against Haitian migrants and their descendants in an attempt to keep power in the hands of those who are deemed to be “true Dominicans.”

KEYWORDS: Linguistic violence. Dominican Republic. Haiti. Anti-Haitianism.



O armamento da linguagem contra os haitianos étnicos na República Dominicana

RESUMO: Na República Dominicana, os imigrantes haitianos e os haitiano-dominicanos são marcados por uma “alteridade” que os priva da identidade cultural e legal dominicana, ou dominicanidade. Este artigo explora a ligação entre linguagem e poder na República Dominicana, demonstrando como a linguagem foi armada contra os migrantes haitianos e seus descendentes na tentativa de manter o poder nas mãos daqueles que são considerados “verdadeiros dominicanos”.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Violência linguística. República Dominicana. Haiti. Antihaitianismo.

MADELINE SOINEY

Master’s student in the Latin American, Caribbean, and Iberian Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Email: soiney@wisc.edu

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1 Introduction

For those living near the Haitian-Dominican border in October 1937, the ability to say a single word—the Spanish *perejil*, meaning parsley—became a matter of life and death. Individuals who failed to trill the ‘r’ or enunciate the gravelly ‘j’ sound in *perejil* risked exposing themselves as Kreyòl-speaking Haitians or Haitian-Dominicans—a sure death sentence for those captured by Trujillo-regime soldiers operating under orders to kill anyone of Haitian descent that they encountered (AYUSO, 2011). For six days, Dominican soldiers carried out this slaughter, commonly referred to in the United States as the “Parsley Massacre,” due to the shibboleth used by the Trujillo regime to identify those not considered to be “pure” Dominicans. Soldiers disposed of the victims’ bodies in the Massacre River — ironically not named after the Massacre of 1937, but after a previous incident in 1728, in which a group of Frenchmen was murdered by Spanish settlers at the border between the two colonies of Hispaniola (ALAMI; FERNÁNDEZ, 2019). Both the 1728 and 1937 massacres served as symbolic representations of the expulsion of French influence from the Dominican Republic. In the most extreme way, the 1937 massacre exemplifies the *anti-haitianismo* — prejudice or discrimination against ethnic Haitians — that exists in the Dominican Republic. Anti-Haitianism “must be understood as more than racism,” because “it arose initially as a consciousness of colonial difference, an identity marked first by language (French versus Spanish; the import of the linguistic ascription of alterity still lingers today)” (DERBY, 1994, p. 495). This linguistic and cultural expulsion of the Haitians has seeped into the present day, albeit in a less conspicuous fashion.

Currently, the Dominican Republic faces a paradox in which perceptions of the Dominican identity are simultaneously exclusive and inclusive. As part of an increasingly transnational Dominican nation, members of the diaspora are embraced by the Dominican government as being entitled to their *dominicanidad*; however, Haitian immigrants and Haitian-Dominicans are not treated with the same grace. Rather, they are marked with an Otherness that distinguishes them from “true Dominicans.” This rhetoric of *anti-haitianismo* has leaked into the Dominican legal system, and the

country's discontinuance of birthright citizenship has disproportionately targeted Dominicans of Haitian origin.

This paper explores the intersections of race, identity, and citizenship in the Dominican Republic. In particular, I focus on the link between language and power in the country by analyzing literature and dominant narratives in the Dominican Republic spanning from the Trujillo dictatorship in the twentieth century to the present. Historically, the cultural weight of the Spanish language in the Dominican Republic has yielded linguistic violence against Kreyòl-speaking ethnic Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans. In turn, this anticipates other forms of violence, including the symbolic and literal expulsion of Haitians from the nation. The cultural idea of Dominicans of "pure stock," permeates the country's social discourse and understanding of identity. The rhetorical shift regarding the Dominican diaspora from *dominicanos ausentes* to "economic heroes" further nuances ideas of what constitutes *dominicanidad* and who is entitled to it. Race plays a fundamental role in the discourse surrounding Dominican identity; consequently, anti-Blackness and its links to language must be centered on the discussion of anti-Haitianism in the Dominican Republic. These factors highlight the ways in which language has been weaponized against Haitian migrants and their descendants in the Dominican Republic, in an attempt to keep power in the hands of those who are deemed to be "true Dominicans."

Hispaniola functions as a poignant case study of the role that linguistic violence and anti-Blackness play in conceptual formations of national identity and the "Other." Recent anti-Haitian policies have placed the Dominican Republic in the global spotlight, with international organizations condemning the actions and rhetoric of the Dominican government. As a result of the Dominican State's retroactive revocation of birthright citizenship through Judgment TC/0168/13, a decision often referred to as *La Sentencia*, the denial of Dominican cultural citizenship for ethnic Haitians has subsequently been expanded to include the denial of legal citizenship. This state-sponsored anti-Haitianism is visible both in the actions of the Dominican government and the official discourse surrounding conceptions of the Dominican nation and

its members. As this situation continues to unfold, understanding its historical context — as well as the linguistic mechanisms through which Haitians are persecuted in the Dominican Republic — is essential in bringing an end to conflict.

2 Language, Identity and Power

The construction and use of language is intimately linked to identity and power dynamics. Language influences the way people identify themselves and others, and the multiple identities that an individual holds shape their language use. Language ideologies shape the attitudes held by and toward various groups, cementing biased beliefs about certain languages and their speakers. The imposition of linguistic hierarchies, which assign ranked values to particular languages, grants preferential status to the dominant language in a country, and — by extension — to its native speakers (AHEARN, 2017). In the Dominican Republic, the value placed upon Spanish distinguishes native Kreyòl speakers as “inferior” to native Spanish speakers. Consequently, these linguistic hierarchies and values “affirm reformulated individual and collective identities” (ROJO, 2017, p. 05) within Dominican society, since Spanish fluency is viewed as a key marker of *dominicanidad*. In general, the prevailing language ideology serves to benefit the dominant group within a society, often at the expense of marginalized populations. This rings are true in Dominican society, where the preference for Spanish over Kreyòl perpetuates the power imbalance that keeps Haitian migrants and their descendants oppressed.

Language and race can be viewed as co-constitutive processes, since they are both “created out of continuous and repeated discourses emerging from individuals and institutions within specific histories, political economic systems, and everyday interactions” (ALIM et al., 2020, p. 01). In this way, the construction of language and race are both social processes contingent on the context in which they exist. Additionally, language is often used as a tool for obscuring racism, as prejudiced statements targeting speakers of a particular language can act as a substitute or camouflage for discrimination against racial groups (CHUN; LO, 2020).

This consequently allows people to disguise their racial prejudices by making judgments not explicitly about race, but about language competency, style, or practices. Thus, linguistic violence against Kreyòl speakers in the Dominican Republic is inseparable from racial and ethnic violence against Black Haitians.

Language plays an integral role in the formation of a national identity. In general, nations behave as an “imagined community” of sorts, fabricating a seemingly uniform national culture to maintain stability and coherence among their citizens (ANDERSON, 1983). To maintain this false homogeneity, a nation must privilege certain symbols or characteristics, which community members consequently use to define their own identity and establish boundaries between themselves and the “Other.” The establishment of a de facto or de jure national language is one way in which these national symbols are formed. By rallying citizens around a particular language, countries ostracize speakers of different languages by depriving them of a common identifying factor.

Similarly, the “cult of *mestizaje*” as a way to describe the racial miscegenation of Latin Americans is often employed as a tool for building solidarity among populations with origins in Latin American countries. However, these discussions usually center around the European and indigenous heritage of Latin Americans — while ignoring African roots in the region. In the words of Tatiana Flores (2021, p. 71), centering “*mestizaje* in Latin American political discourse has clear eugenicist implications,” since it serves to erase Blackness from national narratives. Therefore, the language used to describe heritage in Latin America has concrete implications for the widespread perception of race and its connection to national identity.

3 Historical Context

The current situation on the island of Hispaniola is a result of a long and contentious history between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. In 1822, the newly independent Haiti took control of the eastern part of the island, Santo Domingo (now the Dominican Republic), to prevent Spanish imperial intervention. After the

unification of the island ended in 1844, the Dominican Republic doubled its efforts to distinguish itself from Haiti (MYERS, 2019). As a result, Dominicans perpetuated *antihaitianismo*, which established Dominicans as culturally and racially superior to their Western neighbors. Since then, the formation of Dominican identity has historically been a struggle to create a clear separation between the Dominican and Haitian.

The relationship between these two countries was further complicated by the first U.S. military occupation of the Dominican Republic (1916 - 1924) and Haiti (1915 - 1932). In particular, the precarious legal status of Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic stems from the United States' introduction of Haitian laborers into the Dominican Republic during this period. In 1918, the United States prompted the Haitian government to establish a new constitution which prioritized the purchase of Haitian land by U.S. corporations (GARCÍA-PEÑA, 2016b). This pushed Haitians to migrate to the Dominican Republic in search of work on U.S.-owned sugarcane plantations, which dominated the Dominican economy. Haitian migrant laborers were brought to the other side of the island through U.S. organized programs; however, these migrants arrived without official documentation, or a path to citizenship or permanent residency (MARTÍNEZ, 1999). Thus, their only choice in terms of deportation was to continue living and working in the abysmal conditions of the *bateyes* — established camps in or adjacent to sugar plantations — in the Dominican Republic. The U.S. occupation of Hispaniola was marked by paternalistic rhetoric and white supremacist ideologies that “left a legacy of anti-Blackness that has condemned Haitian-descended Dominicans to poverty and exclusion in the Dominican Republic” (GARCÍA-PEÑA, 2016b, [s.p.]).

During this period, the United States established the *Guardia Nacional Dominicana* (GND), which served under the command of the U.S. Marine Corps. Future dictator Rafael Trujillo served as the general of the GND and became the right-hand man of the United States in the Dominican Republic (ROORDA, 1998). After the 1930 coup, Trujillo capitalized on his U.S. support and utilized the GND to establish his dictatorship, which lasted until his assassination

in 1961. Trujillo is often considered the most malevolent dictator in Latin American history for his human rights abuses, especially against Haitian migrants and Haitian-Dominicans. However, his anticommunist politics helped him maintain U.S. support and operate with impunity throughout his rule (COLEMAN, 2015).

State-sponsored *antihaitianismo* rose drastically in prominence and was formally institutionalized during Trujillato. Trujillo's nationalist rhetoric was Hispanophilic in nature, emphasizing the white European roots of the Dominican nation. His regime feared the potential "ennegrecimiento" of the Dominican people as a result of Haitian influence, viewing hybridization as a threat to the fundamentally "Hispanic culture" of the Dominican Republic (GARCÍA-PEÑA, 2016a). The anti-Haitian ideology of the Trujillo dictatorship culminated in the Massacre of 1937, which serves as a quintessential example of language being wielded as a weapon in the Dominican Republic. Under Trujillo's orders, Dominican soldiers murdered sugarcane workers near the border who they perceived to be Haitian (based on racialized perceptions of Haitians as Black). The number of victims of this genocide is unknown; however, estimates range from 14,000 to 40,000 victims over a span of six days (FUMAGALLI, 2015). The name "Parsley Massacre" derives from the fact that — in addition to racial markers — the victims were allegedly profiled based on their pronunciation of *perejil*, the Spanish word for "parsley". Thus, Haitian migrants' use of language resulted in violence against them if they failed to conform to Dominican notions of linguistic purity. Subsequently, the Dominican State refused to acknowledge their role in the massacre and issued a moratorium in newspapers covering the slaughter (BISHOP; FERNANDEZ, 2017). The Trujillo regime later painted this act of violence as part of the perpetual Dominican struggle for sovereignty over Haiti.

Though many believed that Trujillo's death in 1961 would mark the beginning of a new era, state-sponsored *antihaitianismo* continued post-dictatorship. This hope was short-lived, as democratically elected Juan Bosch was forced out of office after only a few months. When young officers attempted to restore Bosch to presidency, the United States decided to intervene. With the

Cuban Revolution still fresh in U.S. policymakers' minds, President Lyndon B. Johnson sent troops to the Dominican Republic in 1965, with the unofficial mission of preventing the Dominican Republic from establishing a communist government (COLEMAN, 2015). U.S. occupation in this period resulted in the presidency of Joaquín Balaguer, a key actor in the former Trujillo regime. Like Trujillo, Balaguer engaged in suppressive politics, largely based on anti-Blackness and *antihaitianismo*. Consequently, Balaguer's time in office cemented the Trujillato's legacy of anti-Haitianism, which has subsequently haunted Dominican politics for generations.

Sixty years after the end of the dictatorship, recent migration and citizenship policies in the Dominican Republic marked a resurgence of Trujillo-era policies designed specifically to target Haitians and Haitian-Dominican citizens. The Dominican Republic rewrote its constitution in 2010, including the "In Transit" Clause, which states that those born in the Dominican Republic to parents who are "in transit" are not granted Dominican citizenship (SAGÁS; ROMÁN, 2017). In 2013, the Dominican government revoked birthright citizenship in a decision referred to as "La Sentencia." This decision disproportionately affected Dominicans of Haitian ancestry, since a majority of them lacked the official documentation necessary to prove citizenship. As a result, hundreds of thousands of people of Haitian descent were left stateless and not considered citizens of any country. Since then, tens of thousands of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans have been expelled from the Dominican Republic, including those who lived the country's entire lives. Those that remain in the Dominican Republic without proper documentation cannot receive a government identification card and, thus, have been stripped of their ability to work or go to school, their protection under the law, their livelihoods, and their dignity.

After issuing *La Sentencia*, the Dominican government established the *Plan de Regularización Nacional de Extranjeros* (National Regularization Plan for Foreigners). This plan stated that those affected by *La Sentencia* had to register officially with the Dominican government by June 2015. To remain legally in the Dominican Republic, individuals had to prove their family's legal

residency since 1929. However, most Haitian laborers do not have access to the official documentation necessary for registration. Furthermore, the provisions of the *Plan* were vague and left many Haitian migrants in an unclear position with regard to their national identity. Rumors that the registration process would actually result in deportation prevented many Haitian-Dominicans from seeking regularization. Consequently, the *Plan de Regularización* has not been largely successful, and Haitian-Dominicans in the Dominican Republic remain disenfranchised.

4 Invention of *Dominicanidad*

Group identity is marked by boundaries and constructed through negation; that is a group often defines itself not based on what it *is* but on what it *is not*. With respect to Hispaniola, this means that often the “Dominican” is simply conceived of as “that which is not Haitian.” The rigid distinction between the two nations necessitates a sort of “purity” present in the concept of *dominicanidad*. However, this notion of a pure Dominican culture has inevitably evolved, as the physical and cultural markers used to distinguish between Dominicans and Haitians have become increasingly blurred over time and across space.

The notion of cultural purity requires that the factors differentiating between the self and other must necessarily be fixed and rigid (BHABHA, 2004). However, this is not how cultures function in reality; rather, cultural identities are fluid and changing. The phenomenon of hybridization negates the existence of cultural purity, and “the very idea of a pure, ‘ethnically cleansed’ national identity can only be achieved through the death, literal and figurative, of the complex interweavings of history, and the culturally contingent borderlines of modern nationhood” (BHABHA, 2004, p. 07). Such is the case with the Dominican Republic, where the realization of a cultural purity is impossible without a forceful, comprehensive eradication of the Other—a futile undertaking, given the deep-rooted legacy of cultural exchange between the two nations of Hispaniola.

Furthermore, the invention of culture and identity is an ongoing process, rather than a historical phenomenon. This process of hybridization creates a liminal “Third Space,” which functions as a cultural “in-between” breaking the binary between two seemingly separate identities. Within this space, individuals “deploy the cultural hybridity of their borderline conditions to ‘translate’, and therefore reinscribe, the social imaginary” (BHABHA, 2004, p. 09). Thus, the “Third Space” is a site of the recurrent re-definition of identity. In the Dominican Republic, those inhabiting this “in-between” space, such as *rayanos* and Haitian-Dominicans, are constantly transforming conceptions of what constitutes *dominicanidad* — and who is entitled to it.

Throughout his dictatorship, Trujillo’s nationalist rhetoric shaped the country’s perception of Dominican identity, leaving behind a legacy of oppressive policies. During the dictatorship, the idea of *pura cepa*, or “pure stock” Dominicans rose in prominence (SAGÁS; ROMÁN, 2017). Trujillo painted Haitian migrants as threats to Dominican culture and security, consequently promulgating anti-Haitian and anti-Black rhetoric throughout the country. The dictator’s emphasis on cultural purity was echoed by the *trujillistas teóricos* — Trujillo’s intellectual elites responsible for reinforcing the ideological roots of *antihaitianismo* in the Dominican Republic (MATEO, 1993). Through the work of these Dominican intellectual figures, disassociation from the Haitian identity became further cemented in ideas surrounding Dominican cultural purity.

In particular, Trujillo’s propensity for *hispanofilia* — his infatuation for all that is Spanish in origin — was embodied in both his words and actions throughout the dictatorship. During the early years of the Trujillato, *hispanismo* was further spread by ideologues, such as Manuel Arturo Peña Batlle, who asserted that “the [Dominican] state’s legitimacy derived from Hispanic tradition” and therefore, “Dominicans needed to return to their cultural heritage to reinvigorate the nation” (BATLLE, 1952, p. 560). By ingraining these ideals in the discourse surrounding the *dominicanidad*, Trujillo’s intellectual army painted the Dominican Republic as an inherently Spanish-speaking nation, both linguistically and culturally superior to Haiti. Trujillato’s emphasis on the Spanish heritage

of the Dominican Republic imposed not only linguistic and cultural value, but also a racial judgment, since Europeanness was associated with whiteness.

Hispanophilia which privileges the European origins of the Dominican Republic was evident in the policies enacted by the Trujillo regime. The dictator's *hispanofilia* resulted in an attempted *dominicanización* campaign at the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti (MYERS, 2019). This campaign allowed no room for cultural hybridization; anything that was not considered to be "purely" Dominican (and European in origin) was seen as a threat to the nation. Trujillo formally changed the French names of rivers and towns to Spanish ones (MAYES, 2014), an explicit example demonstrating the linguistic hierarchy of the Dominican Republic. Some historians assert that these Hispanophile policies were, in reality, a response to Trujillo's own alleged Haitian ancestry (MYERS, 2019). Thus, Trujillo's dogmatic emphasis on Spanish ancestry and language became a tool for the reconstruction of his self-identity — and, consequently, for the reconstruction of the Dominican nation's identity. The advent of Hispanophilia in the Dominican Republic is crucial for understanding the dynamics between the two nations of Hispaniola, since this linguistic ideology establishes a series of values associated with language, race, and origin. Consequently, language becomes a space in which individuals' identities are controlled. In the Dominican Republic, this policing of language serves to sustain these fictional concepts of Dominican "purity" and punish those who speak Kreyòl, depriving them of their claims to Dominican identity.

Historically, Dominican narratives have centered on the nation's disavowal of *negritud* — especially during the Trujillo dictatorship. These narratives often painted Haitians as the Black, barbaric adversary of the white, civilized Dominican. Race-based *antihaitianismo* seeped into all aspects of Dominican life, including the nation's educational system. Throughout the twentieth century, Dominican schools became "pedagogical laboratories" that led children to a national disidentification with Blackness (MAYES, 2014). As Minister of Education, Joaquín Balaguer responded to growing fears over the perceived *ennegrecimiento* of the country

by requiring school's curriculum to include texts such as César Nicolás Penson's *Virgenes de Galindo*, which characterizes the Dominican Republic as an unmistakably non-Black country, diametrically opposed to Haiti (GARCÍA-PEÑA, 2016a). More than 60 years after this decision (and over 160 years after they were written), these books still require readings for every public-school student in the Dominican Republic — demonstrating that notions of Dominican “purity” are extant in the country, kept alive by the linguistic violence present in the nation's education system.

Unlike the Dominican Republic, Haiti has labeled itself as a “Black Republic” since declaring its independence. Tatiana Flores (2021, p. 59) characterizes the Haitian Revolution as the “most significant challenge to white supremacy *ever*,” since it “challenged the ontological order of the West and the global order of colonialism”. As the first and only independence movement borne by a successful slave revolt, the Haitian Revolution threatened U.S. and European hegemony, which asserted that Black populations would always be racially inferior subjects of imperial powers. This link between Haitians' racial and national identity is evidenced in the republic's founding documents, in which “blacks” serve as the official and unambiguous racial label for all Haitian citizens (HAÏTI, 2013). This document sets the stage for perceptions of Blackness as native, and whiteness as the Other in Haiti — and subsequently, of Haiti as the racial inverse of the Dominican Republic.

Seeking to distinguish themselves from “Black” Haitians and renounce the island's African heritage, Dominicans often choose to describe their race as “Indio,” despite the almost-immediate eradication of the island's indigenous population after the arrival of Europeans in the fifteenth century. The label of *indio* functions as a euphemism for Blackness — ascribing the non-European lineage of Dominicans to the island's native people, rather than to the enslaved Africans brought to the Caribbean during the colonial period. This *indigenismo* — the “mythical exaltation of Native Taíno heroes” (GARCÍA-PEÑA, 2016a, p. 34) — affirms the cultural and ethnic integrity of the Dominican people, since the indigenous peoples were seen as noble and dignified in comparison to the Black populations of the island. This demonstrates how

Dominicans use language intentionally to define national identity, by employing racial labels that “water down” the Blackness of Dominicans.

During the dictatorship, the Trujillo regime institutionalized anti-Blackness through racial categorizations originating in the colonial *casta* system. During the Trujillato, the Dominican government formally established *indio* as a “non-black, mixed, race/color category” which served as an unequivocal distinction between Dominicans and Haitians, who were labeled as “Black” on government documents (SIMMONS, 2009). As a result, Dominican citizens were forced to reject their Blackness to acknowledge their *dominicanidad*. Over sixty years after the end of the Trujillo dictatorship, Dominicans still struggle to free themselves from the rigid, anti-Black ideological framework of the regime, and prevailing discourses surrounding *dominicanidad* continue to favor linguistic markers of national identity rooted in white supremacy.

5 The Borderland as a “Third Space”

The Haitian-Dominican border functions as a source of cultural and racial hybridization. This point of distinction is more arbitrary than effectual — in essence, it functions as a permeable barrier that is seen by residents on both sides as mutual property. Those who inhabit the border, known as *ryanos*, are in most cases bilingual and embrace the cultural hybridity of this “Third Space”. Prior to the first U.S. occupation of Hispaniola, there was little separation between communities on either side. However, the border became a far more concrete barrier when Trujillo “declared the river [to be] the impermeable boundary that separated two countries which he ‘imagined’ as far more different and distant from each other than they really were — one Spanish, the other French; one white, the other black” (AYUSO, 2011, p. 51). With this decision, the Haitian-Dominican border became more pronounced in a legal and political sense. Nevertheless, the border continues to serve as a cultural, linguistic, and racial “Third Space”, in which the distinction between “Haitian” and “Dominican” is blurred.

The *Rayanos* living in the borderlands undermine the narrative of the Dominican Republic and Haiti as two opposed countries. They live similar daily lives and frequently interact with their counterparts across the border. Since *rayanos* are the product of racial and cultural hybridization, they have likewise become targets of the rise of *antihaitianismo*. Dominicans living in the borderlands have been particularly harmed by anti-Black rhetoric and practices, especially with regard to the persecution of Afro-religious groups. Despite the long-standing history of Afro-Caribbean syncretic belief systems in the Dominican Republic, Vodou and related practices are seen as inherently Haitian in nature and have played a significant role in the demonization of Haitians in the Dominican Republic. In fact, Vodou is still illegal in the Dominican Republic and “those who are caught practicing it can be fined, put in jail, or even ‘deported,’ suggesting that they are, ultimately, Haitians and not Dominicans” (FUMAGALLI, 2015, p. 110).

This vilification of Afro-religious practices amounted to legal discrimination and physical violence towards *Rayanos*, as made evident by the assassination of Afro-religious leaders. In the border town of San Juan de la Maguana, faith healer Dios Olivorio Mateo Ledesma — known as Papá Liborio — amassed a following of *Rayanos* at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, in 1922, Papá Liborio was assassinated by U.S. Marines who feared the faith healer would provoke resistance in the borderlands (FUMAGALLI, 2015). Even after Papá Liborio’s death, *Rayanos* continued to engage in Afro-religious practices — albeit in secret. After the end of the Trujillo dictatorship, *Rayanos* were still unable to freely engage in these Afro-religious rituals, known as *Liborismo*. The followers of Papá Liborio engaged in spiritual traditions such as “fervently reciting an *oración* — which in Spanish means both ‘Christian prayer’ and ‘magic charm” (FUMAGALLI, 2015, p. 202). This highlights the important linguistic elements present in these Vodou customs, and the way they incorporate both the Spanish and African heritage of *Rayanos*. The *Liboristas* organized their community according to social and spiritual systems that defied Dominican national standards. As retribution for their transgression of conventional *dominicanidad*, the community of Palma Sola

was attacked by the Dominican military in 1962, resulting in over 800 deaths (FUMAGALLI, 2015). Trujillo saw the linguistic, racial, and cultural hybridity embraced by Afro-religious groups such as the *Liboristas* as a direct threat to Dominican national identity. The Palma Sola Massacre is another example of linguistic racism against Black Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans that yielded physical violence.

6 Writing Border Literature

Literature plays a fundamental role in conceptualizing the Haitian-Dominican border. Fumagalli (2015, p. 15 - 16) highlights the “*texture*” of the borderland, which she describes as “the ongoing processes that go into the making and remaking of a certain place and the complex set of networks that shape it”. By writing literature focused on the border region, both Dominican and Haitian authors use language to renegotiate and broaden the scope of *dominicanidad*, especially for *Rayanos* who live near the Haitian-Dominican border.

In particular, these literary works underscore the linguistic, racial, and physical violence perpetrated against Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans in the Dominican Republic. The historical legacy of anti-Haitianism and anti-Blackness present in the country is exemplified in the novel *The Farming of Bones* by Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat. Through the fictional story of Amabelle Dèsière, a Haitian immigrant who works as a servant for a wealthy Dominican family, Danticat recounts the violence towards Black *Rayanos* on the border leading up to, during, and after the 1937 massacre. In addition to the physical violence suffered by those in the novel, including the murder of Amabelle’s lover, Sebastien Onius, Danticat also conveys the cultural violence of anti-Blackness that manifests in less conspicuous ways within Dominican society. In particular, the language used by characters in *The Farming of Bones* to describe the racial identities of themselves and others reveals the ideologies championing whiteness in the Dominican Republic, and the novel’s characterization of *Rayanos* exemplifies the linguistic and racial hybridity of the border region.

While working on the estate of Don Ignacio — a member of the Dominican elite — Amabelle tends to his pregnant daughter, Señora Valencia. When Señora Valencia gives birth to twins, she immediately notices that her daughter, Rosalinda, is darker in complexion than her son. In response to this observation, Señora Valencia asks Amabelle, “Do you think my daughter will always be this color? My poor love, what if she’s mistaken for one of your people?” (DANTICAT, 1998, p. 12). These questions highlight the anti-Blackness prevalent in Dominican society, where dark skin is inherently seen as a negative trait. Señora Valencia desperately hopes that her daughter’s skin will lighten as she grows, so that she appears more racially white, and thus more “Dominican”. In asking these questions, Señora Valencia demonstrates the arbitrary nature of racial distinctions between Dominicans and Haitians, based on skin color alone, Rosalinda could be visually identified as a member of either group. Furthermore, this question acknowledges the negative implications of being Haitian (or at least being perceived as Haitian) in the Dominican Republic — which Señora Valencia does not want her daughter to face, especially as a member of the Dominican elite. Though said offhandedly, this type of commentary highlights a racial dogma that perpetuates the erasure of Blackness as part of Dominican identity.

Later in the novel, Señora Valencia describes her twins as “my Spanish prince and my Indian princess” (DANTICAT, 1998, p. 29) — a manifestation of the two “acceptable” lineages of Dominican citizens: Spanish and Taíno. Since her son, Rafael, is whiter in complexion than Rosalinda, he is seen as Spanish — whereas Señora Valencia must reconcile her daughter’s darker skin with her desire to be seen as an “honorable” member of the elite class. Thus, Rosalinda — in the words of her mother—does not have a Haitian appearance, (that is to say — Black), but rather the “profile of Anacaona, a true Indian queen” (DANTICAT, 1998, p. 29). Regal and dignified, Rosalinda’s invented indigenous heritage makes her “Dominican” in a way that presumed Haitian heritage would not. Since phenotypic markers preclude darker-skinned Dominicans from fully embracing the whiteness of their Spanish ancestors, they are obliged to settle for the “next best thing” — their indigenous roots.

Furthermore, *The Farming of Bones* demonstrates the ambiguity of racial and cultural markers that distinguish Haitians and Dominicans living in the borderlands. As she heads towards Haiti in pursuit of safety, Amabelle encounters two women that are also desperate to cross the border, who “seemed like they might be Dominicanas — or a mix of Haitian and Dominican — in some cases it was hard to tell” (DANTICAT, 1998, p. 171). She later discovers that these women are, in fact, Dominican, and do not speak any Kreyòl. Thus, even *Rayano* Dominicans demonstrated their native fluency in Spanish — a typical marker of “pure” *dominicanidad* — could not shield themselves from the same violence faced by Haitians in the borderlands due to their Blackness. Later, in a tent camp on the Haitian side of the border, Amabelle encounters a Dominican man who is “black like the nun who came to re-dress his wounds. He’d been mistaken for one of [the Haitians] and had received a machete blow across the back of his neck for it. There were many like him in the room” (DANTICAT, 1998, p. 217). As made evident by these two events in *The Farming of Bones*, Dominicans, Haitians, and Dominican-Haitians alike living in the borderlands were met with the same fate. This further proves that *Rayanos*, regardless of nationality or citizenship, embody the hybridization between Dominican and Haitian culture. As such, those who live in the borderlands continually transgress conventional perimeters of *dominicanidad* and redefine what it means to be “Dominican”.

7 Deterritorializing the Dominican Nation

In the era of globalization, countries have become increasingly “transnational” and notions of who is considered to be “native” have consequently been renegotiated. Many modern immigrants are no longer forced to integrate into their host country at the expense of ties with their homeland — instead, these “transmigrants” identify themselves by the relationships they maintain with multiple states across international borders. For this reason, scholars have begun to define these “deterritorialized nation-states” using social — rather than geographic — boundaries (GLICK SCHILLER et al., 1995).

This phenomenon of deterritorializing the nation-state has led to the revival of a “politics of differentiation”, given that in a nation no longer clearly defined by physical parameters, citizens must find other criteria by which to distinguish between “true members” and the “Other.” In the Dominican Republic, ethnic Haitians have borne the brunt of this “politics of differentiation”, serving as a demographic border that marks the limit of *dominicanidad* — that is to say, Haitians are inherently seen as the antithesis of Dominicans and are consequently estranged from general conceptions of Dominican national identity. The process of globalization has rendered notions of an ethnic *dominicanidad* an increasingly unsustainable marker of national identity due to transmigration. As a result, *dominicanidad* has been redefined in terms of autochthony — an essence of “nativeness” borne by diasporic communities and Dominicans on the island (so long as they do not have Haitian ancestry). This renewed version of national identity has in turn cultivated “long-distance nationalists” within diaspora communities, who “go to great lengths to revitalize, reconstruct, or reinvent not only their traditions but their political claims to territory and histories from which they have been displaced” (GLICK SCHILLER et al., 1995, p. 52). Despite their physical separation from the Dominican Republic, the Dominican diaspora functions as an integral part of the nation. As a result of their greater inclusion in the discourse surrounding Dominican national identity, diaspora communities are constantly redefining *dominicanidad* and renegotiating who is entitled to it. Thus, members of the diaspora are confronted with a unique opportunity to push the limits of *dominicanidad* in a way that is more inclusive to all Dominicans, including — and especially — those of Haitian descent.

The mass emigration of Dominicans to the United States began in earnest after the 1965 U.S. invasion that ushered Balaguer into power and pushed many Dominican nationals to leave the country. Subsequently, the phrase *dominicanos ausentes* came into use as a way to describe the Dominican emigrants who had become disconnected from their home country (SAGÁS; ROMÁN, 2017). This moniker rose to prominence in the 1980s, when it began to circulate throughout the popular and official discourse surrounding

Dominican national identity. The term “ausente” suggests that Dominican émigrés are meant to be on the island, but instead reside elsewhere, “missing” from the Dominican Republic. Although Dominican émigrés are categorized as “absent,” this label also suggests that members of the diaspora remain Dominican. During the dictatorship, this was manifestly true, as Trujillo prohibited Dominicans abroad from renouncing their Dominican citizenship by becoming naturalized citizens of their host country (REPÚBLICA DOMINICANA, 1934). This became a way for Trujillo to maintain a certain degree of control over the Dominican exiles, even if they managed to escape the dictator’s force on the island.

The “Lost Decade” of the 1980s yielded high inflation and currency devaluation in the Dominican Republic. This resulted in the exodus of Dominicans from the country in search of employment and economic opportunities abroad (SAGÁS; ROMÁN, 2017). In the 1980s and 1990s, “workers [became] the island’s main export” (PESSAR, 1995, p. 01) and the remittances that members of the diaspora sent back home became an integral part of the Dominican economy. As they wielded this economic power, members of the Dominican diaspora were able to amass political power. The 1994 revision of the Dominican Constitution included the provision of demands made by Dominican emigrés, including the right to dual citizenship, ability to vote overseas in presidential elections, and the option for children born abroad to apply for Dominican citizenship (SAGÁS; ROMÁN, 2017).

In May 2004, Dominicans living abroad were able to vote in the presidential election for the first time. The decision to allow members of the diaspora to vote in preliminary homeland elections reflects a phenomenon that is increasingly prevalent, especially in Latin America, where remittances are highly consequential in the home country’s economy. However, the Dominican Republic’s choice to establish a congressional representation of Dominicans abroad in 2010 has far less precedent. This legislation provides that members of the diaspora elect seven legislators for Dominican Congress (SAGÁS; ROMÁN, 2017). These elected representatives must reside within their respective overseas district, further strengthening the ties between diaspora communities and the Dominican Republic.

With these reforms to the Dominican constitution, the national narrative regarding Dominican emigrants shifted — those who were once considered to be *dominicanos ausentes* were henceforth known as the “Dominican diaspora”. This new terminology reframed those abroad as loyal Dominicans who were forced to leave the country due to political and economic factors outside their control (SAGÁS; ROMÁN, 2017). Not only did émigrés have little choice but to leave the Dominican Republic, they also worked long hours, making little money under poor conditions to send remittances back to the homeland. With this rhetorical transformation, it became difficult to characterize the diaspora as anything other than the loyal Dominicans entitled to their *dominicanidad*.

The country’s open embrace of the diaspora became even more ingrained in Dominican discourse with the election of President Leonel Fernández — a Dominican who grew up in the United States and returned to the Dominican Republic in adulthood. In 1996, Fernández appeared on a U.S. Spanish-language television channel, persuading Dominicans in New York to become naturalized U.S. citizens and actively participate in American politics and society, insisting that their *dominicanidad* — in both the legal and cultural sense — was no longer under threat (FISHER, 1996). Throughout his time in office, Fernández continuously spread the message that Dominican diaspora communities would always be welcomed as members of the *patria dominicana* — the cultural Dominican nation would accompany the diaspora no matter where they settled. The push to include the diaspora under the umbrella of autochthonous Dominican identity demonstrates the contradictory evolution of the *dominicanidad*. In other words, members of the diaspora are thought to have some “essence” of *dominicanidad* that Haitian-Dominicans simply do not; thus, ethnic Haitians can never be “true” Dominicans. However, this Dominican “essence” is shown to be fluid and — to some degree — arbitrary, since the diaspora expanded upon and broadened the original interpretation of *dominicanidad* over time. Therefore, the diaspora’s integration into the collective *dominicanidad* signals the potential to reframe narratives surrounding national identity in the Dominican Republic in a way that includes Haitian migrants and Haitian-Dominicans.

Within the United States, members of the Dominican diaspora are racialized in terms that differ from Dominican conceptions of racial identity. In particular, Dominican Americans grapple with the U.S. Black/White paradigm which centers on the binary of “Black” and “white” racial identities, ignoring populations that either fall in between or outside of these two racial categories. Consequently, the diaspora “translates blackness” (GARCÍA-PEÑA, 2016a, p. 173) since Dominican migrants encounter different systems of racial classification in each country. Within the United States, Dominican Americans occupy “El Nié” — a term popularized by Dominican artist Josefina Baéz (2011), meaning a place “neither here nor there”. García-Peña (2016a, p. 173) describes the El Nié as an “interstitial space of belonging” with regard to race, in which members of the diaspora act as “racexiles” who do not neatly fit into one category. Furthermore, members of the Dominican diaspora in the United States occupy the same conceptual space as Haitian-Americans, as both groups are seen as the racialized “Other” in comparison to white U.S. citizens. By bridging the gap between Dominican and Haitian identities, the Dominican diaspora in the United States is able to challenge the dominant discourses regarding *dominicanidad* which has historically and systemically excluded ethnic Haitians.

8 Diaspora Literature: Reconstructing and Reclaiming History

Following the end of the dictatorship in 1961, a new genre of literature emerged in the Dominican Republic — the *novela del trujillato* — in which Dominican writers could “horadar el silencio y el miedo impuesto por la tiranía de Trujillo y ensayar maneras de abrir algunos espacios — a través de la ficción — que permitieran procesar esa experiencia” (CUIÑAS, 2008, p. 413). Many of these stories parallel historical fiction, interweaving the invented accounts of the novels’ characters with the historical realities of Trujillo dictatorship. Within this literary genre, Dominican American authors highlight “the relationship between prose fiction and social reality, between the novel and time seen as concrete, historical medium” (STEINER, 1971, p. 11). Thus, the line between

truth and fiction is blurred, and the fabricated stories in *novelas del trujillato* “se [convierten] en una gran tableta de esa ‘verdad’ amarga, histórica y social tanto tiempo silenciada” (CUIÑAS, 2008, p. 422). In this way, language becomes a tool for understanding and interpreting the personal experiences of Dominicans and Haitians under dictatorship and — by extension — a way to retell history from the perspective of those formerly silenced.

Given their status as “racexiles” who transgress conventional boundaries of national belonging in both the Dominican Republic and the United States, Dominican-American authors are uniquely well-positioned to use their liminal identities to redefine *dominicanidad*. Through their literary reconstruction of the historical past, “los escritores dominicanos ‘leen’ un presente que compromete su futuro” (CUIÑAS, 2008, p. 415). Thus, the diaspora literature exemplifies the potential of language as a vehicle for social change. Dominican writers in the United States challenge prevailing anti-Haitian narratives that exist in the Dominican Republic, instead “asserting a new version of Dominican national identity that embraces the common experience of blackness that Dominicans and Haitians share as new residents of the United States” (WIGGINGTON, 2006, p. 59).

Afro-Dominican author Junot Díaz is one of the best-known Dominican diaspora writers, as well as one of the fiercest challengers of exclusionary conceptions of *dominicanidad*. In his novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz explores issues of anti-Blackness and anti-Haitianism in the Dominican Republic, undermine national narratives that depict the Dominican Republic and Haiti as polar opposites. Díaz’s novel centers on the story of Oscar de León, a Dominican American adolescent living with his sister, Lola, and mother, Belicia, in New Jersey. As a nerdy, overweight, and socially awkward teenage boy, Oscar fails to conform to the standards of Dominican masculinity and social prowess by default. Already an outsider to Dominican identity, Oscar is hyper-cognizant of other characteristics that mark individuals as outcasts in Dominican society, such as Blackness. This awareness causes Oscar to bring these identity markers into question and highlights their arbitrariness. In recounting the history of a

Dominican-American who does not fit within the conventional framework of *dominicanidad*, Junot Díaz, consequently pushes the boundaries of Dominican identity to include Afro-descendants who are generally excluded from national narratives.

Throughout the novel, characters' casual interactions and passing statements demonstrate the anti-Blackness that pervades Dominican culture — both on and off the island. For example, upon arriving home after spending the summer in the Dominican Republic, Oscar's uncle Rudolfo "looking askance at [Oscar's] complexion", remarks, "Great...now you look Haitian" (DÍAZ, 2007, p. 32). Though offhand in nature, this comment reveals a prejudice so deeply rooted within Dominican culture that it has followed the diaspora to the United States. To have dark skin means to appear Haitian — and to appear Haitian is undesirable. This racial association drawn by Rudolfo is inherently meant to be an insult, as it undermines Oscar's *dominicanidad* by associating him with a population held in opposition to Dominicans. Thus, language can be used to subvert claims regarding Dominican identity.

Similarly, throughout her adolescence in the Dominican Republic, Belicia "Beli" Cabral faced discrimination due to her darker complexion. At her private school, Beli was an outcast, looked down upon by other students for various reasons, including her racial identity. Even Wei — a Chinese girl who was socially ostracized for her Asian heritage and lack of Spanish-speaking abilities — pointed out the fact that Beli was "Black-Black" (DÍAZ, 2007, p. 84). This emphasis on Blackness demonstrates the salience of race in the Dominican Republic, especially in determining who "belongs" in Dominican society. La Inca — Beli's aunt who became her guardian after Beli's parents was murdered by the Trujillo regime — desperately tried to help Beli restore her family reputation by mitigating some of the factors responsible for Beli's ostracism. In order to raise Beli's social status, "La Inca had to correct her on grammar and against using slang, [and] she now had the best diction and locution in Lower Baní" (DÍAZ, 2007, p. 85). La Inca recognized the power of language in navigating the Dominican social hierarchy, especially with respect to the style of language that was considered appropriate for members of the upper class.

Díaz's novel also explores the significance of Afro-religious beliefs in the Dominican culture. Throughout the book, Díaz references the fact that generations of Oscar's family had been burdened by a *fukú*, which the narrator defines as "a curse or doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World" (DÍAZ, 2007, p. 1). According to Dominican superstition, *fukú* "came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved" (DÍAZ, 2007, p. 01) and was subsequently carried by European colonizers to the Americas. Later, *fukú* became strongly associated with the Trujillo dictatorship — dissidents who were punished by the regime were victims of *fukú*, and perhaps even Trujillo himself, in his death, had fallen victim of *fukú*.

If Rafael Trujillo was *fukú* and every street, landmark, and business was named after him during the dictatorship, then this "Curse of the New World" was truly inescapable for anyone living in the Dominican Republic. Not only does this highlight the painful and deeply rooted legacy of Trujillato, but it also exemplifies the performative power of language. In the Dominican Republic, under the Trujillo regime, the decision to name things after the dictator had a tangible impact on the perceptions of Dominicans' loyalty to the regime. Likewise, the fear of saying Trujillo's name post-dictatorship demonstrated the overall silence surrounding the atrocities committed by the dictator and his supporters, which therefore inhibited systemic changes in Dominican society post-dictatorship. Consequently, *fukú* is more than just a "ghost story from the past" (DÍAZ, 2007, p. 2) — it is the conscious decision whether to speak, whether to collectively process the nation's history as a Dominican people. In the same manner that *fukú* acts as a curse, *zafa* acts as a blessing — by simply speaking this word, individuals are protected from the adverse effects of the *fukú*. Likewise, *fukú* demonstrates the negative implications of language, while *zafa* accentuates the salvational power of words. As the narrator states, "Even as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a *zafa* of sorts. My very own counterspell" (DÍAZ, 2007, p. 07). In the eyes of a Dominican-American writer like Junot Díaz, the act of storytelling is almost magical, with respect to its ability to liberate, redeem, and protect both readers and writers by illuminating truths that had previously been unspoken.

9 Final Considerations

The deeply rooted legacy of anti-Haitianism in the Dominican Republic is manifest itself in the form of racial, cultural, and physical violence. In particular, language has been used as a weapon against Haitian migrants and Haitian-Dominicans in the Dominican Republic, as the national narratives surrounding *dominicanidad* have historically and systematically served to exclude ethnic Haitians. This anti-Haitian rhetoric is the result of European colonialism, U.S. imperialism, and Trujillo-era structures that institutionalized anti-Blackness in the Dominican Republic and served to relegate Haitians to the periphery of the Dominican society. Furthermore, the use of language in conceptualizing *dominicanidad* highlights the arbitrary nature of the distinction drawn between “Dominican” and “Haitian,” consequently undermining the argument that the two nations are diametrically opposed.

Although the case of Hispaniola exemplifies the ways in which language can be utilized as a form of violence, it also demonstrates that language has the potential to be the bearer of peace. In particular, many Dominican-Americans question the prevailing narratives surrounding Dominican identity and renounce the anti-Blackness and *antihaitianismo* that frequently appear in national discourse. Diaspora writers use language to describe their own experiences with race and language in the United States, thus redefining what it means to be “Dominican.” Consequently, the role of language in the invention and perception of Dominican identity is vital — however, the question remains of whether language will continue to be used as a means of excluding Haitian migrants and Haitian-Dominicans from sharing in a collective Dominican identity, or if language will become a vehicle for constructing a new, more inclusive definition of *dominicanidad*.

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