

From *tierra de nadie* to *terre brûlée* – From Borderland to Border in Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

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From the early 1900s, the Haitian-Dominican border underwent a transformation from borderland to hard border. Permeability vs. non-permeability has been fundamentally a reflection of the presence or the absence of a strong state. As I argue in my book *More than a Massacre; Racial Violence and Citizenship in the Haitian-Dominican Borderlands* the initial organizational impetus for this process had to do with the fiscal agenda of the American Customs Receivership as well as the explicitly racial state-building agenda of the American military occupiers. But the real origin point of the hard border policy was Trujillo's genocide of 1937, which eliminated an estimated 20,000 ethnically Haitian civilians living in the Dominican Republic. A wave of summary executions trailed off into irregular vigilante and official violence along the border and years of cat-and-mouse repression at the hands of border patrols that the people on the Haitian side of the border remember as '*candeliers*.' Years later, anyone captured along the border for contraband could also be executed by Trujillo's government. The emergence of a firm closed border policy was not the end of Haitian presence in the Dominican Republic but it eliminated the possibility of an ethnically Haitian component of the citizenry and it strictly confined ethnic Haitians to the category of migrant sugarcane laborers. Contracts for their extreme exploitation were negotiated directly between Trujillo's dictatorship and Haitian regimes including that of François Duvalier.

Duvalier himself played his own role in the era of the hard border on Hispaniola which happens to have lasted exactly one half century from the 1937 genocide to the fall of the Duvalier dynasty in 1986-7. During the 1960s he began a policy called *terre brûlée* by which he burned a strip of land along the border dislocating families and farms in order to prevent incursions from armed insurgent groups. Many of the same border residents and refugees who bear the memory of the 1937 Dominican massacre of Haitians also recall that in the 1960s and 70s the *tontons macoutes* enforced Duvalier's closed border policy by forcing people caught approaching the border to dig their own graves before shooting them. Summary violence made for a hard border indeed, but the border opened up significantly following the Revolution or the *Dechoukay* (uprooting) of 1986-7 in Haiti. From that period as more recent Haitian migrants entered new sectors of the Dominican economy outside of sugar, the migratory, racial, and human rights situation in the Dominican Republic has evolved into a border society in the sense that Lomnitz suggests in light of "border thresholds" that "...need not be located 'on' – or even near – the border." Here nationwide checkpoints, periodic deportation campaigns, struggles over legal documentation, racial patterns of enforcement, and exploitative labor practices all represent valences of a despatialized border, an everywhere border.

Many periods of warfare shaped the division and sometimes the administrative unification of Hispaniola in the colonial era and through the nineteenth century. During the periods when it existed at all (for example there was no border on Hispaniola before 1650 or between 1822 and 1844 when the Haitian Republic ruled the entire island) the complex, evolving boundary was never more than a 'borderland' in the sense of being an ill-defined remote space of transfer, movement, contact, trade, and exchange – devoid of any clear demarcation or means of regular enforcement.

Rather than drawing a line and enforcing it, early-modern authorities on the island demonstrated the limitations of their powers to govern distant, rugged territory by attempting to control unregulated settlements through reductions – forced campaigns of relocation and depopulation. During 1605 and 1606 the Spanish governor of Hispaniola Don Diego de Osorio famously depopulated the island's northern and western coast through a scorched earth depopulation campaign known as '*las devastaciones*.' Ironically this would make these regions including Tortuga island perfect terrain for buccaneers and the very Dutch smugglers that the reduction campaign was meant to thwart. On this basis French interlopers gained the foothold that would eventually become their greatest and most profitable plantation colony – Saint Domingue.

As the French colony of Saint Domingue grew beyond early buccaneer settlements on Tortuga and an early fortress and plantation area around Ti Goave and Leogane, the border was drawn by skirmishes and battles between French and Spanish forces, and would eventually become formalized in European peace treaties. The 1697 Treaty of Ryswick was the first time that Spain formally recognized the French colony and accepted the first formal border on Hispaniola – though this first official line on the map could hardly have been well defined on the ground. The Treaty of Utrecht left France and Spain both under Bourbon rule. During this time, the fast and increasingly profitable development of indigo, sugar, and coffee plantations in French Saint Domingue fed a symbiotic economic coexistence with the sparsely populated, long neglected Spanish colony. The notables of Santo Domingo had long lost the ability to pay for significant slave imports and thereby reap sugar profits, so the thinly populated colony specialized instead in producing cattle, horses, and mules, which were sold westward to feed and power the voracious French plantation complex.

The 1779 treaty of Aranjuez settled on a colonial boundary line roughly represented below:



The Haitian Revolution had multiple, complex echoes and implications for the region that is now the Dominican Republic, as considered in detail by Graham Nessler in his 2016 *Islandwide Struggle for Freedom*. Throughout the Haitian revolution multiple bands, nations and factions crossed and recrossed a non-border, which was formally unmade by the 1795 Treaty of Basel. For a few years Toussaint Louverture ruled the entire island, nominally for France but in a state of de-facto independence recognized unofficially by Britain and America. France retained Santo Domingo. In 1805, directly after Haitian independence, Dessalines' forces crossed the non-border and invaded the former Spanish colony occupied by French forces loyal to Napoleon. Dessalines failed to capture Santo Domingo, and his forces burned, pillaged, and captured hundreds of civilians during their westward retreat. Around this time Dessalines also struggled to stamp out unauthorized settlements along the border. Exactly two hundred years after Osorio, Dessalines would also find that ungovernable rugged border areas were beyond the reach and grasp of his struggling regime. Unable to guard or police the entire border, his policy was one of reductions and forced depopulation. Near some of the same territory that had been burned and depopulated by Osorio, Dessalines' soldiers were sent to the border areas around Dajabón to burn huts, uproot gardens, and drag scarce laborers back to the coastal plains where early Haitian rulers had restarted plantation production.

After finally unifying Haiti and concluding Haiti's own period of civil wars in 1820, Jean-Pierre Boyer sent his forces across the non-existent border, took Santo Domingo, and unified Hispaniola under his rule from 1822-1844. After Dominican independence in 1844 the border would remain unenforceable and scarcely governable. At the onset of Dominican independence in 1844, one legacy of 'unification' was the expansion of Haiti beyond the earlier colonial boundary as demonstrated in the map below



When Spain attempted to recolonize the Dominican Republic in the 1860s, the border was a major site of rebel mobilization and of key victories for the ‘restorationist’ forces. In a period where both Haiti and the Dominican Republic were periodically destabilized by civil wars between *caudillos*, the border was mutually and reciprocally a potential underbelly of instability as strongmen such as Benito Monción could use the border region as a refuge, just as Haitian *caco* forces would in their ultimately futile efforts to resist the American occupiers.

Hispaniola offers multiple historical frames of reference for considering a typology of borderland vs. border. Under such a theorization borderland is a region where state power is thin, where the sovereignty of two or more governments might be ‘mutually cancelling’ and where lines in the sand might be easily and constantly crossed, and even ill-defined. A hard border by contrast is a site where the power of governments in faraway capital cities is especially manifest, undeniable, and forcibly imposed. As my book argues, this is the transformation that happened, from porous, poorly regulated borderland to hard border across three major turning points in the twentieth century: roughly 1919, 1930, and most markedly in 1937.

The US marines took Port-au-Prince in 1915, and they took Santo Domingo in 1916. The lengthy military occupations that ensued had precedents in the struggles over both countries’ foreign debts, alleged crises of governance, as well as wartime strategic concerns over potential German influence as well as the shipping lanes surrounding the new Panama Canal. From roughly 1905 the US had achieved a relationship of ‘customs receivership’ with the Dominican Republic by which they hoped to capture all of the country’s customs revenue in order to make good on obligations to foreign creditors involved in multiple layers of loans involving the Santo Domingo Improvement Company and other banks and foreign investment concerns. Shoring up customs revenue meant regulating trade and creating a real border where scarcely any had existed before. The first Dominican border force was established in 1907, and the first racial legislation referring to ‘non-caucasians’ came in 1912.

When the American marines fully occupied the country by the end of the 1910s decade, as they disarmed the population and extinguished the last embers of rural insurgency,

their mission would exemplify the fiscal mandate for territorial control and geographical legibility. The Americans provided the first serious aerial survey of Hispaniola – this gigantic map remains a real marvel of early military cartographic production, with its hut-by-hut level of fine-grained detail. I should note that this was ‘full-fledged’ early air power, as the American occupiers used planes not only to survey the land and perform reconnaissance but also to bomb Haitian insurgents. The border that the Americans helped to define was both spatial and racial. As I point out in my book, in 1919 the American occupiers issued Executive Order 372, which established special fines, fees and enforcement for the control of ‘non-caucasian *braceros*.’ It was this same legislation that Trujillo would employ as soon he came to power in 1930 and set about permanently changing the border region in multiple ways.

A ‘real’ border was a goal of the US occupiers. Arguably the underlying priority of the US was to control and bolster customs revenue collection. The US set the stage for Trujillo to rise through the military that they established, and after Trujillo consolidated his power and became rich and strong enough to act independently of the Yankees, the border reached it’s peak of ‘hardness’ under his deadly rule. The occupation helped to fully establish an economic border, with an unending pattern of American preferential treatment for the lighter, whiter, more pro-foreign society helped to initiate a self-fulfilling prophecy of economic divergence between the two underdeveloped Caribbean nations.

Before, he ordered a wholesale slaughter of Haitian men, women, and children, which reached its peak in the fall of 1937, Trujillo’s border policy immediately after his rise to power in 1930 involved new forms of documentation, surveillance, taxation, and border enforcement that included displacement and imprisonment of Dominican born ethnic Haitians who on certain occasions could not prove their citizenship with civil documents. Like all Dominican residents and citizens, ethnic Haitians were required to pay for Trujillo’s new *cédula* or national ID card, but they also had to pay for special immigration permits. Trujillo’s government began to force locally born people to pay for these foreign resident permits, and by 1930 his officials began to ignore peoples’ claims to local birth and citizenship rights. From that year under Executive order 372, locally born citizens were arrested and deported to Haiti as ‘non-caucasian *Braçeros*.’ From here the situation represented a slippery slope of repression. A treaty concluded in 1936 established the border line represented in this map below.



This remains the location of the border through the present area. Many areas in Dominican territory such as Restauración were heavily populated with ethnic Haitians. In fact, the place had a parallel name: Gurabo Haitiano. These were among the areas that were nearly cleared out by the genocide. Following the genocide of 1937-38, Trujillo's government negotiated a diplomatic settlement and paid a miniscule financial compensation to the Haitian government. On the basis of this corrupt peace, Trujillo negotiated government contracts to supply Haitian laborers to his vast national complex of sugar cane plantations for the next twenty years. Sugar regions such as those around San Pedro or La Romana became racialized enclaves of confinement. Following 1937, remaining survivors and suspicious border residents who were accused of contraband or of keeping up ties with Haiti would be forcibly relocated to 'agricultural colonies of the interior.' Border people, and border lifeways were carefully surveilled and purposely uprooted. Years after 1937 Trujillo's government prominently strung up bodies of alleged smugglers with signs reading '*yo no vuelvo más a ser contrabandista.*'

The notorious regimes of Trujillo and Duvalier only coexisted for a short period of roughly four years.



Trujillo meets François Duvalier

While they likely distrusted one another, they were similarly inclined toward domestic political terror and the swift and excessive exercise of power. They both feared threats that might emanate from the border and they both used extreme force to maintain their own hard border policies. Named '*camoquins*' or *kamoken* in Haitian Kreyòl, after an antimalarial tablet that they would take during their training and campaigns in the bush – anti-Duvalier insurgents of the 1960s and early 1970s reproduced a centuries-old pattern (witnessed again in the Haiti coup and violence of 2004-5) by which the border and the neighboring nation served as the natural refuge and base of operations for armed exile intrigues. Their efforts and incursions of the *kamoken* produced some skirmishes along the border, and Duvalier's response, a policy officially announced as *terre brûlée* or 'scorched earth' was literally a 20th century echo of the colonial reductions of Osorio and the border depopulation and relocation efforts of Dessalines. At El Corte, near Los Cacaos, 1937 Haitian Massacre survivor Notilia Milat recalls that the house she lived in near the border was burned down by Duvalier's government at some point in the 1960s when a wide buffer zone of territory all along the border was depopulated and burned in an effort to close the border fully and remove any settlements or forests that might provide an undergrowth or a shield for the proven threat of cross-border insurgent activity.

With a line firmly drawn in blood along the border, the line was drawn throughout Dominican society: social and racial boundaries of enforcement came to shape the entire country. The key transformation was that nobody Haitian should ever again be allowed to become a citizen or a property holder. The hard border was not about zero passage – elite diplomats and businessmen and small numbers of tourists could cross at the formal crossing points. Much more importantly massive flows of Haitian canecutters were a major business for both governments and they were the lifeblood of the largely state-owned sugar business that Trujillo had appropriated from foreign owners. They were brought across, but under conditions of notorious exploitation and strict confinement and control. Paid piece rates by a numbered company badge and housed in bad conditions on company towns where their meager food was bought from company stores, these spatially defined *braceros* were very explicitly separate and relatively rigorously excluded from Dominican society. Their toil and poverty came to define Haitian-ness in a society where a Haitian out of place could be routinely chased, hunted down, arrested, and sent back to the *batey* or deported to Haiti. A public hue and cry of *haitiano!* is remembered as roughly equivalent to *stop thief!* Spatially

relegated to plantations, the growth of a local Dominican-born population of children and grand-children of these twentieth century migrants has represented a major matter of ongoing legal and political struggle, with the Dominican government having moved mountains in an ongoing struggle to deny these people legal documentation and citizenship status.

Because the conditions of labor for Haitian *braceros* in the sugar industry were so starkly exploitative (laborers had few to no legal rights, were visually stigmatized as barefoot and dressed in rags, housed in dingy ‘barracoons,’ and frequently paid in company scrip or company credit within company towns) the comparisons with early modern unfreedom appear in songs of Manno Charlemagne, and others who use the *braceros* as the living proof of the legacy of the colonial plantation. The analogy with colonial times also suggests the explosive potential of the Haitian historic *weltanschauung*: one of the explosions of the 1986-87 revolutionary process was an uprising at a seasonal mass recruitment of *braceros* destined to cut cane in the Dominican Republic. In his carnival anthems aimed at the legacy of exploitation in the Dominican sugar industry Koudjay famously warns the Dominicans that *Mwen deja kok kalite mwen konnen sak rele gagè*. (I’m a gamecock and I know how to fight) In response to rumors of Dominican ambitions to occupy Haiti he hurls the patriotic battle cry ‘*a l’assaut*’ (attack!) and the defiant line ‘*nou la n’ap tann yo*’ (literally ‘we’re here waiting for you,’ with a rough connotation similar to ‘come and get it...’). The notion that that an armed *riposte* is the will of the Haitian nation who records its voice in carnival songs, with no relationship whatsoever to the hopeless Haitian state harkens back to street protests after 1937 when elements of the popular classes marched to call for war against the Dominicans while the government of Stenio Vincent desperately attempted to squelch the topic and negotiate with Trujillo. One legacy of the massacre was to contribute to the radicalism of the 1946 Black power revolution, and the *noirisme* of Duvalier. A populace convinced that its foreign-controlled ‘mulatto’ government would do nothing to help them was fertile soil for the authoritarian populism of Duvalier.

While the hard border softened fundamentally from roughly 1986-87 with revolution in Haiti and the fall of the Duvalier dynasty – the increased ‘porosity’ from that time has fed a complex and contested new *modus vivendi* of hyperexploitation. The racial-spatial everywhere border of the state sugar economy softened to a more flexible regime of cheap ultra-contingent Haitian labor that has played a historic role in the profitability of the neo-liberal post-dictatorial Dominican economy. From construction, to multiple arenas of agriculture other than sugar, to tourism, to the length and breadth of the informal sector, Haitian labor has been a key component to the economic growth and diversification of the neoliberalized post-dictatorship Dominican economy since roughly 1990. The main pillar of border control through the 1990s and 2000s were waves of deportation. The country’s constitutional law reflect a profound determination shared by many elements of the political establishment and the wider society to prevent ethnic Haitians from fully entering Dominican society and institutional life.

The contemporary border, apart from alternating between more or less ‘open’ and ‘closed,’ can also become ‘hot.’ The Haitian-Dominican border has since the twentieth century switched between closed, hot, and semi-open. Ethnic Haitians live beyond the bateyes, and they are in the capital and elsewhere in the country. But there is a rigid border regarding the lines of citizenship, property-holding and occupations. It is also a hot border, or tense border, with fears of conflict, escalation, and even recurrence of genocidal violence, most likely at the civilian level. The contemporary border is characterized by an ever-present risk of disturbances, the periodic closing of border markets, recurrent calls for a heavy handed approach to immigration including a ‘build a wall’ campaign, scandals over the dumping of refuse meats and other products by the Dominican industries that sell to the Haitian market, high-level bribery corruption and trafficking among officials, human

trafficking, widespread bribery at the low level of the police, smuggling in moonshine, drugs, stolen vehicles and motorcycles, and a somewhat pitiful trade in second-hand clothes donated to Haiti.

Drones, evolving biometrics, electronic surveillance, and a Donald Trump-inspired border wall have all been recent aspects of evolving debates and polemics concerning the contemporary border. The idea of a border wall and the possibility that it might be electrified raises an interesting question that throws into relief the remarkably rosy view of Dominican economic development held by those whose carefully dressed windows into the country have been sparkling resorts or the highly performative Santo Domingo light rail infrastructure: If the fence is to be electrified, for how long will the Dominican Republic be able to keep the power on?

Short of the kind of extreme violence and repression used in the twentieth century to instill terror through gruesome examples – any system of a terrestrial ‘hard border’ is not at all easy to enforce. Technocratic sophistication of monitoring and surveillance can complicate but not eliminate the human tendency to assert freedom of movement as a kind of intuitive ‘human right’ if mainly because migrants will continue to view the right to cross borders as a stark matter of survival. On the other hand, as nation states focus on legibility, governance, identification, and evolving systems of migratory control, systems of identifying people and socially, economically, and spatially controlling the interior of the national territory will remain sites of contestation along multiple evolving ‘borders.’