

EDITED BY

Megan Jeanette Myers *and* Edward Paulino



The



Border



of Lights



Reader

*Bearing Witness to Genocide  
in the Dominican Republic*

*The Border of Lights Reader*

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BEARING WITNESS TO GENOCIDE IN  
THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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Edited by

Megan Jeanette Myers

Edward Paulino

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Amherst, Massachusetts

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# *Memorialization, Solidarity, Ethnically Mixed Couples, and the Mystery of Hope*

## *Mainstreaming Border of Lights*

*Maria Cristina Fumagalli and Bridget Wooding*

October 2019 marked the eighth anniversary of the *Border of Lights* commemoration of the 1937 massacre of Haitians and Dominico-Haitians on the Dominico-Haitian border. As the website of the initiative explains: “This is why Border of Lights came to be . . . to commemorate the lives lost and affected by the 1937 Parsley Massacre, to uplift the narrative of historical and ongoing collaborations between two peoples at the Dominican Republic (DR) and Haiti border, to continue in the struggle for justice, with hope in our hearts.”<sup>1</sup>

*Border of Lights* is therefore both a laudable and necessary initiative because across-the-border exchanges on Hispaniola have often been framed as being characterized by conflict and violence. The first border clashes between the Spanish and the French colonizers took place in the seventeenth century, before the French colony of Saint Domingue was officially established in 1777. The warfare produced by the 1791 revolt and Haitian Revolution, during which the border between the two sides often shifted or disappeared altogether, the Haitian occupation of the Spanish side between 1822 and 1844 and, more recently, the 1937 massacre of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans in the Dominican borderland, have all contributed to cast the island and borderland as sites of violent confrontation. Yet, border relations have also been characterized by many collaborative linkages and productive exchanges between the two peoples which have been minimized routinely and occluded by ultranationalist discourses which have been invested in hiding, justifying, or denying the horrors of the 1937 massacre.

Over the years, *Border of Lights* has stubbornly continued to commemorate the massacre, reminding us that solidarity and communality have played, are playing, and can continue to play an important part in border relations and that they need to be persistently brought to the fore and nurtured in order to counteract powerful ultranationalist narratives. In what follows, we will show how we have built on the example set by *Border of Lights* when we organized a series of activities in Comendador in October 2017 in close collaboration with associates on both sides of the border. We will conclude by suggesting how the lessons learnt



from the *Border of Lights* experience could be usefully mainstreamed into activities relating to Dominico-Haitian relations on a more permanent basis, so that positive spin-offs of the annual commemoration may have a ripple effect on and in island society.

Underlining cultural continuities and collaboration between Haitians and Dominicans has clearly become particularly urgent since September 23, 2013, when the Dominican Constitutional Court ordered that all birth registries from 1929 should be audited for people who had been (allegedly) wrongly registered as Dominican citizens. This put at risk of denationalization (and, in some cases, expulsion) 133,000 Dominicans of Haitian ancestry. Also, long-term migrants, born in Haiti, have faced an uncertain future under a pioneer regularization plan for undocumented migrants in which 250,000 long-term migrants have received temporary status rather than residency in the country.

Since 2013 local civil society organizations have continued to demonstrate against nationality stripping, plead their case in the media, and use all the legal means at their disposal to restore the fundamental rights of those affected by the ruling, but for human rights activities to gain traction it is vital to challenge ultra-nationalist propaganda from a cultural, not only legal, point of view. Among those affected by the denationalization crisis, for example, are ethnically mixed couples and their children born in country who are facing collateral problems for being registered as Dominicans. Working in the Dominican Republic, Observatory Caribbean Migrants (OBMICA) developed a three-year project (2016-2019)<sup>2</sup> aiming at realizing the constitutional right to Dominican nationality of children born to such couples in the Dominican Republic. To better understand their predicament and support them in their battle for the restoration of their right. However, it is vital to understand that ethnically mixed couples are not “exceptional” but that it is the “state of emergency” in which they are plunged that has recast them as “non-normative” families. Approaching the issue from a broader historical and cultural perspective, therefore, can be extremely valuable since mixed couples are not only well represented in literary texts, but they have often been chosen as powerful symbols of hope in literature and performance art which have put border relations at their core.

In Freddy Prestol Castillo’s *El Masacre se pasa a pie*, written as the 1937 massacre was unfolding in Dajabón, for instance, victims and perpetrators are often related: Captain Ventarrón, one of the military men in charge of the killings, is utterly distressed when he suddenly remembers that his own grandfather was born in Haiti. The mixed family of Sargent Pío’s illegitimate sister, who had married a Haitian-born wealthy land- and cattle-owner and had seven children with him, is spared by the Sargent who, instead of killing them as he had been ordered to do, lets them escape through the border to find refuge in Haiti. Among the main characters of René Philoctète’s *Le peuple des terres mêlées* (1989), another text focused on the 1937 massacre but from a Haitian perspective, we find “the lovers of the border”, that is “*el mulato Dominicano*” and labour activist Pedro Alvarez Brito and his wife Adèle, “*la chiquita negrita haitiana*”. Philoctète uses Spanish to describe them in the original text in French, in order to highlight the bilingualism of the people living in the borderland, and this mixed couple embodies the idea of unity between Haitians and Dominicans conveyed by the title of this novel which identifies a “single people” (“*le peuple*”) on these “*terres mêlées*” (“mixed lands”).

*Mis 43 años en La Descubierta*, which is not a fictional text but a memoir which illustrates the life of Jesús María Ramírez in La Descubierta, a small town in the central portion of the Dominican borderland, explains how, in 1937, news of the killings which took place in the north reached the central portion of the borderland and its inhabitants were informed that, by the end of 1938, 'Haitians' living in the area would have to relocate in Haiti regardless of the fact that they might have lived for years (or were even born) in the Dominican Republic. As part of a process which became known as *el desalojo* (or 'evacuation'), ethnically mixed families were dismembered and Ramirez informs us that the majority of those who refused to go, were killed.

In his 1963 collection of poems entitled *La criatura terrestre*, the Dominican poet Manuel Rueda, who was born in Montecristi in 1921 and was fifteen when the 1936 border agreement was signed, remembers life in the northern borderland before the massacre: he famously explains that before the establishment of the borderline, his 'world was entire' and that he felt 'exiled from Eden' when the borderline was forcefully inscribed on the ground. Twenty-five years later, in the long poem *Las metamorfosis de Makandal* (1998), Rueda focuses instead on a mythological mixed couple: the mutual desire of the characters Makandal and Anaïsa, in fact, plays center stage as their flesh crawls "between Dajabón and Juana Méndez"—that is, at the very heart of the northern borderland. Makandal is a legendary figure in Haiti, a slave who had organized a massive insurrection against the French plantocracy in Saint Domingue but was captured just before he could bring his plans to fruition and then burnt at the stake. Many believed that he managed to escape by metamorphosing into a fly and he was expected to return one day to fulfil his prophecies. Anaïsa is instead a powerful spirit or *lua* of Dominican Vodú and in Rueda's poem their union is so strong that Makandal at some point metamorphoses into Anaïsa and becomes one with her ("I, the strong Makandal, / am Anaïsa!") erasing the 'self vs other' binarism enforced by the border.

A different (but equally compelling) kind of corporeal and spiritual fusion is at the core of a truly compelling visual metaphor for the island of Hispaniola which also foregrounds a "mixed couple," namely the Dominican artist Karmadavis's video performance *Estructura completa* (2010). As a blind man of Dominican origin carries in his arms a disabled woman of Haitian origin whose legs have been amputated, this mixed couple becomes a complete structure which moves along the streets of the Dominican Republic and overcomes different obstacles only through cooperation: in order to move forward the "structure" of which they are part, the woman has to pay attention to passers-by, walls, steps, traffic and communicate their presence promptly and effectively while the man has to trust her and act on her guidance. Both members of this peculiar "mixed couple" are perfectly aware of their deficiencies and of the deficiencies of their partner but they are also fully committed to make their partnership work by building on what they can offer to one another because they know that neither can go anywhere without the other.<sup>3</sup>

*Border of Lights's* positive message resonated also in the 80th anniversary of the massacre when the Juan Bosch Foundation co-organized an international seminar in which various academic, activists, writers, and institutions gathered at the INTEC University in Santo Domingo in order to break the silence surrounding the massacre and reflect on its

relevance for current Dominico-Haitian relations.<sup>4</sup> In the same year, encouraged by the success of the *Border of Lights* initiative, we joined forces and set out to contribute to the transformation of the eightieth anniversary into an occasion to rethink and help reframe past, present and, crucially, future relations between Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

Inspired by the decision of the founders and participants of *Border of Lights* to make their presence felt in the northern borderland where the massacre was carried out (but also where solidarity between the two people has always been strong), we decided to complement their activities in Dajabón/Ouanaminthe by extending the commemoration to the central borderland, an area where the local population had also been affected by the massacre and the subsequent *desalojos* and where the cross-border towns of Belladère (Haiti) and Comendador (Dominican Republic) face one another. Working in close consultation with local civil society organizations and authorities on the border at the Comendador/Belladère crossing, we devised a series of inter-connected activities which built on the *Border of Lights* experience. Initially instigated by diaspora actors of Haitian and Dominican ancestry, this experience has come to incorporate and be “owned” by local organizations on the ground.

On October 24, 2017, human rights concerns were put in dialog with academic research on the literary/cultural history of the massacre in a talk by Fumagalli in the Centro Cultural Juan Pablo Duarte in Comendador which targeted a young age group and made available to the local population some of the findings included in her monograph *On the Edge: Writing the Border between Haiti and Dominican Republic*, the first literary and cultural history of the border region. The talk, in French and Spanish to celebrate the bilingual and bicultural nature of the borderland, was attended by some seventy-five school children and numerous officials from Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Fumagalli’s talk focused on the different ways in which literary texts and performance artists have told and retold the history of the massacre and, at the same time, foregrounded the continuous presence and relevance of mixed couples, offering a number of examples (including the above-mentioned ones) which, it was hoped, would resonate with the local population among which mixed couples feature in considerable numbers. Consecutive official reports on the numbers and characteristics of Haitian migrants and their descendants in the Dominican Republic (ONE 2013 and ONE 2018)<sup>5</sup> have identified some 25,000 cases where Dominican documentation has not been acquired for children born to ethnically mixed couples where one parent is of Haitian ancestry. In fact, local contacts along the border report many cases of undocumented offspring of such couples, especially in the border province of Elías Piña which is the poorest province in the country and where the chief town Comendador is located.

Fumagalli highlighted, for instance, that the protagonists of René Philoctète’s *Le peuple des terres mêlées* live in Comendador/Elías Piña – the very place where we organized our activities—and are part of a transnational, bilingual, and bicultural community which was not divided or separated by the presence of a physical border. Before the massacre, as Philoctète points out, the priest of Elías Piña used to purchase his eggs in Belladère, the Dominican sergeant in Bánica bought his *clairin* in Mont-Organisé, and merchants from Jimaní, sold their wares in Fond-Parisien.

Apart from offering an account of Philoctète's reconstruction of the massacre and a crucial contextualization of the ethnically mixed couples at his core, the talk also brought in sharp relief the end of the novel, where those forcibly displaced by the massacre are of "every color, every walk of life, every belief, every character, every kind of memory and beauty." Significantly the narrator cannot tell (and does not want to know) if they are Haitians or Dominicans: all he knows is that they have "so many things in common, share so many wounds and joys that trying to distinguish the two peoples violates their tacit understanding to live as one" and their "dream of creating one people from two lands mixed together." It was pivotal, in fact, to convey the message that, in Philoctète's novel, the massacre is not allowed to abolish, once and for all, the deep connections which characterized the peoples of the borderland and that the novel contains the promise of a new beginning, of a new "world to build."

Philoctète's novel also enabled us to explore and underline, in a market town like Comendador, the historical significance of binational markets in the border region: Adèle and Pedro, in fact, met at the market of Maribaroux, according to him, or of Thomassique, according to her. The suggestion that the two cannot agree on the exact location of their first encounter signposts the fact that the markets which were held (then) on Haitian territory were visited by both Haitians and Dominicans on a regular basis and were central to the local economy and social life of the area, a fact that, as Fumagalli observed, was also underlined by Ramírez in *Mis 43 años en La Descubierta*. Fumagalli's talk, also inaugurated a photographic exhibition on the border crossing of Belladère/Comendador (October 23 to October 28) which was very well received by the local population. The exhibition especially featured Haitian market women who cross twice weekly to the Dominican Republic to engage in small-scale trading in a border market and who had been the focus of a research project by OBMICA. While the photographs, by Hillary Petrozziello, had previously been exhibited at the Centro Cultural de España in Santo Domingo,<sup>6</sup> this was the first time that these images were seen locally and OBMICA gifted the exhibition to our local collaborators for permanent use on the border.

The *pièce de résistance* of the activities was a concert celebrated in the market square in the evening of October 24, 2017, with the binational cultural group Azueï and with guest artist Delmas T1, a Dominican rapper of Haitian ancestry. Azueï is a movement of talented Haitian and Dominican artists initially supported by the European Union and launched in 2015, during a retreat conducted by Dominican and Haitian artists on the shores of Lake Azueï, a nature sanctuary that spans the borders of the two countries and aims to promote a culture of peace and dialog through art and culture. Significantly, further confirming the cross-pollination that this kind of activities are supposed to facilitate, Azueï's first musical album which came out in 2021, features a piece entitled "Mixed couple."<sup>7</sup> The outreach with the media carried out on the ground in Comendador in October 2017 involved both of us speaking with local social communicators: Wooding, for example, exchanged for an hour with the local program host Mario Alcántara, Presenter of the TV program "Good Night Elías Piña."

Mindful of the importance of turning the memorialization of the 80th anniversary of the massacre in Comendador into a permanent legacy, we organized two further activities:

first of all, two Azueí artists, the Dominican Gabriel Shak Doñe and the Haitian Olivier A. Ganthier, painted together a mural in Comendador which is aimed at reiterating solidarity, peace, and cooperation between the two countries. In relation to bottom-up attempts at cultural rapprochement between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, the group Azueí was therefore able to have not only its first musical performance but also its first mural in Comendador since, previously, their musical and artistic performances on the borderlands, supported by *Border of Lights*, had been limited to the northern border crossing of Dajabón/Ouanaminthe.

Secondly, OBMICA launched a video called “The Haitian-Dominican border past and present” on December 18, 2017, which is the annual day of the International Migrant, celebrated for when the *International Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Family Members* came into force in 1990. The video features reflections on the massacre and border relations by Wooding, Fumagalli, and the local cultural promoter Juan Secundino, as well as documenting the activities carried out in the central borderlands in October. Importantly, since the video is a useful milestone which evidences, from the testimonies of interviewees, the impact of the activity on the border,<sup>8</sup> it has also been mobilized in follow-up activities to exhort the competent authorities to urgently attend to the legal rights of the figure of the cross-border dweller (*habitante fronterizo*) – included in the Dominican Migration law of 2004. Were this regulation mechanism to be implemented, it would be easier to protect the rights of persons who cross the border routinely to work on the other side, notably Haitian women who participate in the bi-weekly *ferias*, the border markets, which today are held in the Dominican Republic.

It is now commonplace that it has been easier to memorialize the 1937 massacre from the vantage point of the Haitian and Dominican respective diasporas, especially through literary and artistic voices based in the United States. The consequences on the island of this opening of new spaces to remember the past with a view to re-inventing the future need to be further disentangled, so that local human rights actors on the ground may fully profit from this new canon abroad and use it for their own ends across Hispaniola. It is our contention that the *Border of Lights* initiative provides precisely this bridging role which needs to be even further capitalized upon on the border and elsewhere on the island by island-based organizations and activists.

Annual commemorations in October, for example, could be put in dialog with the results of the Haitian and Dominican Republic Universities’ research project (OBMEC 2015–2017) focused on the environment, education, migration, and trade on the Haitian-Dominican border and synthesized in the webpage of the new Dominican Border Observatory created in late 2018. An outstanding issue is that of using island relevant texts in the school curriculum, recognizing that great strides have been made in recent years to translate pertinent texts in Spanish into French and vice versa. It is unfortunate, for example, that the title of Philoctète’s novel was misleadingly translated in Spanish as *Rio Masacre*, a title which emphasizes violent conflict rather than the transnational solidarity and collaboration at the core of the novel. Paradoxically, Philoctète’s narrative is rooted in the central border area and not in the north where the Rio Masacre (a name which was chosen to commemorate the slaughter of a company of French *boucaniers* and border-trespassers in 1728, when the island was still officially



a Spanish colony) is to be found.<sup>9</sup> However, the point is that inserting such texts into the curriculum could be beneficial for schools on either side of the border and beyond. Sadly, the Q&A that followed Fumagalli's talk in Comendador revealed that the school children had not had access to literature dealing with the border and, specifically, to works focused on the 1937 massacre and local reactions to this defining event and were not even aware of the existence of Philoctète's work which is set in their hometown.

Another avenue to be further explored is that of better disseminating the existing work on the island of Dominican and Haitian artists. One such example is the Dominican performance artist Karmadavis whose *Estructura completa* has been mentioned above. For over a decade, Karmadavis has been a prize winner during the biannual Centro León art exhibitions in Santiago de los Caballeros in the Dominican Republic, but his work is not as well-known as it should be on the island nor has it been fully explored by interested parties as a means of gaining more traction on human rights issues concerning Dominico-Haitian relations. As Fumagalli has pointed out elsewhere,<sup>10</sup> in 2014, Karmadavis returned to the Dominican borderland where he set his performance *Comedor Familiar*, a performance provocatively informed by the desire to "look for similarities"<sup>11</sup> rather than positing incompatible differences between the two peoples. Here Karmadavis identifies the borderland as a place which can play a decisive role in promoting the development of national identity in relation with and not in opposition to one's neighbours whilst foregrounding the predicament of mixed couples.

For this performance, Karmadavis (who is a trained chef) placed a dining table straddling a small stream on the borderline between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, a visual reminder that the frontier often runs alongside a river—the Massacre in the north, the Pedernales in the South, and the Artibonite in the central portion of the borderland. Then, equipped with a cooking stove, he prepared a delicious lunch for a nearby family with a Dominican father, a Haitian mother, and a Haitian-Dominican child. This meal was a gastronomical fusion of ingredients and dishes typical of both nations. *Comedor familiar*, therefore, represents a "family meal" and the safe space of a "family dining room" where members of a family sit together, share food and renew their bonds of intimacy: the "mixed" family portrayed here reaffirms that such bonds can transcend the limits of national identification and nationalistic discourses. However, the table on which the family ate had only three legs to indicate the extreme precariousness of mixed families who now live not only near the border but throughout the national Dominican territory.

Karmadavis's *Comedor familiar*, however, is an ultimately hopeful work, as the epigraph to the performance explains: "when dialogue is no longer possible, what still exists is the mystery of hope." This hope has been the engine behind *Border of Lights*, Wooding's and OBMICA's work, Fumagalli's research, and is sustained by the belief that the way forward for the realization of the human rights of Haitian migrants and their descendants in the Dominican Republic is the restoration of citizenship to those Dominicans who have been affected by the 2013 ruling. More broadly, the forging of future border relations predicated on solidarity may become a lot easier when the values so valiantly championed and the inspiration afforded by the *Border of Lights* initiative are mainstreamed, creating new synergies across the island and, concomitantly, fresh grounds for hope.

## Coda

As we are writing this chapter, the world is in the grip of the Covid-19 pandemic and, in line with *Border of Lights*, we believe that policy advocacy must support different ways of sustainably including side-lined groups, often ostracized because of their ethnicity, so that they may fully belong in Dominican society, benefiting from risk management both now and in the future. We sincerely hope that, despite all the terrible challenges that it presents, the pandemic might also provide opportunities to improve border relations and finally address the predicament of segments of the populations in precarious legality like Haitian migrants and denationalized Dominicans of Haitian ancestry since, in order to be effective in the Dominican Republic, it is evident that the Covid-19 response ultimately has to include all those who have been routinely marginalized and neglected.

## Notes

1. *Border of Lights*. October 2017. <http://www.facebook.com/pg/BorderofLights/posts/>. [Accessed 20 May 2020].

2. Final outputs of the project include: A Protocol for para-legals to accompany affected persons. OBMICA. *Facilitando el acceso al registro civil dominicano a descendientes de parejas mixtas: protocolo para el acompañamiento legal*. Santo Domingo, Editora Búho. 2018 <http://obmica.org/images/Publicaciones/Libros/Protocolo-2018-FINAL.pdf>. [Accessed 6 July 2020]. An accompanying video (in English, Spanish and Haitian Creole) OBMICA. *Libertad*. Santo Domingo, 2018. <http://obmica.org/index.php/parejas-mixtas/multimedia/228-libertad-la-historias-de-las-y-los-hijos-de-parejas-mixtas>. [Accessed 6 July 2020].

3. All these examples are given more sustained attention in Fumagalli, Maria Cristina. *On the Edge: Writing the Border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic*. Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2015 & 2018 and Fumagalli, Maria Cristina. "Foreword". *El Masacre se pasa a pie/You Can Cross the Massacre on Foot*, by Freddy Prestol Castillo. Translated by Margaret Randall, Duke University Press, 2019, pp. v–xvii.

4. Conference papers were collected in Bosch Carcuro, Matías Eliades Acosta Matos, and Amaury Pérez Vargas, editors. *Masacre de 1937, 80 Años Después: Reconstruyendo la memoria*. Santo Domingo, Ediciones Fundación Bosch, 2018.

5. ONE. *Segunda encuesta nacional de inmigrantes en la República Dominicana, ENI-2017, Informe General*. Santo Domingo: Oficina Nacional de Estadística. 2018. <https://dominicanrepublic.unfpa.org/es/publications/informe-general-de-la-segunda-encuesta-nacional-de-inmigrantes-eni-2017>. [Accessed 6 July 2020].

6. Exhibition called "Haitian migrant women in the Dominican Republic," reviewed in OBMICA. "Publicaciones de parte de OBMICA" in OBMICA Boletín Informativo Year 1. Number 3. Santo Domingo, Editora Búho. December 2011. <http://obmica.org/images/Publicaciones/Boletines/boletin%20obmica%20dic%202011.pdf>. [Accessed 6 July 2020].

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9. This point was brought forward by Fumagalli and Arturo Victoriano-Martínez, during the international Santo Domingo seminar in October 2017 when it was observed that the decision on the title in Spanish had been an arbitrary one on the part of the publishing house, possibly because they may have felt it might increase their sales.

10. Fumagalli, Maria Cristina. "La massacre de 1937: adueñarse de un recuerdo tal y como relumbra en el instante de un peligro." *Masacre de 1937 - 80 años después: Reconstruyendo la memoria*, edited by Matías Bosch Caruro, Eliades Acosta Matos, Amaury Pérez Vargas, Santo Domingo, Fundación Juan Bosch, 2018, pp. 273-294 and Maria Cristina Fumagalli, "When dialogue is no longer possible, what still exists is the mystery of hope: Migration and Citizenship in the Dominican Republic in Film, Literature and Performance." *Border Transgression and Reconfiguration of Caribbean Spaces*, edited by Myriam Moïse and Fred Réno, London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2020.

11. Suero, Indhira. "Karmadavis entre Haití y RD" in *Listín Diario*. 4 January 2015. <https://listindiario.com/ventana/2015/01/04/351276/karmadavis-entre-haiti-y-rd-entre-haiti-y-rd> [Accessed 6 July 2020].