Racial Landscaping of the Frontier: The Physical and Discursive fortification of land and space in Dominican Republic

Projecting a Racialized Past

It was my third trip to the Dominican Republic; however, judging from my gaze at the approaching island out of the small plane window, I must have appeared to be a newcomer. The thirty-something year old, stylishly dressed man sitting next to me touches the window with his index finger, breaking my concentration. When I fixed my eyes on him, he began describing the island of Hispaniola’s landscape. He said:

*Tu ves esa tierra seca, sin palo, sin planta, muerto, sin nada negro pero la gente ...eso es Haití; cuando empiezas a ver la tierra negricona, plantas verde, cosechas que llegan hasta el cielo y adonde dios manda café desde las nubes...llegamos a nuestro país la República Dominicana, los mas bello del caribe.* [Field Notes]

You see that dry land, without trees, without plants, dead, with nothing black but the people. That is Haiti. When you start seeing the land (soil) blacker, plants greener, crops that reach up to the sky and where god sends coffee down from the clouds, then we have arrived in our country, the Dominican Republic, the most beautiful island of the Caribbean. [Translation by author 2007]

The man pointed to large areas of space, and the assumed visual differences to the topography down below. He pointed left and labeled it the west, he then pointed down below and designated it the east. Still thousands of feet in the air, the man described the bareness of the west and the lushness of the east with clarity and vividness. But the man described more than the geography of the island, he gave me a rapid geopolitical lesson on the racialized human landscape, on the divisions that exist structurally and ideologically between the east and west, between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which share the island of Hispaniola.
The man’s description of the land from the plane high above signals more than just a racist comment—a dislike of Haiti or a belief in the Dominican Republic’s superiority. The description is a snapshot of the processes that reinstantiate historical and ideological racism. The details in the description create a racialized landscape that in turn validates racist discourse. This imagined landscape created from racist discourse are then backed with physical evidence and validated as truth. This process occurs across the wider environment and as a result, it controls dominant value, institution and space by segregating the social landscape (Kobayashi and Peake 2002, 393). The racialization of the landscapes of Haiti and the Dominican Republic differed in significantly visible ways—they produced not only disproportionate amounts of crops “cosechas que llegan hasta el cielo (crops that reach up to the sky)”, but also opposing body types “nada negro pero la gente (nothing black but the people).” The opposition suggests that Haiti is naturally poor, ecologically dead and phenotypically black, while the Dominican Republic is rich, lush and non-black.

I am not concerned with whether the man’s description matched what my eyes could see but rather how his description corresponds with grand racialized narratives of history, culture and power that have been mapped onto the land and which perpetuate a racialized discourse that shapes day-to-day experience. The geography of the Dominican Republic, the spatial distribution of land as well as the...
interaction of its humans and their environment, is a result of a continuous struggle of politics and power (Kobayashi and Peake 2002, 394). Land not only becomes an essential factor in the production of financial wealth for the nation but in manufacturing and elevating human value as well. This is an essential aspect of life in the Dominican Republic and a major influencing factor in the Japanese experience in the Dominican Republic. Within the process of *blanqueamiento*, land, much like bodies and nations, is racialized and as such becomes part of the problem and the potential solution. The racialized understanding of the *frontera*¹ and its inhabitants was the primary reason for the Japanese immigrants’ settlement in the Dominican Republic. However, it was also the racialized understanding of the land that seemed to become a barrier in the successful establishment of the Japanese colonies.

During the 12 months of my fieldwork in the Dominican Republic, I encountered several instances in which Dominicans and Japanese immigrants referred to land in similar racialized ways as they would a person. For example, after a few weeks of moving into Reparto Universitario—a residential area of middle class Dominicans and college students located west of PUCMM university’s main gate—I received several “*consejos* (recommendations)” from Dominicans friends about particular parts of the island—especially areas in which my research project was bound to take me. Yolly², a fair-skinned Dominican woman in her late 20s who became a close friend and informant—recommended that I not walk alone, especially in the dark, past the unfinished building at the corner of *Calle 3* in Reparto Universitario³. She explained that “*la tierra es mala y atri los vagabundo y perezoso negros* (the land is bad and attracts the vagabonds and the lazy blacks).” Thus she drives from her mother’s house to her own apartment located less than three tenths of a mile away. Sandra⁴, my Dominican landlord’s friend who is considered a darker-skinned “*Dominicana de color trigo* (Dominican the color of wheat),” explained to me that she could be living in a house that was much newer and bigger than the one we

---

¹ The term *la frontera* means “the frontier” in English and refers to the areas that border Haiti. This extensive area includes 5,000 square kilometers in the north and, along with the southern and central frontier areas, these lands comprise roughly one-fourth of the country’s 48,000 square kilometers, the land on and around the Haitian Dominican border. In this chapter, I use the terms *la frontera*, the frontier and borderlands interchangeably to refer to the western region of the Dominican Republic.

² Pseudonym

³ Reparto Universitario is a residential sector near Santiago’s premier university, PUCMM

⁴ Pseudonym
lived in now but that the “tierra no vale na (land is not worth anything).” In hopes of understanding clearly what she meant by the land not being worth anything despite the bigger and newer house, I asked where the house was located. Sandra said it was in el campo (the countryside); however did not offer much else. Talk of El campo by city dwellers can take on opposing connotations of revelry for being the regions of agricultural production and the keepers of tradition or disgust for its backwardness and rejection of modernization. Therefore to make sure I understood, I asked again, “Adonde (where)?” She answered sheepishly, “Azua.” Azua is one of the borderland towns. Remembering having heard her talk about a harvest, I then asked what the land grew and what was wrong it. “No, na! ‘Tierra mala adonde crece cacahuete y la gente hechichero con cabezas mas duras que las cascaras (No, nothing [grows]! It’s bad land, where peanuts grow and the people who are into sorcery have heads harder than the peanut’s shell).

As Sandra answered my questions, her nose wrinkled and her eyes squinted as if against a pungent smell; her face expressed disgust. Her explanation for what was wrong with the piece of land she owed along the frontier land—peanuts and sorcery—were linked to racialized notions of capital, labor and religious practice. Peanuts, I came to understand from several conversations with Dominicans and Japanese immigrants, grow in land that has little to no fertility. Sato, a vegetable farmer of Japanese descent, explains that peanuts need little water and could grown in red-colored soil and the actual crop does not sell for too much on the market. “No déjà plata (It doesn’t leave money)” stated Sato. In the local frontier markets and along many beaches, Haitians and poor Dominican boys sell peanuts in small clear bags for less than a dollar.

The borderlands are linked to strong presence of sorcery and spirits the spirits of Taíno and Haitians killed in massacre—said to fly over the land especially when peasants are tilling their plots. The land becomes the embodiment of the spirit who may be vengeful as a result of having been violently driven off their land and massacred. Marit Brendbekken describes visiting a mountain along the Haitian Dominican border with a curandero (herbal healer) and having been told of the lands dangers (Brendbekken 2003, 35). According to the curandero the destructive land makes: “harvests fail, children
get sick and peasants migrate in search of a better fortunate elsewhere. Sorcery is linked to the Haitian practice of voodoo and is believed to have the power to negatively affect the physical and mental state of humans, animals and land. The medical anthropologist Paul Farmer who works on cultural understandings of AIDS in Haiti, points to the ways that the “popular press drew upon readily available images of squalor, voodoo and painted Haitians as the principal cause of the American epidemic [in the 1980s]. (Farmer 1990, 9).” The proximity of borderlands to Haiti and the association of Haitians with sorcery and disease mark lands in la frontera, such as Azua, as having a high potential of being bad.

_Tierra mala_ was physically, mentally, economically and phenotypically bad for non-black residents because it was linked to illness, poverty and the blackening of skin, physically (from working in the sun) and perceptually (bad land both resulted from and created bad residents). Sandra’s assessment of the land being bad was based on the proximity of land to Haiti, the color & quality of the dirt and the value of the crop it grew. Based on the assessment of those factors, she identified the land as _mala_ linked to nationally prescribed racist troupes of blackness. Another significant factor in Sandra’s assessment of the land as bad or good was our current residence in Santiago, a large cosmopolitan city in the Cibao region which she circuitously characterized as better even without the large pretty house.

Santiago de los Caballeros, “El Corazon de la Republica” (Heart of the Republic), is popularly known for having the country’s most beautiful people. It is said that the women are beautiful for their fair-skinned and blonde straight hair and the men are the fairest gentlemen in the entire nation. Azua, Barahona and other frontier are where those Dominicans can’t hide the black behind the ear (Candelario 2007). Azua and Barahona’s blackness, located southwest of the capital, is linked directly to their proximity to Haiti.

This association of particular lands considered _mala_ (bad) with black bodies was a byproduct of strategically planned whitening projects—European colonization, American occupation and then Trujillo’s _blanqueamiento_ project, which he titled _Dominicanization_. These racializing projects and discourses left a physical imprint on the landscape of _la frontera_, the borderlands between the Haiti and

---

5 In 2004 while I was in Santiago, the city put out posters, flag and commercials with this tagline.
the Dominican Republic, and on the lives of the inhabitants of the land. This includes the Japanese immigrants who were invited to settle la frontera in hopes of them reversing the racialized position of the land from tierra mala (bad land) to tierra buena (good land). Sued-Badillo (1992) argues that this imprint of the past on the future is a reality for all of the Caribbean. “In much of the Caribbean the past still constitutes much of its present, whether there is a consciousness of it or not (1992, 598).”

This paper examines how local and immigrant associations of race and land, at times challenged and at times reinforced, racist nation-building discourses and settlement practices. Thus, this paper proceeds by describing the landscaping practices during the colonial and nation-building period of Hispaniola and examines how la frontera became the focal point of blackness. To understand this fully, a closer look at western conceptions of land, property and nation are outlined focusing on how Trujillo manipulated these conceptions to justify demographic and physical transformation of la frontera. The physical change of the landscape was completed with the settlement of people who were coerced to use the land in ways associated with modernity and whiteness. Plots of land were given as gifts of property, with the hopes that this gift to “non-black” persons would elevate the land’s value and simultaneously confer to the inhabitant’s higher status.

The second half of this chapter examines the specific case of the Japanese immigrants and their settlement along the frontera. I place the history of the Japanese immigrants within the context of western conceptions and practices of blanqueamiento (whiteness) and national discourses of Dominicanness calling attention to the linkages that has been sidelined, or excluded, by past social science discourse that focused discussion of race within Atlantic (Mignolo 2012, Horne 2007). Race has been cut from the womb of biological science, but immaturely wedded to specific racialized bodies—black and white—delegating others types of bodies—Asian, Latino, Middle Eastern, etc—to ethnicity and nationality. I highlight the special situation (historical and contemporary) of the Japanese immigrants in this section because it brings to light the legacy of whiteness, and the need to examine whiteness and blackness outside the U.S. white/black racial binary by analyzing conversations with people living or working in the western region of the island about the land surrounding la frontera. I
highlight these particular conversations because they designate land as either *tierra buena* (good land) or *tierra mala* (bad land). In unpacking the definition of these terms, the power and value attributed to land as racialized and racializing is further uncovered.

**Same story, Different storyteller**

I met Seio, a Japanese-Dominican man in his thirties, at the small cafeteria by Hotel Florida in Santo Domingo. It was our third meeting. We settled down at one of the café-style tables and called aloud our order to the waitress standing by the register. The cafeteria was empty of people but filled with the delicious smells of *moro de guandules* and *carne guisada* (stewed rice with pigeon peas and beef) stewing for the afternoon lunch crowd. As we sipped our *café con leches* (traditional latino coffee with milk), I told him about my plans to visit *la frontera* in the next few weeks and wanted to know if he had any recommendations on which *colonias japonesas* to visit. Before answering, he asked if I was traveling alone and if I had a car to get there. I explained to him that I would be traveling with a friend for about a week. After that, however, I would be alone. I reassured him that either way I would be fine. He chuckled and then replied that I would not need more than two weeks in *la frontera* because there was nothing there. “Na’ (nothing)” he emphasized. I responded, “*Yo voy a visitar las colonias en La Vigía pero quiero ir a otros lugares adonde se establecieron colonias. Tienes idea adonde mas podría ir* (I am going to visit the colonies in La Vigia but I would like to visit other places where the colonies were also established. Any ideas on where I should go?) He reiterated that there was nothing there and that it would be best for me to go to Constanza where “*la tierra esta buena* (land is good) (Fieldnotes December 2000).”

Seio was Yuki’s (who I introduced in chapter 1) younger brother; he lived in San Cristobal with his wife and kids. His parents emigrated from Japan in the 1950s and lived in San Cristobal near him. San Cristobal is a town about an hour northwest of the capital and is well-known for being the birth place of Rafael Trujillo. However, San Cristobal was not one of the original Japanese settlement locations in the Dominican Republic. There were eight colonies established with the 249 Japanese
immigrant families; six of the colonies were located along the frontier (Horst and Asagiri 2000, 342). The eight colonies were located in La Vigía, Pepillo Salcedo, La Altagracia, Agua Negra, La Colonia, Plaza Cacique, Jarabacoa and Constanza (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Colonias Japonesas

Seio’s parents were one of the families that arrived in the port of Santo Domingo in 1956 (Gardiner 1979, 180) as part of a special agreement between the Japanese⁶ and Dominican government. The Dominican government, under the rule of Trujillo, offered free land along la frontera as part of his nation-building project to whiten the borderlands. The Japanese government told the immigrants that each family would receive 300 tareas⁷ of free land in the Dominican Republic. By the mid 1960s, those Japanese immigrants who were settled in Dajabon received no more than 80 tareas of land. Within a few years of settlement many of the original settlements have disappeared or have since been abandoned by

---

⁶ For more on Japanese immigration to the Dominican Republic refer to Gardiner 1979; Horst and Katsuhiro 2000; Peguero 1990, 2005
⁷ 6.43 tareas is equal to 1 acre; thus 300 tareas equals approximately 46.6 acres
the Japanese immigrants. Seio alluded to the abandonment of a majority of these colonies when he stated that I would not need more than two weeks to visit the colonias.

Of the eight colonies established; five remained. Seio explained that “Las condiciones estaban tan malas que un grupo de familias regresaron a Japón o se fueron a Brasil o otros lugares—se fueron con na’ (The conditions were so bad that a group of families returned to Japan or Brazil or other places—they left with nada).” In the fall of 1961, in response to several complaints from the immigrants, the Japanese government offered to pay for the immigrants’ relocation out of the Dominican Republic. However, the government encouraged them to settle in Latin America instead of returning to Japan. Of those families who stayed, many also abandoned the colonias due to insufficient distribution of land and undesirable living conditions and moved closer to major cities. Only a few of the original colonies remain with smaller numbers of Japanese families residing and working there much like the case of Seio and his family.

In the Dominican Republic, the association between land and racial identity is intimately and intricately described within moral standards of good and bad. Consider Seio’s description of the Constanza’s land as “negrita, listo para trabajar”—as black and ready to work for the relationship between blackness and land. In this description, the labeling of the land as black does not necessarily equate tierra mala. The common usage of the diminutive suffix –ito in the Spanish language is used to convey the idea of smallness and delicateness. The use of the diminutive suffix “-ito” with the word “black” functions to lessen the harshness associated with “negro” indicating a level of affection. The blackness of the tierra is considered desirable because the color signals the land’s readiness for cultivating and the possibility of its success. The association of blackness with land has multiple layers and is linked to racialized discourse of black bodies and agricultural labor.

The largest of the remaining colonies, and one of the most successful, is located in Constanza, in the rich Cibao agricultural region of the Dominican Republic. Seio proclaimed the colonia in Constanza prospered because “la tierra es negrita, listo para trabajar (the land is black and ready for work).” The blackness of the soil was believed to indicate fertility, the darker the soil the more it was believed it
could produce. A few of the Japanese immigrants, from the colonias in Dajabon, recalled memories of their first journey from Santo Domingo to their settlement site in Dajabon. While riding in the back of a military caravan, they remembered approaching the Cibao region and feeling a sense of excitement at the sight of rich black soil and lush green mountain ranges (Peguero 2006, 25). The military caravan, however, did not stop; it continued for a few more hours. It stopped finally in Dajabón—a northwest border city between the Dominican Republic and Haiti which Seio described as having less black soil but “mas negritude (more blackness)” referring to the large community of Haitians and Dominican-Haitians.

Land, much like skin color, is used as an index for racial identification. Since the 19th century, Dominican elites and western powers have identified the land between the Dominican Republic and Haiti as racially black or at risk of becoming black and, many times with the same breath, as empty and lifeless. Nationalist discourse in the 20th century claimed that this area was both a no man’s land in need of development and a breeding ground for savagery and blackness. The contradiction in the discourses is reconciled when it is understood that within Dominican nationalist discourse, Haitians, who are considered the blacks in the Dominican Republic, are considered less than human and a hindrance to modernity. Therefore, though the land between the nations has been a lively dwelling ground and a marketplace for both Dominicans and Haitians since the colonial period, because of the national and racial identity of the inhabitants, nationalist discourse declares this area unoccupied with civilized persons and in need of intervention. Seio’s comment that there is na’ (nothing) at la frontera and thus my time would be better spent elsewhere resonated with the discourses spun by the Dominican government for over a century and reiterated by the Dominican man on the plane. Discourses that cement blackness with Haitians and mark la frontera as blackness portal thus justifying political intervention of the type brought about by Rafael Trujillo’s government.

Kobayashi and Peake argue that the association of land and race, where land is racialized and racializes, is part of “an historically specific social formation, shaped within a racialized problematic” of whiteness (2000, 392). The has been the suggest that “no geography is complete, no understanding
of place and landscape comprehensive, without recognizing that...geography, both as discipline and as special expression of...life is racialized.”

Creation of la frontera: Hispaniola: One Island, Two Nations

In 1697, the French and Spanish divided the island of Hispaniola\(^8\) in two, Saint Dominque and Santo Domingo. The boundaries of these two territories, however, were not clearly defined. The semi-border between the nations provided refugee for runaway slaves from the French and Spanish colonies and the establishment of maroon communities during the period of colonization. In the early 20\(^{th}\) century, rebel and opposition forces collaborated and launched attacks from these minimally supervised, marginal lands. In 1789, Saint Domingue had a population of half a million slaves, 40,000 mulatos and 30,000 whites (Frenchmen) (Metraux 1958, 33). In the late 18\(^{th}\) century, the permeability of the frontier coupled with the uneven ratio of slaves to whites became of particular concern to the Spanish colony. Spain’s neighboring French colony was experiencing several small uprisings among slaves, mulattos and French plantation owners resulting in many people to seek refuge in the east. Within a few years, the uprisings escalated and France could no longer contain the fighting.

In 1804, groups of slaves revolted killing thousands of Frenchman and forcing the others to surrender. The former slaves established the first independent black republic in the western hemisphere\(^9\), Ayiti (Creole for Haiti). In 1822, the unified\(^10\) republic of Haiti ended slavery on all of Hispaniola and took control of the eastern region, successfully unifying the entire island under Haitian rule. The once nebulous division between the two colonial territories was completely lifted. Haiti remained in control of the entire island for twenty-two years. On February 27 of 1844, the eastern part of the island gained its independence, becoming the Dominican Republic. The new independent country declared Santo Domingo the capital, the largest and oldest city in the republic located on the south-central coast.

\(^8\) Hispaniola was the name given to the island by Spain (from La Española) in the late 15\(^{th}\) century; however, it is also referred to popularly as Quisqueya (from the Taino work Kiskeya meaning mother of the earth).

\(^9\) Haiti became the second independent country in the Americas, after the United States in 1776.

\(^10\) After the revolution, Haiti was divided into two parts, a southern republic founded by Alexandre Pétion and the northern kingdom under Henry-Christophe. In 1820, Christophe committed suicide, resulting in the reunification of the nation as the Republic of Haiti under Jean-Pierre Boyer.
After establishing itself as a nation, the Dominican government voluntarily relinquished sovereignty to Spain in 1861 in fear of an alleged Haitian plot to invade. However, within two years, the re-colonized territory launched a war against Spain reestablishing independence in 1865. For several decades after Spanish independence, the fluctuating border continued to be an unresolved point of contention. Unable to establish definite borderlines between the two countries or to implement recommended economic and political policies the United States occupied Haiti\footnote{According to Naval reports from 1914, the reasons for U.S. presence in Haiti was as follows; “Owing to the disturbed political conditions in Haiti, American forces were landed for the purpose of protecting American and foreign lives and property.”} from 1915 to 1934\footnote{In 1918 shortly after occupation, the United States repressed a revolt resulting in the death of more than 15,000 Haitians. Hostility, with respect to the U.S. presence, grew among the Haitian people and lead finally, in August of 1934, to the departure of the North Americans. The United States, nevertheless, continues to influence strongly the political and economic policies of Haiti.} and the Dominican Republic from 1916\footnote{Shortly after occupying Haiti, the American Minister accredited to Dominican Republic cabled the State Department that he believed trouble was imminent in the Republic (Lieut-Col. R.B. Farquharson of U.S. Navy, 2005. Study of U.S. Navy Expeditions from 1901-1929. Navy Department Library. Washington, D.C.)} to 1924.

Operating under a policy of “preventive intervention” that aimed to guarantee stability in the region, the United Stated occupied the island of Hispaniola to restore political and financial order where local armies and governments failed (Pérez 1982, 168). Pérez contends that the United States’ “responsibility over the administration of national economic affairs was asserted in “Dollar Diplomacy (1982, 168-169).” He quotes Secretary Philander C. Knox as summing up American concerns succinctly in 1912:

> The logic of political geography and the strategy, and now our tremendous national interest created by the Panama Canal, make the safety, the peace, and the prosperity of Central America and the zone of the Caribbean of paramount interest to the Government of the United States. Thus the malady of revolutions and financial collapse is most acute precisely in the region where it is most dangerous. It is here that we seek to apply a remedy.\footnote{“Address of the Honorable Philander C. Knox before the New York bar Association,” Jan. 19, 1912, in Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States 1912 (Washington, D.C., 1919), 1092}

During U.S. occupation of Hispaniola, American government officials surveyed the island and claimed that the lands between the two countries were high-risk zones. Dominican elites, such as José Gabriel García reiterated U.S. urgency to deafricanize la frontera because
“las comarcas fronterizas, víctimas de especulaciones ruinosas que las an convertido en tributarias de Haití, … a paciencia de los gobiernos dominicanos que, ocupados en sus querellas oposicionales, las han visto con la más grande indiferencia y las an mantenido en el mayor abandono hasta irles dejando perder la pureza del idioma y la moralidad de las costumbres. (García, Historia Moderna de la Republica Dominicana)

“the border regions, victims of ruinous speculations that have turned into tributaries of Haiti,… the patience of the Dominican governments who, occupied in their oppositional disputes, have seen them with the greatest indifference and have maintained them in great abandonment even allowing the lost of [our] pure language and the moral customs.

When compared to the western region of Haiti and the southern regions of the Dominican Republic, the border areas were relatively under-populated and severely lacking resources; the United States classified this area as underdeveloped, vulnerable and dangerous to western stability encouraging American financial and political intervention. Pérez writes that this was the purport of U.S. President William H. Taft’s observations in the early 20th century:

It is therefore essential that the countries within [the Caribbean region] shall be removed from the jeopardy involved by the heavy foreign debt and chaotic national finances and from the ever-present danger of international complications due to disorder at home. Hence the United States has been glad to encourage and support American bankers who were willing to lend a hand to the financial rehabilitation of such countries … because this financial rehabilitation…would remove at one stroke the menace of foreign creditors and the menace of revolutionary disorder.15

The search for stability and security drew the United States government deeper into various issues at the local national level—one of which was the development of la frontera. The international community, headed by the United States, made the establishment of a clearly defined Haitian-Dominican border one of the top political priorities for the two countries. The treaty to establish definite borderlines between Haiti and the Dominican Republic was signed in 1929 under the watchful and enforcing eye of U.S. military.

U.S. international spotlighting of the semi-fluid border16 increased Dominican anxiety of the black peril and elevated the issue as a pan-American risk. The fortification of la frontera was a physical reform of U.S. military occupation in Hispaniola; Knight argues that the construction of a road network to connect the capital of Santo Domingo with the three regions of the country was another (1990).

15 Congressional Record, 62nd Congr., 3d sess., Dec. 3, 1912, p.9
16 I use interchangeably the term border and frontier as English translations of the Spanish term frontera. The Spanish phrase “la frontera” appears in this chapter in Spanish quotations.
roads allowed for great surveillance throughout the country and easier transportation of imports and
exports (Calder 1984).

Finally, in 1929, the Dominican president Horacio Vázquez and Haitian President Louis Borno\textsuperscript{17}
signed an agreement establishing, for the first time in Hispaniola’s history, a definitive border. For
years, countries in the Americas, even the Vatican, negotiated the division of land between Haiti and the
Dominican Republic. Throughout the negotiations, Haiti argued for the border to be drawn farther east,
to include lands that not only were historically French territory but also were currently inhabited by
Haiti people. The Haitian government believed that the limits were unfairly delineated giving the
Dominican Republic lots of Haitian land and sole access to major bodies of water including Luquillo
lake—the largest lake in the Dominican Republic. Haitian resentment towards Dominicans grew,
publicly calling them “\textit{dominiquen vole},” Haitian Creole for Dominican thieves.

The United States justified its occupation of Haiti and the Dominican Republic by highlighting
two major accomplishments: the substitution of Haitian and Dominican armed forces with national
guards\textsuperscript{18} and the establishment of a definite border. With these accomplishments, the United States
claimed to have placed both nations on the road to internal and external pacification. Scholarship at that
time celebrated American achievements in the region claiming that the Dominican Republic went from
“a land of perpetual revolt to steadied and nurtured through the infant years of republicanism and [has
been] given new promise of political stability (Pérez 1982, 168).” Haiti, after a “period of misrule which
pushed people very close to the borders of savagery,” had been brought “to civilization” by American
intervention (Johnson. 1920, 131). However, many contemporary scholars have argued against the short
and long term benefits of U.S. occupation for the Dominican Republic and Haiti (Renda 2001).

\textbf{Snapshot of \textit{La Frontera}}

There is no natural, geographical border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. \textit{La frontera}
is a politically enforced border between Haiti and Dominican Republic. There is no mountain range, or

\textsuperscript{17} Dominican president Horacio Vázquez and Haitian President Louis Borno were figureheads that were both installed under U.S. occupation and influence.
\textsuperscript{18} In other countries of occupation, the United States followed a similar policy of dismantling radical armed forces and implementing national guards, for example Nicaragua.
river, or jungle, which divides these two countries. From north to south the line that separates the lands between these two nations winds for 171 miles. The land is considered fruitless and one of the least hospitable terrains on the island. The rugged Cordillera Central mountains cuts most of the border at a right angle from the south to center; the border extends from where the mountains turn east, into the ravine lowlands towards the southern areas of Dajabón, Massacre and Pedernales. The climate in this region is extremely arid, making agriculture difficult, if not impossible, without a system of irrigation (Augelli 1980; 23). Other than the Haitian vendors that cross back and forth, mostly by foot, to sell at the markets in Dajabón the border region is considered void of valuable resources—little arable land or trees for wood. For miles before reaching the official border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, the terrain is desolate with occasional vegetation.

**Zeroing in on la frontera as the zone of blackness**

It was in 1936 when the leaders of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, President Stenio Vicent and Generalísimo Rafael Leonidads Trujillo, respectively, met to inaugurate the new highway near the frontier and to settle recurring border disputes. The new border restrictions meant little to the long-standing residents. Many inhabitants, whether unaware of or in direct defiance of the new border, remained in the restricted area19 months after both governments released the decree for their removal. Trujillo became frustrated with what he saw as a deliberate violation of the border. In an attempt to make visible the nationally enforced border so to slow down the flow of bodies, Trujillo placed 311 posts across 383-kilometers separating the open terrain. He then publicly announced that he would give away 700 tareas of Dominican land for the construction of *la carretera international*. The international highway would run along the established Haitian-Dominican border and would be financed20 by both

---

19 The restricted areas were mainly Restauración, el Luisa, Cabo Corto, Cajuil, Cañongo and in the south Estrelleta, which today is the Province of Elías.

20 A cost of $450,000 American dollars
countries. Trujillo declared that the International Highway would stand as a symbol of reconciliation, amity and Hispaniola’s progress towards modernity.

Trujillo made sure to highlight having “donated” the southwestern lands of Miel and Tilori for the construction of the border in hopes of quelling the reports of having taken Haitian land. However, a major stipulation of this donation was the compulsory expulsion of inhabitants of the areas alongside the border, inhabited by Haitians for decades before the delineation of the frontier. For months before and after the construction of the highway, Dominican military expelled hundreds to thousands of people working and living within miles of the site. In addition to the highway, Trujillo established the *Comisión Delimitadora*, a Dominican bureau, to regulate the human traffic across the border, especially from west to east. Trujillo’s effort to contain blackness to the west did not stop with the international highway; he invested in developing the western region of the Dominican Republic. By spending millions of pesos on fortifying and relegating the frontier lands a space ignored by previous governments, he concretized *la frontera* as the source of blackness.

Trujillo was effective in elevating the borderlands as black and dangerous, garnering much support from the elites and poor country people allowing government intervention to the geography. For decades prior to the official delineation of *la frontera*, the lands between the Dominican Republic and Haiti continued to be inhabited largely by cattle-grazers, small gypsy merchants and small farmers (Derby 1994). For many of the inhabitants of this area land was not viewed as a commodity to be bought or sold, but instead represented subsistence, identity and place of belonging (McDonell 1983, 1).

Trujillo drew upon western conceptions of land and individuality to strengthen his control of the frontier region. His analysis of the problems at the border drew upon Western notions of the imperative of conquering and taming nature, and more specifically in Lockean conceptions of land use and individual rights. John Locke posited that land could become one’s own only through labor, and that only through labor did land gain value. In *Of Civil Government*, Locke provided the justification for appropriating land occupied by indigenous groups and others who did not properly cultivate the land:

---

21 A person who moves from place to place as required for employment
A person has a right to possess a given object [land included] if and only if (1) he labours for it or else inherents it or has it given to him by someone who has laboured for it and (2) either (a) he uses it or (b) if he does not use it, his possession of it does not prevent anyone else who could and would use it from doing so. If either of these two conditions is satisfied, then, although someone may possess a given object, he has no right to take it from him and use it themselves or else give it to someone else who will (cited in Hall 2000: 5)

Under this definition of land and property, it could be argued that the inhabitants of the la frontera used the land; since a majority used the land for grazing cattle; however since the ethnic, racial and national identity of the inhabitants were considered a threat to the nation their labor was deemed of lesser to no value to the nation. Dominican elite declared that la frontera was severely underutilized, unkept and vulnerable; thus making the region ripe for dominicanization.

Without serious and immediate government intervention, Trujillo posited that this frontier land would continue backward, un-colonized and vulnerable to Haitian invasion. Trujillo claimed that the area menaced the nation because it was infested with negros and plagued with incessant smuggling. As part of the plan to fortify the border, he released statements via newspapers and pamphlets warning the public of a genocide occurring right before their eyes along the frontier. The genocide referred to by the government was the “amalgamation of Dominican people with Haitians (Trujillo 1934).” This melodramatic plea attempted to demonize persons of Haitian and Haitian descent creating a rift between neighbors, coworkers, friends and family members based on a racialized nationality.

Dominicanizing Zafra

The land should be the well guaranteed property of the cultured man, the always fertile workshop of regular and orderly work, not the wrong, not the wrong-headed, unproductive and anonymous pastures of ranching, not the silent theatre of vagabond life. (Trujillo 1934)

Decisions about the allocation and consumption of resources are deeply political acts, entrenched in systems of power, with the effects of environmental change being experienced differently by different sectors of society. The physical landscape of la frontera and surrounding areas changed drastically during the 31 years under Trujillo. These physical changes had some to do with nature but largely to do
with the iron-fist of government. During the years of Trujillo, *la frontera* received massive resources and national attention.

In the 1920’s the nationalist discourse that ultimately reshaped, transformed and harden the geographic and ethnic border of the nation revolved around the history of Haitian immigration to the Dominican Republic. Specifically, public intellectuals and state officials in the late 1920’s condemned what they termed the “denationalization” of the Dominican frontier regions. This discourse reflected the Dominican elite’s long-standing mode of racism that valorized cultural practices associated with Europe and derided those associated with Africa (Turits 2003, 145). Besides D.R’s opposition to Haiti and the border, there existed a second axis to early twentieth century nationalist that would influence the course of Trujillo’s rule. This discourse revolved around U.S. imperialism and its massive ownership of sugar companies and accompanying land (Roorda 1998).

For Trujillo, it was important to establish his administration and the Dominican Republic as an economically independent nation. Foreign entrepreneurs in the sugar industry had monopolized the Dominican sugar markets, leaving the Dominican economy weak and underdeveloped. Even as he modeled his nation-building projects on western conceptions of nation, Trujillo blamed the economic and social problems of the Dominican Republic on these western investors. He felt that the Dominican Republic’s weak leadership contributed to one of the biggest social problems the nation faced at that time: the Haitian cane-cutter. Foreign planters, worked against Trujillo’s ideal white nation by continuously employing and recruiting *braceros* (Haitian migrant laborers). These foreign investors were capitalizing on the island’s resources: climate, low manufacturing cost and cheap neighboring labor (Roorda 1998). Trujillo’s nation-building project aimed to unify the nation under a national imagine of whiteness, sovereignty and Catholicism. Trujillo blamed the U.S. occupation for exacerbating the black problem.

During U.S. occupation, Americans established a stronghold on the Dominican sugar market controlling more than 90 percent of the large *zafras* (the sugar plantations) in the island (Ayala 2000).
In order to keep labor cost low and maximize profits, American companies’ imported “cocolos,” African descendant workers from the Lesser Antilles (Veras 1985). Trujillo accused American sugar companies of jeopardizing the well-being of the nation by blackening the Dominican population, “ennegrecieran la población Dominicana (they blackened the Dominican population)” and extracting the nation’s white gold, sugar.

Trujillo felt that D.R was not receiving enough of a financial return from foreign investments to sanction the continuous recruitment of Haitian labor into the country. During this period, forty percent of the Haitian population residing in the Dominican Republic was concentrated in the bateyes, shantytowns located near plantations. In order to decrease the Haitian presence on the zafras (sugar plantation), Trujillo used legal machinery to Dominicanize, or, as he articulated it, revolutionize, the agricultural industry, implementing policies and laws enforced by hefty fees and quotas. These laws attempted to tighten border control, reduce foreign investment, and heighten a whitened national ethnic identity.

Towards the goal of decreasing the nation’s foreign influence and dependence, Trujillo established a national currency, the peso, eliminating the use of the American dollar and the popularly used Haitian gourde in the western coast of the Dominican Republic. In addition, Trujillo aimed to completely control the sugar plantations, not just streamline foreign sugar investments.

During the first six years of his term, Trujillo attempted to dominicanize la zafra by encouraging North American owners to hire Dominican laborers in return for tax cuts. The Dominicanization of all the sugar plantations meant forcing planters to hire a majority of Dominican nationals. This labor shift was particularly significant because it looked to reverse the association of black bodies and plantation labor in effect for hundreds of years. Plantations were marked as racialized land and space where those labeled “black” worked the land, cut the sugar cane and reaped enough to sustain life.

However, Trujillo met resistance from both plantation owners and Dominican workers. The long history of plantations in the Caribbean created the conditions for the contestation of such work. Many
Dominicans regarded working on the plantation as dirty, unrespectable, and sub-human. By the late 19th century, the cutting of cane was synonymous with Haitians, who were described by the Listín Diario (1908), a Dominican newspaper, as “disease-bearing beggars and vagrants,” thus pathogens to the Dominican nation, reinforcing them as outsiders. The “disease-bearing” Haitians were thus associated with the plantation, an “unspeakable hotbed of disease (Crassweller 1938,151).”

Dominican workers demanded higher wages for less laboring hours forcing many North American owners to bypass the tax incentives and hire Haitian workers. Trujillo established a series of agricultural laws restricting Haitians from working the land and encouraging Dominicans to take their place. Law No. 837 regarding the Dominicanization of labor, compelled firms, even foreign ones, to employ not less than 70 percent Dominicans. This law was supplemented with others that specifically focused on making the plantations a desirable and attractive place to work. For example, Law No. 358 compelled employees to protect their workers against labor accidents and Law No. 929 limited the commercial and working day to eight hours (Roorda 1998). In many of his speeches, he called upon Dominicans to join him in picking up a machete and working the land.

However, Trujillo quickly realized that the stigma associated with the cutting of the cane could not be easily shaken. The stigma was established deep in the New World colonization were the historic labor structure equated cane-cutters with slaves and the slaves were African with bodies considered black. These bodies were labeled inferior and forced to perform tasks designated as low-grade black work. Depending on time and place, designations of what was “black work” varied and changed. However, in the Dominican Republic the association of cutting-cane and black bodies remained and solidified. While, national discourse rallied Dominicans to not consider themselves black at the same time Trujillo tried to reverse the racialized association of plantation field labor and negros, sugar-cane cutting was black labor and thus not Dominican labor. Haitians and Africans, are the only blacks and hence they should cut the cane.
Shortly after his first six years, Trujillo took matters into his own hands, Trujillo nationalized over 80%\(^{23}\) of the sugar plantations and refineries placing even the largest sugar company under his direct control. From 1948 to 1957, Trujillo used sugar import taxes to consolidate his control over the Dominican sugar industry pushing most investors out of the Dominican Republic. By the end of the 1950s, Trujillo had gained control of 12 out of 16 sugar plantations (Roorda 1998) which permitted Trujillo to directly manage the labor force and minimize the importation of *braceros* (Haitian migrant workers).

Motivating Dominicans to work the plantations was difficult, because of the long history of racialized association with cutting cane on the plantation and the brutality of the work. In the Dominican Republic, due to past colonial structures and division of labor, plantation work, particularly the cutting of the cane, continues to be highly stigmatized and heavily associated with black bodies. The work of harvesting cane is backbreaking. With a small machete, or knife, a cutter slices the cane stalk as close to the ground as possible. Standing under the unforgiving sun and in wet muck soil, the cutter cuts off all the leaves and the top of the stalk, then tosses the cane into a pile. They do this for hours, accumulating thousands of stalks in their piles to earn less than a price of a bag of rice (Martinez 1996). Most Dominicans, still today, view the cutting of the cane as degrading and inhumane as described by Severino (interview with author 2004), a thirty-year old dark skinned Dominican male who owns a travel agent, “*cortando caña no lo hago yo por nada. Teniendo ni un chele en mi bolsillo levantare un machete…eso es trabajo de animales*” (I wouldn’t cut cane for anything. Having not a cent in my pocket would I lift a machete…that’s animal work).” Sugar plantations would remain black spaces within the republic. Eugenio Matibag explains that “although Dominicans for their part generally seek work elsewhere, considering cane-cutting too low-paying, hard, and demeaning an occupation, many do end up working in sugar, often doing the less demanding tasks of weighing, supervising, transporting, or refining (2003,196).

\(^{23}\)Trujillo took control of the following sugar plantations; Amistad, Barahona, Boca Chica, Catearei, Consuelo, Esperanza, Monte Llano, Ozama, Porvenir, Río Haina, Santa Fe and Quisqueya (Bosch 1985).
In Trujillo’s crusade to rid the Dominican Republic of Haitians, he created policies, such as giving “unused” land to Dominicans, who would not have to work as wage labor to sustain themselves. Trujillo distributed “unused” semi-fertile land--unused by Dominicans, but commonly used by Haitian and Dominico-Haitian cattle herders--to indigent Dominican country residents, pushing Haitians off these lands. This policy ultimately decreased the amount of land he had control over; however, Trujillo hoped that by giving this land to particular individuals, a sense of devotion to land and nation would develop and possibly spur fellow Dominican neighbors to see the value in working land. A sense of pride in landownership was said to arise but Trujillo was still frustrated with the owners desire to only grow enough to sustain themselves and with other Dominican’s lack of desire to work land not owned or primarily used by them. Many of these Dominicans received their own plots of land shortly after Trujillo came into office.

It was equally difficult for plantation owners, both national and foreign owners, to create work forces of 70 percent Dominican labor. The still-strong presence of Haitians near the plantations, due to the lack of sufficient roads and military surveillance at the border, further added to Dominicans’ refusal to cut cane and to the employers’ equal agitation of paying Dominicans twice as much for the same work. Trujillo’s attempt to sever the concretized association of plantation field labor and black bodies failed. The racialization of plantation labor could not be reversed. In order to capitalize profits on the plantation, the colonial racial structure remained in place.

La Frontera Gets Modernized

Trujillo inability to reverse the association of plantation labor with black bodies ignited his plan to whiten the frontier through other means that worked with rather than against Dominican discourse. The government justified its decreased attention to the black bodies in the plantations by arguing that in comparison to other regions of the nation, particularly la frontera. The plantation, though holding a high concentration of Haitians, were located in isolated, heavily surveillance spaces. Interactions with locals were minimal to nonexistent. Residents in the la frontera, however, had lived and worked in these areas
for decades, establishing networks, interacting freely and communicating in Spanish, French and Creole. This, the government argued, was a new form of genocide; it was killing the republic’s pure Dominican culture.

_We [Dominican people] may have imaginary borderlines, but the real ones we must plant. Our people, laborious and white, animated with the grand spirit of defense, should go live near the frontier and fight back by working and vitalizing the economy._ [Trujillo, transl. by Gardiner1971]

In 1920, the total Dominican population was 894,665. Haitians made up 3.2% (28,258) of that total (Census 1920), rising to 3.6% by 1935 (Tolentino 1944, 198). Though Haitians represented less than 4% of the Dominican population, their concentration in three provinces near the frontier fueled Dominican authorities’ fear of black peril.

Table 1: Dominican national 1920 census

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provinces</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Number of Haitians</th>
<th>% of Haitians</th>
<th>% of Total Haitians in D.R.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AZUA</td>
<td>101,144</td>
<td>4,545</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BARAHONA</td>
<td>48,182</td>
<td>4,492</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MONTE CRISTI</td>
<td>67,073</td>
<td>10,972</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>38.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>216,399</td>
<td>20,009</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>70.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Trujillo and other Dominican authorities under his regime understood their national duty as an effort to “deafricanize the country and restore Catholic values” (Knight 1990, 225). A year after coming into office, Trujillo asked the U.S. President Roosevelt to loan him a team of immigration experts so that the Dominican Republic could draft laws facilitating “neo-white” immigration (Roorda 1998). The Roosevelt administration sent two labor department officials to conduct a study and suggest legislation. Within a year, the U.S. officials help draft immigration laws that strategically excluded the entrance of black bodies. These laws were the foundation to Trujillo’s Dominicanization and blanqueamiento policies.

There were policies that favored the invitation and settlement of “whiter” immigrants to the Dominican Republic before Trujillo’s administration. By the 1930s, D.R. had a history of welcoming non-black immigration and settlement. In the 19th century, immigrants came from a number countries
considered to have non-black inhabitants; these whiter-than-categorically black persons were invited and then strategically settled along the western and southern regions of the island. During the period of renewed Spanish occupation (1861-1865) more Spaniards settled on the island.

With the Dominican government’s offer of land and almost instantaneous national inclusion, many immigrants such as Spaniards made a home in the Dominican Republic. In the 19th century, with hopes of economic prosperity, Arab-Lebanese and smaller numbers of Palestinians and Syrians arrived on Dominican shores maintaining contacts with relatives in the Middle East (Wiarda 1975). Italians also arrived during this period and settled relatively quickly, as did immigrants from diverse South American countries (Walker 1972). Some Chinese came from other Caribbean islands and established a reputation as hard working contributors to the land. However prior to Trujillo’s regime, the government’s recruitment efforts were sporadic and unsystematic. This resulted in low retention rates in these new settlements. The historian C. Harvey Gardiner noted that the Dominican Republic has served as a trampoline, where many immigrants arrived then moved elsewhere. There were a handful of successful settlement stories, which made immigration an attractive tool for the Trujillo regime to expedite the construction of an ideal whiter Dominican nation along the frontier.

Stories of how Haitians pushed Dominicans out of the western areas masked years of government neglect and disinterest in the borderlands. The frontier became an amalgamated space of the unknown. The areas alongside the Dominican-Haitian frontier became collectively known as la frontera. These distinct provinces became analogous with the long vertical political line of demarcated space. The political line and the bordering provinces had as their common denominator blackness—a black history of black land and black bodies—which unified and solidified blackness in the west and non-blackness in the east.

La frontera, sin embargo, no es una línea. La frontera no es siquiera una región. La frontera dominico-haitiana, tal como la conocemos los que la viajamos, exploramos o caminamos todo el tiempo, es una sucesión de regiones y de espacios que tanto unen como separan a estas dos naciones…Cada día que pasa, la frontera o, mejor dicho, las varias fronteras acentúan sus diferencias. Mientras tanto, la mayoría de los dominicanos no se da cuenta de ello. (Moya Pons 1977)
La Frontera is not a line. La Frontera is not even a region. La Frontera Dominico-Haitiana, the way we know it, the ones who travel it, explore it and walk it everyday is a succession of regions and spaces that unite as they divide two nations…Everyday that passes, la frontera, or better put the many frontiers, accentuate their difference. However, in the meantime, the majority of Dominicans do not take notice. (Translation by author 2007)

The frontier lands were spaces were Haitians, Dominicans and Dominico-Haitians worked, traveled and lived. There was less state surveillance of this area prior to Trujillo’s regime. Residents used these lands for cattle herding, farming and squatting creating areas of cultural, racial and linguistic mixture (Derby 1994). Shortly after fortifying the new border, Trujillo reorganized the provinces in the west, making each of them smaller and creating new ones. Now with smaller provinces, the state could conduct surveillance of the area more effectively.

Within a few years of establishing the border and gaining international recognition—for what the world thought was the end of the island’s long antagonistic relationship and border disputes—Trujillo took more drastic measures to eradicate the Haitian presence in the west. As mentioned in previous chapters, in 1937, the residents of the borderlands witnessed the dreaded aggression and horrific warfare forewarned by the Dominican government. However, the perpetrators of this gruesome attack were not Haitians, but Dominican soldiers dressed in laymen’s clothes, carrying machetes and following strict government instructions to kill all Haitians found along la frontera.

In understanding that blackness was much more than a physical embodiment, Trujillo sought to whiten the frontier land by disassociating the productivity of private farmland with black bodies—similar to his attempt to disassociate Haitian labor with plantation. Trujillo’s government fashioned stories about burnings, murders and rapes in the western lands with the objective of unifying the country against Haiti. The Dominican government claimed that the Dominican people had been forced to live in the interior due to the gradual spread of Haitians into Dominican lands. Continuing with a law established in 1907, Trujillo enacted policies to promote the development of the regions neighboring the border of Haiti (De la Concha, Frier and Demorizi; 1945, 46-47). The census of 1920s was used as proof of the true magnitude of the invasion (Dominican Republic 1923) and justification for the killings.
However, stories of the horrific massacre spread across the country and leaked into international arena causing the world to look at Trujillo and the Dominican Republic as barbaric and backward. Human rights activist across the globe pressured their nations to take economic and political actions against the Dominican Republic. Within weeks of the massacre, Trujillo was under international scrutiny and faced the possibility of economic sanctioning and political ostracism. At the Evian Conference in 1938, President Roosevelt of the U.S. requested assistance in finding safe havens for thousands of Jews expelled from Nazi Germany. During this meeting, as a way of expunging the international scandal caused by the indiscriminate slaughter of Haitian nationals, Trujillo offered to settle 100,000 exiles and provide them with shelter, work and social services (El Caribe, Enero 1955)

Marriage of Whiter Bodies and Darker lands

By the 1940s, Trujillo had fallen from grace receiving serious criticism from the international community. Anxious to counteract “world protest against his regime” and to regain acceptance, especially by the United States, as devout Catholic and statesmen (Hicks 1946, 134; Ornes 1958, 95), Trujillo accepted Jewish exiles into the country. Trujillo hoped he would gain accolades as a Good Samaritan of human rights. Trujillo hired United States immigration policy makers to compile the Dominican Republic’s stand on immigration. It was imperative that the immigration policies of the Dominican Republic mirror the U.S.’s racist Jim Crow Laws, without articulating directly the exclusion of blacks. In this way, Trujillo was able to select particular exiles groups, such as the Jews and the Spaniards, and have a policy to justify why no exiles of African origin were invited.

The invitation and settlement of the Jewish exiles in the north-coast took most of the heat off Trujillo allowing him to continue without the probation of the international community. Once the border was established, Trujillo ordered the construction of a road running directly on top of the official dividing line. This highway, named the International Highway, would stand as a peace symbol for the world to witness. Instead, this highway quickly became both a highly militarized zone and a no-man’s-land for miles in either direction sending a stark message of dissociation and rupture.
Shortly after the 1937 massacre, the Dominican Republic became notorious as a site in heavy need of humanitarian aid and vigilance. The newly developing nation risked being further ostracized by the international community; they saw the massacre as representative of an underdeveloped, undemocratic and unstable political government. With the massive killings of thousands of black bodies, Trujillo attempted to clean the border’s slate, so to speak, and recreate it in his image of Dominicanness “white, catholic and civilized.”

Building a “whiter Dominican nation” meant constructing a modern western nation that resembled the infrastructure of U. S. and Europe. Within months of being in office, Trujillo began public projects such as rebuilding homes, businesses, roads, highways, and parks. The tropical and mountainous landscape of the island was manicured with paved roads and seeded with cinder blocks. Under his Dominicanization projects, Trujillo established institutions and legislation that created new modes of “social discipline and control and a novel penetration of the state in areas previously defined as private and thus not formerly subject to national authority” (Derby 1994, 501). The international highway along the Haitian Dominican frontier stood as another symbol of modernity and progress. It also became the settlement site for international communities to become part of the national vision of whiteness.

Figure # 3: Japanese as non-black miracle workers
Colonization of borderlands by non-black persons became the landscaping solution to modernizing a nation that shared an island with an undesirable neighbor. The national discourse worked to homogenize the racial landscape of the country, creating a Dominican ethnic identity tied to a non-black race, while at the same time, presenting the Taino identity as primary to the Dominican mixed cultural and racial identity (Peguero 2005, Simmons 2009).

“Los apologistas del régimen consideraban la inmigración de ‘hombres y mujeres de origen caucásico’ como ‘necesidad inaplazable de nuestra vida nacional’ porque servirían para contrarrestar el crecimiento ‘vegetativo’ de los negros africanos que desde los tiempos coloniales residían en el país.” (Peguero 2005, 65)

The sympathizers of the regime understood the immigration of “men and women of Caucasian Origen” as a necessary and uncompromising element of the life of the nation; it served to stop the “vegetation” of the black Africans that reside in the country since colonial times. (Translation by author 2007)

Trujillo rallied Dominicans in support of transforming the west under the banner of modernity, national identity and security. Integral to the successful colonization of the west is that the people who settled these frontier lands have an understanding of ownership, individualism and agriculture. The land given to them would be for them to protect and produce. Having been long intrigued with Japanese cultural, to the point of naming his daughter Japón, Trujillo believed the Japanese were the “non-black miracle farmers” the nation needed.

In 1958, one of Trujillo’s advisors questioned whether the Japanese immigrants would defend the border from Haitians the way Dominicans would. He recommended the fortification of the western with Dominican nationals. Trujillo agreed to set up Dominican colonies alongside the Japanese colonias only under one condition that Dominicans be white. Trujillo’s advisor recommended the Dominicans living in Espaillat, who were considered of “tez blanca (white breed)” and hard working. Settlement of the right individuals was integral in establishing a modern nation state. Ideologically grounding Trujillo’s dominicanization project was western conceptions of land and ownership of property.
Scholarship on developmental policy argues that land is a key component to the wealth of a nation. Well-defined, secure, and transferable rights to land are crucial to development efforts. In developing countries, there was a large pressure to use land for agricultural production, a mainstay of economic sustenance (R. Lal, G.F. Hall and F.P. Miller 1998, 194). The possession of land rights also typically ensures a baseline of shelter and food supply and allows people to turn latent assets into live capital through entrepreneurial activity. It is believed that once secure in their land rights, rural households invest in increasing productivity.

Moreover, the use of land as a primary investment vehicle allows households to accumulate and transfer wealth between generations. In capitalist societies, the ability to use land rights as collateral for credit helps create a stronger investment climate and land rights are thus, at the level of the economy, a pre-condition for the emergence and operation of financial markets. Property rights to land are one of the cornerstones for the functioning of modern economies (World Bank 2003). The World Bank was created to assist developing governments adopt abovementioned policies, beliefs and ideologies, branding this particular notion of land and nation as the archetype to a modern nation.

Trujillo sought to increase the wealth of the nation by distributing (potential) land rights to individuals deemed acceptable national representatives. The distribution of land rights to only a particular type of people acts as an investment for the nation state’s future because the accumulation and transfer of the wealth created will continue to solidify the social-economic status of the elite class.

In this vein, the agreement to establish colonias japonesa along “Dajabon hasta [to] Perdenales” was formed with following mutual responsibilities between Japan and the Dominican Republic.

Table 2: Immigration Responsibilities of each government (Gardiner 1979, 208-209)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominican Government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. A furnished house per family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Upto 300 tareas of land per family (approximately fifty acres, 1 acre= about 6 tareas)—with the possibility of receiving more land with demonstrated of superior cultivating skills and high productivity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

24 These provinces mark the extreme poles of the frontier with Haiti. Oficio de Porfirio Carías Dominici, Division de Protocolo de la Sec. de Estado de Relaciones Exteriores, citado en Despradel, _La migración_, 10
The Dominican government developed strict immigration conditions that would facilitate the integration of the non-black bodies with the local Dominicans. Trujillo’s governments required that the Japanese government follow four provisions when selecting candidates for immigration.

I. Families of three adult members: Adults must be between the age of 15-50 years old
II. All immigrants must be physically and mentally sound—no alcoholics, introverted people (must be highly social) or persons with extreme religious or political views
III. All individuals must have strong desire to cultivate land

The first provision states that immigrating families must have three adults; the family of three adults did not have to be conjugal. Despradel reports that some of the Japanese families adopted or named a cousin or a friend as fictive kin (cited in Peguero 2005). Because of this first provision, there would be at least one Japanese adult without a partner. It was the hope of the regime that this available adult would marry local Dominican nationals. The second requirement outlined the physical and mental conditions, as well as the personality traits, that Trujillo’s government believed would best fit the colonia. The immigrants should be physically and mentally sound and have a desire to work the land, which is the point of provision three. Moreover, they should be social; this requirement looked to facilitate the inclusion process into the surrounding Dominican communities—and not of extreme religious or political views, which Gardiner states was code for no communism (Gardiner 1979).

Eligible persons who immigrated and promised to cultivate the land would receive the “gift of land in paradise.” The offer of land to families who were living in war-torn Japan was no small gift. However, leaving Japan was considered a high price to pay forcing many Japanese to reflect seriously on their decision to move to the Dominican Republic even if it was advertised as “paradise.”

---

25 A. Kenkichi Yoshida, Ministro de Japón, de Luis Mercado, Sec. de Agricultura, 12 de mayo, 1956 AGNSA, oficio # 0 4994
A Heavy Gift: Dominican Land for Japanese Nation

Scholars have well-documented Japan’s strong link between land and national, local socio-economic identity (Bestor 1989). Bestor shows how in the small town of Miyamoto-chō, residents create a social narrative of the town by rooting their current everyday practices to a glorified invented past. In this way, the residents create and recreate a homogenized notion of Japaneseness and its particular relation to land and space. Loyalty to the emperor is loyalty to the nation, to the land, to customs, to employees and to your elders. The anchoring of the present in the past legitimates current practices while creating a seamless undifferentiated way of being. Japanese persons are then believed, and at times espouse, to be replicas of a national identity (Vogel 1963). Both the Japanese and the Dominican government used a popular romanticized image of the Japanese as skillful peasants successfully producing crops on relatively small plots of elevated land to promote their respective goals.

Scholars have argued that Japanese’s strong association with land may derive from the limited amount of land available. According to a 1992 National Land Agency survey on land utilization, 252,100km$^2$ (66.7% of the national land area) is forests, 52,600km$^2$ (13.9%) is cultivated fields, and 16,500km$^2$ (4.4%) is residential areas. The cultivated area is decreasing year by year, though gradually.

On April 26, 1946, the population of Japan was reported as 73,114,308, of which 34,542,171 (47.2%) were classes as “farm population” (Grad 1947). The return of overseas soldiers and of Japanese repatriates, together with average projected increase, brought the population to 78,627,000 on October 1947, in which the farm population represented more than 46% of the total.

Prior to World War II, Japan was experiencing a population decline in farm families, but the destruction of a considerable portion of industry, as well as the complete stoppage of war industries and partial shut-down of other industries, reversed this trend. Under Allied Pressure, Japan established land reform, which, in many cases, drastically reduced the plots of land owned per person and eliminated absentee landlordism by forcing landlords to sell their holdings to the government at prices so low as to be almost confiscatory. The low land prices were a result of the 1947 land reforms but due to the system of government-fixed prices prevailing in Japan since 1939.
The land reform was to decrease the number of tenants and increase proprietors in hopes of transferring the land to farmers who cultivate it. This reform succeeded in breaking-up feudal landmasses and distributing small plots of land amongst farm families. However, despite the reforms achievement in increasing proprietors, the reform could not alleviate the postwar economic pressures. The Japanese government looked for other solutions, immigration.

The Japanese government pushed immigration to Latin America. Opportunities for immigration to the Dominican Republic—“paradise,” headlined newspapers and magazines all over Japan, usually following other immigration possibilities to Latin America. Firsthand accounts of those Japanese who already immigrated filled the press. A notable example is Norubu Uda’s immigration narrative. He was one of the first immigrants to the Dominican Republic and his experience was one of the most popular and frequently printed immigrant stories. Uda praised his new Caribbean home, reporting that the houses were neat and fully furnished and that working conditions were pleasant and the food inexpensive and plentiful (Gardiner 1971, 26). Uda’s story added incentive of personal comfort, social mobility and security to a decision that was still held in some contempt by fellow Japanese. Not only would leaving Japan be one’s duty to the emperor and the nation, but one’s family would be well off as well.

There was little to no mention of the Dominican Republic’s blanqueamiento process to the immigrants. Establishment of agricultural communities was continuously highlighted as the primary impetus for Japanese settlement in the pre-selected regions. There was no word of their integral role in whitening the frontier lands.

Frank Moya Pons (2004) describes the relationship between Dominican history and its people with la frontera as somewhat of a conscious oblivion.

También es cierto, aunque casi nadie lo dice, que los dominicanos viven de espaldas a la frontera con Haití. Para la gran mayoría de la población la frontera es misteriosa e invisible, lejana y desconocida.

It stands as truth, even though no one admits it, that Dominicans live with their backs to the Haitian border. For the grand majority of the population, la frontera is mysterious and invisible, distant and unknown (Translation by author 2007).
The Japanese immigrants experience and an understanding of “tierra buena” and “tierra mala” emphasizes the survival of past whitening ideologies and the current manifestations of it today. I place the Japanese immigrant experience within the narrative of Dominican history because it highlights the salient cultural factors that are acculturated showing a strong legacy and reinstatiation of racist structure in the Dominican Republic.

More than Just a Pawn in Whiteness Game

At a ceremony commemorating forty-seven years of Japanese presence in the Dominican Republic, the ex-Dominican ambassador to Japan, Sr. Despradel (2001), contextualizes the Japanese immigration within Dominican history by stating:

"El gobierno dictatorial del Generalísimo Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, necesitaba promover la política migratoria con nacionales japoneses con la finalidad de favorecer el desarrollo de la zona fronteriza dominico-haitiana. Con la finalidad de crear riquezas y con la presencia Niponá en esa zona de gran interés estratégico, constituir una frontera humana que sirviera de muro de contención a la llamada “invasión pacífica” de haitianos a la República Dominicana."

The dictatorial government of Generalísimo Rafael Leonidas Trujillo needed to promote the migratory policy of Japanese nationals [to the DRD.R] with the purpose of favoring the development of the Dominican-Haitian border zone. The purpose was to create wealth and with the strategic placement of the Japanese in that zone to constitute a human border that served as a wall to the "pacific invasion" from Haitians to the Dominican Republic. [Translation by author 2005]

In this speech to an audience composed of Japanese and Dominican dignitaries, Japanese immigrants, their descendants and family, Despradel affirms that the final goal of the Japanese settlement was to provide a “human border” between the Dominican Republic and Haiti that would ward off another “invasion”. Despradel states that the Japanese immigrants, full of illusions and hope, were betwixt and between two national projects, Japan’s economic and political restoration and the Dominican’s grand “racists, anti-black and chauvinist anti-Haitian immigration project (2001, 5).”

Paradise was never found. It is imperative to analyze the immigrants’ notions of the “paradise” they were looking to find with the descriptions of the tierra mala that they did find. Such an
examination leads us to an important discussion of the conjunction of race, class, conceptions of land
and nation.

The following is Toru Takegawa’s description of the land found and the work needed in order
for it to be listo para trabajar (ready to be worked). Takegama is an emigrant from Kagoshima
Prefecture in Japan and an active spokesperson of the Japanese immigrant condition in Dominican
Republic.

My family arrived in Santo Domingo and days after our arrival, we boarded an
uncomfortable bus with our meek possessions. Within a few hours, we saw lush black
soil up ahead. Everyone on the bus was quite pleased to be settled on such land. But the
bus never stopped. We kept riding on this very bumpy road for a few more hours. We
really could not understand what was going on. Then the truck stopped after about 13
hours and all we saw was dry land surrounded by cactuses. This was our fate. Trees fallen
were still green, and stumps remained as they were. So, we asked for an early
mobilization of bulldozers… the situation was very different from the guidelines, which
promised that in the initial settlement year, 9 hectares of land would be cultivated by the
government of the Dominican Republic at its own expenses for distribution to each
family. There was no individual land distribution, and the Dominican Republic's
Agriculture Ministry officials instructed the settlers to carry out joint work. Under the
burning sun, we were forced to operate peanut seeding machines without any horses or
cattle.
[Toru Takegama, 2000; translation by author, 2006]

Toru Takegama’s narrative, like many others I heard, highlighted the disappointment of
seeing the land for the first time. The journey from the capital, in the south central coast of the country
to Dajabon, in the far northwest, took the immigrants from the coastal land passed the lush central
valleys and

They highlight the settlement agreement of 300 tareas of fertile land; describe the type of land
they were offered (paradise) and then, the cliffhanging moment, accentuate the emotions felt when they
arrived at the settlement. Paradise was rich flat fertile land, described by Japanese immigrants,
descendants and Dominicans alike, as tierra negra. Their argument about good land (tierra buena) is not
strictly about acreage or the condition of the land but also about the condition of the land in concert with
the social landscaping of the space. In a newspaper report when asked what was the Japanese expecting,
Takegama stated that:
"We were dreaming of farming on vast, fertile land on a paradise in the Caribbean Sea. But it was a far cry from a paradise. Our dreams were shattered in a matter of seconds. We all knelt down in despair when we saw the wasteland (Ueno, June 2006, caribbeannetnews.com).”

Yoko Nishio, a Japanese immigrant in her upper sixties who arrived with her family when she was a teenager, explains that she remembers the land and the region being “tan mala, tan mala (so bad, so bad).” She states that she describes it as such because “there as no water. There were many mosquitoes. It was a disgrace.”

From Takegama’s and Nishio’s description, paradise in the Dominican Republic included unguarded and pest-free fertile land the shade of black and not the color of red with soil ready for the cultivation of more than just peanuts. Such a land would have been located in the fertile mountain ranges and southeastern locations of the country farther away from the border than Trujillo have envisioned stated another Japanese immigrant. The reality of the land conditions in the Republic, Takegama stated, overwhelmed many of the immigrants to the point of suicide. Takegama’s association of mala tierra with characteristics of the land as dry, red, peanut-producing, borderland with high surveillance and needing hard labor was representative of a majority of the Japanese immigrant experience. Thus, the question becomes was paradise attainable at all in the Dominican Republic? Seio, responded “Si, para los ricos que no le falta y para los podres que no saben la differencia…tambien algunos inmigrantes en Constanza viven bien (Yes, for the rich who are not in need and for the poor who do not know the difference…also there are a few Japanese in Constanza who live well).”

Teruki Waki’s, a darkly tanned Japanese immigrant man of 50 years of age, claims to have created his piece of paradise in the Republic but only after lots of struggle. The land in Constanza was fertile but still need lots of work. The land was overgrown with pine trees and needed months of backbreaking work to prepare it for desired cultivation. However, Waki claims that in Constanza “the mountain climate is very similar to where we’re from in Japan.” He states that his mother, Choko, is still around to remind him of what life was like in Japan. His fields are full of ornamental flowers that paint a
colorful background for the rich green mountains. The flowers in the Waki fields provide economic subsistence guarding them from some of the unfortunate conditions of other immigrants.

There is not a clean one-to-one link between the description of *tierra negra* (black land) and it being “bad.” The process of land racialization in the Dominican Republic is filled with individuals cultural interpretations takes on colonial ideologies. No matter how successful the colonial project was in amassing land, natural resources and capital—even in spreading political, cultural and economic influence—no colonial power managed to create a satellite cultural replica of itself.

What makes a land good or bad depends on a series of interdependent factors such as 1) activities that are carried out on the land 2) inhabitants of the land 3) type of soil and crop produced 4) proximity to other racialized land and or spaces and 4) historical or contemporary events that leave a racial imprint on the land.

We know where the good land is located in this country, so when the Dominican government apologized for not complying with the 1950s agreement and offered land in Esperanza, we knew that it was bad land. Yeah it is not the frontier, but…but it is still not good. The Japanese government probably pressured them to take the blame. That land is red, not good, it is not black, and it is red. They would not live there, none of them.

[Interview with Ing.Hidaka 2002, translation by author 2006]

The Japanese immigrant’s perception of “*tierra buena*” is molded by Dominican racial structures. It is evident that the Japanese immigrants arrived with conceptions of land, property and nation that differed from their receiving country, Dominican Republic. Yet, it is also important to underscore that their conceptions of land, property and nation, both then and now, are ever-changing constructs of historical moments and processes and as such do not originate from any primordial Japaneseness. Routinely, analyses of Japanese culture are ahistoricized assuming continuance and stability from a shared grand past. Scholarship that argue for an underlying structural and cultural continuities between Japan’s past and present often distort the past, the present and the process of change and continuity that link them (Bestor 1989). Japanese history, ethnicity and culture is not static nor natural, but constructed and highly mutable (Lesser 2003).
I have argued that this chapter entitled Racial Landscaping of the Frontier focused on the racialization process of particular lands and spaces by the government, specifically *la frontera*, in the Dominican Republic and the national whitening projects executed in an attempt to reverse and rectify the area’s black identification. Dominican national discourse reinforced colonial racist ideologies creating a grand narrative of Dominicanness that was closer to whiteness than blackness, even while accepting a mixed ancestry which they identified as “indio.” The elite minority pushed to manifest their whiter Dominican nation and located the root of the nation’s problems at *la frontera*. The land, the space and inhabitants were all part of the problem. Trujillo referred to the frontier, in racially prescribed ways garnering support for his whitening projects—the massacre of Haitian (*negros*) and the settlement of Japanese immigrants (whiter persons) along the frontier and strengthening the nationalist discourse of anti-Haitianism and a Dominican indio identity. The government proclaimed this as the landscaping solution to an otherwise impure region of land.

A hierarchy mixed with race, class and gender order the Dominican Republic disproportionately. The white aesthetic and lifestyle is deemed superior, righteous and natural, the black barbaric, demonic and primitive. Understanding the intricacies of whiteness and blackness in the Dominican Republic requires a profound interrogation of race, class and space. The Japanese immigration was part of nation-building project that strategically looked to whiten the land by not only importing whiter bodies but by having these whiter bodies create productive soil, *tierra negra* (black soil). Fruitful and abundant land whitens the land by creating order, wealth and productive laboring bodies.

**Work Cited**


De la Concha, Troncoso, Julio Ortega Frier, Virgilio Díaz Ordóñez and Emilio Demorizi. 1946. Capacidad de la República Dominicana para absorber refugiados.


