

Book Proposal

A Border Is A Veil Not Many People Can Wear: Writing and Unwriting the Border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic

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This monograph focuses on the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic and on a corpus of fictional, non-fictional, and visual texts produced *around it, along it, about it, from it, because of it* and/or whose aim was/is precisely to *bring it into being* or to *erase it*. Like most borders, it has two dimensions: the vertical interface at the intersection between state sovereignties and the surface of the earth and the horizontality of the borderland, a porous place constantly in transition which questions fixed viewpoints. *A Border Is A Veil Not Many People Can Wear* engages with the dynamic tension that exists between the colonial/national frontier and the borderland of this much disputed border: it focuses mainly on three different moments or points of entanglement, namely those that gravitate around 1791, 1937 and *Now*. Wherever possible, the analysis of texts will pay particular attention to linguistic strategies.

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Series Preface

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Introduction

At times erased and at times enforced with extreme violence, the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic is a legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism inscribed in the island's geography. The introduction contains a brief account of the history of both border and borderland and of its geophysical and geopolitical characteristics. It explains to the readers the rationale for choosing the specific historical moments at its core (1791; 1937 and *Now*) and the origin and significance of the title, and briefly introduces the writers which feature in it.

1. 1791: This place was here before our nations (Madison Smartt Bell)

Moreau de Saint Méry's *Description Topographique et Politique de la partie espagnole de l'Isle Saint-Domingue* (1796) and *Description Topographique, Physique, Civile, Politique et Historique de la partie française de l'Isle Saint-Domingue* (1797); **Victor Hugo's** *Bug-Jargal* (1819 and 1826) and 'The Saint Domingue Revolt' (1845); **Jean-Baptiste Piquenard's** *Adonis* (1798) and *Zoflora* (1800); **Madison Smartt Bell's** *All Souls Rising* (1995) ; **Carlos E. Deive's** *Viento Negro, Bosque del Caimán* (2002).

The first text of this part is Saint-Méry's monumental work on the island of Hispaniola. In the first volume devoted to the French side, Saint-Méry famously compares Saint-Domingue to the past civilizations of Greece and Rome and indicates that his analysis covers the *status quo* up to the 18th of October 1789. I show how the author's commitment to the reconstitution of the pre-1791 *status quo* that both his *Descriptions* minutely depict also includes the forceful reinscription of the border of Hispaniola which, at the time of publishing, had been erased by the Treaty of Basle. Dates are of the essence also as far as Hugo's works are concerned. Written as a short story in 1819 and substantially revised in 1826, after the Haitians had occupied Santo Domingo, Hugo's *Bug-Jargal* focuses on the St Domingue revolt of the 22nd of August 1791. Set in 1793 and published in 1845 (that is, very shortly after the withdrawal of the Haitian army from the Spanish part of the island) 'The Saint Domingue Revolt' is a frightening cautionary tale and a good example of the anxiety that the erasure of the border and the concomitant threat of a subsequent successful overseas exportation of the Haitian revolution engendered in the colonial world. Piquenard is the author of two of Hugo's most probable literary sources and of the first two novels dealing with the Haitian Revolution. In *Adonis*, set in 1791, the action begins in Vallière, a place that signposted the border between the French and the English sides; *Zoflora* is so border-conscious that it ends with a surprisingly bold alteration of the historical chronology: the war between Spain and France declared in 1793 significantly precedes rather than follows the 1791 rebellion. Smartt Bell's is a contemporary rendition of the events of 1791. Central to its

plot is a smuggling of weapons from Santo Domingo to the black insurgents organised by a group of Saint Domingue Royalists which takes place across the northern border of the island, not far from Ouanaminthe and by the river Massacre. Smartt Bell subscribes to the hypothesis that the Black revolt originated in a badly conceived royalist plot aimed at terrorizing the *petits blancs*. Not only is the existence and persistence of illegal exchanges between the two colonies foregrounded throughout Smartt Bell's novel but the border(land) is also qualified as a site of continuous resistance to colonising: the indigenous population of Hispaniola is repeatedly evoked and a link between their behaviour and the Blacks' rebellion is often posited. Deive's novel is set in both parts of the island and insists on the importance and legacy of border-criss-crossing at such a turbulent time. Apart from Moreau de Saint-Méry's, these are all fictional texts which I will put in dialogue with one another, with their historical and non-fictional sources and other fictional intertexts and con-texts such as Pamphile de Lacroix's, *Mémoires pour servir a l'histoire de la révolution de Saint Domingue* (1819), Gros's *An Historick Recital, of the Different Occurrences in the Camps of Grand-Reviere [sic], Dondon, Sainte-Suzanne, and others, from the 26th of October, 1791, to the 24th of December, of the same year* (1793), Manuel de Jesús Galván's *Enriquillo* (1882), and Pedro Mir's *Tres Leyendas de Colores* (1978) .

2. 1937: Grand mere me disait que la riv Massacre etait en sang (Ernst Prophete)

Jacques Stephen Alexis's *Compère Général Soleil* (1955 [*General Soleil, My Brother*]); **Freddy Prestol Castillo's** *El Masacre se pasa a pie* (1973)); **Rita Dove's** "Parsley" (1983); **René Philoctète's** *Le peuple des terres mêlées* (1989 [*Massacre River*]); **Edwidge Danticat's** *The Farming of Bones* (1998).

The American military presence on the island played a central role in establishing the border – Haiti was military occupied for almost twenty years (1915-1934) and the Dominican Republic for eight (1916-1924). After initially precluding diplomatic initiatives, US military strategists realized that an undefined border contributed to political instability in the region. As a result, in 1929, a border settlement was signed and additional clauses to it added in 1935 and 1936, finally establishing the current border. The border treaty, however, was just a diplomatic agreement; for the peoples living on both sides of the newly-established border, little had changed. For decades after the end of the Haitian-Dominican wars, the border region had been a place where the authority of the state had been very weak. This led to the development of a mixed population of *rayanos*, Haitian-Dominicans who spoke Spanish and Creole, engaged in trade and contraband across the border, and did not owe allegiance to any state in particular. In 1937, the Dominican dictator Trujillo ordered the army to kill the Haitian migrants. Estimates on the number of dead have ranged from several hundred to 26,000. The Haitians were killed in a few days using machetes and clubs, so as to give the impression that it was the uncoordinated action of Dominican farmers who had decided to settle old scores. Given that there were often few physical or even cultural markers to separate Haitians from Dominicans in the border region, the inhabitants were forced to say *perejil* (parsley), the word whose pronunciation or mispronunciation supposedly identified them as Dominicans or Haitians. Writers from both sides of the border and from abroad have tried to come to terms with the massacre and powerfully retold the story in different genres. Jacques Stephen Alexis begins his novel by foregrounding race issues while at the end of *General Soleil, My Brother*, the protagonist escapes from the slaughter and reaches the border with Haiti – the title of this section is the Kreyol title of a painting by the Haitian artist Ernst Prophete which was chosen to be the cover for the English translation of Alexis's novel. Philoctète's novel also explores the roots of Dominican racial theory and focuses on the loving marriage between the Haitian Adèle and the Dominican Pedro and the massacre perpetrated in the town of Elías Piña, by the River Massacre. The same river features in the Haitian-American Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*. Danticat disguises her novel as a 'testimonio' by creating a first person narrator who is a Haitian survivor. Despite the fact that her life is tragically scarred by the massacre that sanctioned the enforcement of the border, Amabelle Desir, the protagonist of Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*, does not consider the vertical frontier between Haiti and the Dominican Republic as an insurmountable wall but defines it, interestingly, as a "veil." Dove's poem "Parsley" highlights the interconnectedness of borders and linguistic practices by denouncing the monstrous use of shibboleths at the time of the massacre. Perry Castillo's book was written at the time of the massacre but published 36 years later and from the point of view of a witness from the Dominican Republic. Castillo was

in fact sent to the border region on October 1937 as a young magistrate. Dominicans' and the author's moral dilemmas here take centre stage. The book is controversial because of Castillo's own racism (for example, he repeatedly refers to Haitians as thieves) and because one senses that Castillo would have liked the border between the two nations to be less porous and less easy to cross: the title of his novel ("the river Massacre can be walked across") seems to gesture towards this. Apart from Dove's poem and Castillo's testimonio/apology/novella, the other texts are all fictional accounts of the Massacre which I will put in dialogue with one another, with their historical and non-fictional sources and other fictional intertexts and con-texts which also analyse the racial basis of genocide and contextualise 1937 in the border politics of both countries, such as Bartolomé de las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552); Manuel de Jesús Galván's *Enriquillo* (1882), Louis Janvier, *L'Egalité des races* (1884), Anténor Firmin, *De L'Egalité des races Humaines* (1885), Hannibal Price, *De la réhabilitation de la race noire* (1900), Mario Vargas Llosa's *La fiesta del chivo* (2000), Joaquín Balaguer, *La isla al revés. Haiti y el destino dominicano* (1994), Jean Price-Mars, *Ainsi parla l'oncle* (1928), and Graham Greene, *The Comedians* (1965).

3. Now: Ecocide and *cèche lavi*

Maurice Lemoine's *Bitter Sugar* (1981); **Carlo del Punta's** (dir.) *Haiti chérie* (2007); **Julia Alvarez's**, *A Cafecito Story* (2001); **Mayra Montero's**, *Tu, la oscuridad* (1995) [1996, *You, Darkness*].

This part deals with two different but interrelated issues: the environmental emergency affecting the island of Hispaniola (and in particular the borderland) and the continuous economic migration from Haiti to the Dominican Republic (*cèche lavi* means 'to search for life through emigration'). It begins with an exploration of the disturbing continuity in terms of organization of space and conditions of life which links the ecological trauma caused by the eighteenth-century sugar plantations in Saint-Domingue (especially those near the border which are described with undisguised pride by Saint-Méry) (part one), the compounds or *bateys* in which Haitian migrant peasants worked and lived in the Dominican Republic at the time of the 1937 massacre (part two) and still operate now, and the Free Trade Zones where they have been more recently employed and shamelessly exploited. At the heart of all these enterprises is the conceptualization of land as 'territory' rather than 'earth,' implicit also in the establishment of vertical frontiers. In Haiti only 7% of the country's original forest remains unscathed by deforestation. Most of the trees have been cut down and used as firewood for heating and cooking or as export. As a result, massive soil erosion has occurred, much of the soil in Haiti is depleted of vital minerals, biodiversity is endangered and more and more people turn into migrants and leave the country which fails to sustain them. In the Dominican Republic too the globalization of agribusiness and monocropping has caused environmental problems such as agrochemical pollution from pesticides, soil erosion and devastation of biodiversity. Yet, if slaves' provision grounds constituted the horticultural equivalent of resistance at the time of slavery, organizations which promote fair trade and the rights of workers can provide a viable alternative to the exploitation of land and people alike. Most importantly, such an alternative simultaneously depends on and engenders what the Martinican theorist Edouard Glissant has called an 'aesthetic of the earth' which is vital to oppose the alienation of territorialization. Maurice Lemoine's *Bitter Sugar* (a journalistic reportage) and Carlo del Punta's film are harrowing accounts of the lives of Haitian migrants in Dominican *bateys*; Julia Alvarez's *A Cafecito Story*, a novel with woodcut illustrations, is a fictional text but is also based on Alvarez's real-life involvement in environmentally friendly coffee cooperatives in the Dominican Republic; Mayra Montero's *Tu, la oscuridad* focuses on a zoologist's desperate search for the almost extinct Blood Frog and links the frog's disappearance to human vulnerability in an environment which has forfeited humanity's spiritual relation to the natural world. The historical and geopolitical context for both ecocide and Haitian migration will be emphasised by putting these primary texts in dialogue with one another and their con-texts and intertexts such as Saint Méry, *Descriptions* (1796-7), Michele Wucker, *Why the Cocks Fight; Dominicans, Haitians, and the Struggle for Hispaniola* (1999), Eugenio Matibag, *Haitian-Dominican Counterpoint: Nation, Race, and State in Hispaniola* (2003), Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive* (2004), and documents from NGOs and other humanitarian organizations which are

currently dealing with these issues (i.e. Progressio; Batay Ouvriye; The CoEH Platform: Food security in Haiti).

Acknowledgements

Bibliography

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Authored Books

Caribbean Perspectives on Modernity: Returning the Gaze (Charlottesville: Virginia University Press, 2009), in press.

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Other Activities

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