

# **REVOLUTIONARY FREEDOMS**

**A HISTORY OF SURVIVAL, STRENGTH AND IMAGINATION IN HAITI**

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**with the paintings of  
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## Chapter 26

### Temwayaj Kout Kouto, 1937 Eyewitnesses to the Genocide Lauren Derby and Richard Turits

Despite the enormous scale and monstrous character of the 1937 Haitian massacre, with some 15,000 ethnic Haitians slaughtered by machete in the northwestern Dominican frontier, we will probably never know with any certainty what triggered this genocide ordered by the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo and carried out by his military. Yet we can shed light on the historical context within which this massacre occurred, the pre-1937 frontier world shared by ethnic Haitians and ethnic Dominicans. That world and the massacre itself have remained shrouded in myths stemming both from official nationalist discourses in the Dominican Republic and from widespread conflation by peasants of Haitian descent living in the pre-1937 northwestern Dominican frontier and Haitian migrant laborers in the very different world of Dominican sugar plantations, most located far from the region where the massacre occurred.<sup>1</sup> Moving the narration of the massacre and the pre-1937 frontier world from this mythical realm to a more historical one requires listening carefully to the voices of those who lived in the frontier and who witnessed this unspeakable and seemingly mad state violence.<sup>2</sup>

In 1987, together with Edouard Jean Baptiste (then working at the Centro Pastoral Haitiano of the Archbishopric in Santo Domingo), we collected some 40 hours of oral narratives from ethnic Haitian survivors of the massacre as part of a larger effort to comprehend this genocide, its historical context, as well as how such massive violence has been woven into the national imaginations of both countries. We conducted fieldwork in many Haitian towns, including the still-extant refugee communities established in Haiti by then-President Sténio Vincent (1930-1941) after the massacre. Interviewing dozens of survivors in Mont Organisé, Ouanaminthe, Dosmond, Grand Bassin, and Terrier Rouge in the north of Haiti and in Thiote and Savane Zonbi in the south, we explored the

lives of ethnic Haitians on the Dominican frontier as well as their memories of the violence they suffered. Through these interviews, we learned that most of those who managed to escape the killings had been born and raised on Dominican territory, hence they were, according to the Dominican constitution and also to most local officials at the time, Dominican citizens. Indeed, ethnic Haitians in the pre-1937 Dominican frontier provinces constituted an old, well-integrated, and fairly successful agricultural population with local roots dating back to the late nineteenth century. And what defined being “Haitian” or “Dominican” was far from transparent or consistent—both legally and socially—in this milieu.<sup>3</sup> Thus demographic figures on the “Haitian” population are especially problematic, though it seems clear that people of Haitian descent were not a minority of the residents in much of the vast rural Dominican frontier.<sup>4</sup>

In Haiti, we interviewed many people who recalled living relatively prosperous lives in the Dominican borderlands producing coffee, farming food crops, and, in the frontier towns, working heavily in the skilled trades: tailoring, baking, shoemaking, and iron smelting—prestigious occupations at the time.<sup>5</sup> In parts of the southern frontier, there appears to have been more residential ethnic concentration and more Haitians working as farm laborers, but there too social and commercial integration were high.<sup>6</sup> In oral histories we conducted on the Dominican side of the border, elderly Dominicans similarly recalled the relative agricultural prominence of Haitian farmers, including their development of coffee in the central border mountains. The predominant image of Haiti itself among ethnic Dominicans in the frontier provinces had been one of more commercial and urban vitality than Dominican cities offered in the 1930s.<sup>7</sup> This, in turn, contributed to the image of ethnic Haitians in the frontier neither as poor, backward, nor outsiders, as today prevails in the Dominican Republic.

Certainly, Dominicans and Haitians were not free from everyday frictions, racist constructions of beauty, or prejudicial ethnic stereotypes and other forms of differentiation.<sup>8</sup> But a unified community formed across ethnic difference and even across the national border that was characterized by relatively respectful and intimate relations between Haitians and Dominicans.<sup>9</sup> Haitian-Dominican unions were commonplace; bilingualism (Spanish and Kreyòl) was the rule; and Haitian and Dominican families frequently included relatives and properties on both sides of the border.<sup>10</sup> Regional markets, patron-saint festivals, and networks of religious pilgrimage were also highly transnational. In contrast to state leaders and ardent nationalists in the island's urban centers, local residents treated the border as a political fiction that was largely irrelevant to daily life.<sup>11</sup> For instance, during the 1930s some ethnic Haitian children residing in Dajabón (Dominican Republic) attended the *École des Frères* primary school in Ouanaminthe (Haiti), which was considered superior to the local alternative and for which they crossed the border twice daily. When we visited Ouanaminthe in 1987, we found a grim entry in the school's log for October 1937, mourning the world destroyed on both sides of the border following the genocide:

The number of students with parents disappeared is now 176 [of 267 students]. The poor creatures are all in tears. In the evening one hears nothing but cries and wails from the houses of the whole town. The Dominicans, without doubt awaiting an immediate riposte, have evacuated the civilian population in Dajabón for eight days....Father Gallego of Dajabón has lost two-thirds of his population....In certain parishes, in Loma and Gourabe, 90 percent of the population has disappeared; instead of 150 to 160 baptisms a month, there is not even one. Some schools which had fifty students before now have no more than two or three. It's grievous and heartbreaking what has happened.<sup>12</sup>

The question of whether some local Dominican civilians were involved in the slaughter is a vexed one. The testimony we collected on both sides of the border indicate disparate Dominican roles. We heard stories of courageous resistance by ethnic Dominicans—themselves terrorized by “El Corte” (The Cutting)—who hid Haitian friends and loved ones in their homes, transported them across the border, or emigrated with them to Haiti. On the other hand, the military enlisted numerous local civilians to help identify and locate “Haitians.” And a few Dominican civilians were recruited to participate in the killings. Some of these civilians were prisoners from other areas; others were local residents tied to the Trujillo regime and its informal repressive apparatus.<sup>13</sup>

The following excerpts provide a glimpse into the memories of those who witnessed and survived the genocide and a fragmentary window into a world that came to an abrupt halt on October 2, 1937. The printed word, of course, cannot convey the outpouring of emotion, anger, and sadness generated by their recollections, including those who watched as their families were killed by machete. In one particularly painful and animated interview presented below, Irélia Pierre recounted how as a young girl she survived the killings by playing dead as she lay bleeding underneath the bodies of her slaughtered brothers, sisters, and parents. Scars covering her neck and shoulders still recorded the machete swipes that thankfully missed their mark.

Our interviews in Haiti were conducted in Kreyòl, though many survivors switched occasionally into Spanish while recalling their lives in “Panyòl” or “Dominikani,” Haitian terms for the Dominican Republic. Most informants gave us permission to use their names, but a few preferred to remain anonymous. What follows below are translated transcripts of two of the interviews.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Anonymous Man in Ouanaminthe*

When the massacre happened, I missed becoming a victim as a child. When the massacre started, I was at school; I went to a religious school. The brothers had a choir for all the children who sang; and they had a group of kids who knew how to sing, and I was always singing with the brothers. When the massacre started, the children were in school, and I was at choir. And October 7th, the day of the patron saint festival at Dajabón, the brothers took us over there, since the border

was free to cross, and no one was afraid to cross the border at that time. So the brothers took us to go to mass there, so that we could sing in the choir at mass there. And while we were in the church, I saw a band of Dominican military who were milling about outside while we were in church. Since we were children, we didn't understand anything. What was happening was that the military wanted to kill people at that very time, right in daylight—to take people from the church and kill them. But what happened was the brothers were foreign, they were French, and I think because of them, they didn't do this. But when night came, around six, around that time, they started killing people. They started killing people at six o'clock, while people started crying out for help, people started running, they came wounded, they crossed the Massacre River, they all came wounded, they killed a lot of people.<sup>15</sup> A lot of people who were saved came here. And so, this is how I came to Dosmond colony. When people started arriving, the Vincent government rounded up people in the Dominican Republic. The war began with a lot of people dead, a lot of Haitians were taken when war came to the frontier. They finished killing people after one week, a week later. The Vincent government sent for the rest of the Haitians. Then Trujillo sent his men to gather and haul out the rest of the Haitians left behind. They brought war to the border. In Ouanaminthe, when you looked at the river, it was completely a sea of people and donkeys—it was completely full!—because many of the people—in fact most of the Haitians on the Dominican side—were afraid to live in the Dominican Republic any more. They were forced to leave although they didn't have a place to go to in Haiti since they had never lived there. When they arrived in Haiti, they were homeless refugees. So the government had to make colonies for them because Dosmond was a big savanna, a place where I knew everyone by name. My father had a beautiful garden in the savanna. It really was a savanna—there weren't any houses at all, nothing like it. The place was a desert. Before the massacre, in the frontier, although there were two sides, the people were one, united. All the tradesmen in Dajabón—all the cobblers and tailors—they were all Haitian. And even today there are Haitians all over Ouanaminthe, even though they still die today, there are still Haitian children there today, crossing the border daily. Haitian children, even if they were born in Dajabón, they still went to school in Haiti, every morning they would cross the border to go to school, every afternoon they would return. Their parents lived in Dajabón, but they came to school here. Haitians have always liked the French system of education, and the Catholic schools. Even the Dominicans love the French language, and the French language helps them a lot to speak Kreyòl.

*Irélia Pierre, Dosmond/Ouanaminthe*

I was born in the Dominican Republic. When the massacre broke out, I was very small. I remember that I had been in school a while. The day of my brother's marriage, after the ceremony was over, a Dominican arrived at the reception. The reception was the morning that the massacre broke out, and people started fleeing. That night we hid. The next morning when we woke up, some of the older people said "Be careful if you go out." So we stayed at home. Everyone came to my grandparents' house. They said they were going to Haiti because a revolution had broken out, and

that they were killing Haitians. They all slept at my grandparents'. During the night, a woman said to me, "You come with me to my house." I said, "No, I'm going to stay with my mother—I can't leave her here." So we went out to the garden where my mother was working, and she cut some bananas and put them in her bag. I carried a tree branch.

Suddenly, I looked over and saw a lot of guardias [Dominican soldiers] getting off their horses, and I heard them say, "There's one over there in the garden." Then they entered the garden and killed the girl. When I saw that, I ran. It was night. While I was running, I saw an uncle of mine, who took me into his house to protect me. When I arrived at his house I was terrified. They didn't let me sleep; they took me to another place. That morning at four o'clock they all took their bags, and we started to march toward Haiti.

While we were walking, some Dominicans told us to be careful and not go through Dajabón, but to pass around it, since they were killing people there. When we arrived at the Dajabón savanna, we saw a guardia. When we saw him I said, "Mama, we're going to die, we're going to die!" She told me to be quiet. Then a guardia screamed "*Está preso, está preso!*" [You're under arrest, you're under arrest!]. After that they had us all stand in the sun in the savanna. When we said we were thirsty, they said they would give us water soon. While we watched, we saw one guardia on a horse who had a rope to tie people up. When he saw that if he tied up too many people they started to run, he began to kill them and throw them into a hole.

He killed everyone; I was the only one who was saved. They thought I was dead because they had given me a lot of machete blows. I was awash in blood—all the blood in my heart. After all these tribulations, it's thanks to God that I didn't die. They killed them all in front of me. They tied them up, and after they killed them, they threw them down. I was small when I lived through all of this, but I remember it all too clearly. I remember calling out after the guardia had left, "Mama!" but she was dead; "Papa!" but he was dead. They died one after another. I was left alone in the savanna without anything to eat or drink. There were a lot of small children who were thrown up in the air and stabbed with a bayonet, and then placed on top of their mothers. They killed my entire family, my mother, my father. We were 28—all were killed. I was the only one to survive that I knew of. After they finished cutting me up, it was a group of older men who had come from Haiti who found me on the ground in the sand along the banks of the Massacre River. They picked me up and returned with me to Haiti. They brought me to Ouanaminthe, but they didn't take me in—they said they couldn't take care of me, so they said they would send me to Cap-Haïtien; when I arrived there, there would be people there to take care of me. I spent a month in bed in the hospital, after which time they sent me to live in Ouanaminthe.<sup>16</sup> When I arrived here, I didn't have any family to receive me, so I went back to Cap again. I stayed under the auspices of the state. After about a year, they sent me back to Ouanaminthe again, at which time I lived there with some other foreigners.

God gave me the strength to survive. Now I am married and have four children, but my entire family died during the massacre. Both my mother and father were born in the Dominican Republic. We lived in Loma de Cabrera. My father worked in agriculture, growing manioc, peanuts, rice on his own land—land that he had bought. He had ten karo of land.<sup>17</sup> He also kept some cattle, pigs, chickens, and goats. We grew enough food to feed the family (we never bought food at market) but also to sell. I used to go to market with my mother where we sold everything—peas, rice, bananas, corn. I only spoke in Kreyòl since we lived among Haitians. I hardly spoke in Spanish at all. There were some Dominicans in the area where we lived, but not many; there were mostly Haitians. There were both marriages between Haitians and Dominicans, as well as concubinage. There were no problems that I remember between Haitians and Dominicans—for example, no jealousy for Haitian land.

### Notes

1. Dominican sugar plantations located near the coast and primarily in the eastern part of the country began employing large numbers of Haitian immigrants in the 1910s. In earlier decades, immigrant workers from other parts of the Caribbean supplied most of the cane cutters.
2. This past has also been explored in fiction. See Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* (New York: Soho Press, 1998).
3. See Richard Lee Turits, "A World Destroyed, A Nation Imposed: The 1937 Haitian Massacre in the Dominican Republic," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82, no. 3 (Aug. 2002): 595n-599.
4. In the Dajabón parish comprising the area between Dajabón and Restauración, a Jesuit missionary estimated 30,000 residents of Haitian descent (*raza haitiana*) out of a total population of 35,000. José Luis Sáez, S.J., *Los Jesuitas en la República Dominicana, Volumen I (1936-1961)* (Santo Domingo: Museo Nacional de Historia y Geografía, 1988) 60, 71. The U.S. delegation in Santo Domingo reported a more conservative estimate of 17,000 Haitians (Atwood to Sec. of State, no. 39, 25 Oct 1937, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD [NARA], RG84, 800-D). In 1937, a Dominican colonel offered a high estimate of 50,000 "Haitians" in Monte Cristi province (Manuel Emilio Castillo to Trujillo, 18 Oct 1937), Archivo General de la Nación, Santo Domingo, cited in Bernardo Vega, *Trujillo y Haití, Volumen II (1937-1938)* (Santo Domingo: Fundación Cultural Dominicana, 1995) 77. Cf. Julián Díaz Valdeparés, "Alrededor de la cuestión haitiana," *Listín Diario*, 10 Dec. 1937. Census data did not provide information on the number of ethnic Haitians in the Dominican Republic, but only of documented Haitian migrants, a mere 3,816 out of a total population of 87,022 in Monte Cristi province in 1935 (Vega, *Trujillo y Haití, Volumen II*, 345).

5. See Lauren Derby, "Haitians, Magic, and Money: Raza and Society in the Haitian-Dominican Borderlands, 1900-1937," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36, no. 3 (1994); Freddy Prestol Castillo, *Paisajes y meditaciones de una frontera* (Ciudad Trujillo: Cosmopolita, 1943) 33-40; Michiel Baud, "Una frontera-refugio: dominicanos y haitianos contra el estado," *Estudios Sociales* 26, no. 92 (1993): 42.

6. See also Jesús María Ramírez, *Mis 43 años en la Descubierta*, ed. Gisela Ramírez de Perdomo (Santo Domingo: Ed. Centenario, 2000) 13-75, 77-80; Derby, "Haitians, Magic, and Money," 511.

7. See also Ramírez, *Mis 43 años*, 22-23.

8. See Derby, "Haitians, Magic, and Money."

9. See Turits, "A World Destroyed," 598.

10. See also Héctor Incháustegui Cabral, "La poesía de tema negro en Santo Domingo," *Eme Eme: Estudios Dominicanos* 1, no. 5 (1973) 16-19.

11. Dominican intellectuals represented the Haitian presence in the frontier as a "pacific invasion" endangering the Dominican nation. See, e.g., Joaquín Balaguer, "El imperialismo haitiano," *El Imparcial*, 13 Dec. 1927.

12. Log book, Oct 1937, L'École des Frères, Ouanaminthe. See also Sáez, *Los Jesuitas*, 71.

13. See Turits, "A World Destroyed"; interview with Miguel Otilio Savé (Guelo), Monte Cristi, 1988; testimony of Cime Jean, Ouanaminthe, 3 Oct 1937, NARA, RG84, 800-D; Juan Manuel García, *La matanza de los haitianos: genocidio de Trujillo, 1937* (Santo Domingo: Alfa & Omega, 1983) 59, 67-71; José Israel Cuello, ed., *Documentos del conflicto dominico-haitiano de 1937* (Santo Domingo: Ed. Taller, 1985) 60-85; and Freddy Prestol Castillo, *El Masacre se pasa a pie* (Santo Domingo: Ed. Taller, 1973) 49.

14. To avoid interruption, we have omitted our questions to the interviewees from these transcripts.

15. The river was renamed the Massacre in the 1700s, purportedly after a bloody clash there between French colonists and Spanish forces.

16. Most of the massacre victims were sent to a hospital in Cap-Haïtien, where they were attended by the Catholic Church.

17. One karo (or carreau) equals 1.29 hectares of land.