

FOREWORD

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The book you are about to read chronicles, primarily, the 1937 massacre of Haitians and Haitian Dominicans carried out by the army of the Dominican dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. The Massacre River, living up to its name, became one of the bloodiest sites in the onslaught.

Initially colonized by the Spanish who arrived on the island in 1492, Hispaniola became contested territory when the French slowly began to invade the northern side of the island in the seventeenth century. In his *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue* (1797), Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry explains that the Massacre River owes its name to “ancient murderous acts reciprocally committed by the Buccaneers and the Spaniards in their disputes over the territory.”¹ Saint-Méry, however, is cautious not to highlight the fact that the French had de facto occupied a portion of the island: more precisely, in fact, the Massacre River was named after the slaughter of a company of French boucaniers and border trespassers killed by the Spanish in 1728, when the island was still officially a Spanish colony.

In his *Description topographique et politique de la partie espagnole de l'isle Saint-Domingue* (1796), Saint-Méry includes an *Abrégé historique*, a historical summary which records the history of Hispaniola's

colonial border between Spain and France up to 1777, when the two nations signed the Treaty of Aranjuez that legitimized the French occupation of the island. According to the treaty, the border begins with the d'Ajabon, or Massacre River, in the north of the island and ends with the Anse à Pitre, or Pedernales River, in the south.²

The Treaty of Aranjuez and Saint-Méry's comment cast the line of demarcation between the two colonies, on which the events at the core of Freddy Prestol Castillo's *El Masacre se pasa a pie* unfold, as a "natural" border that had traditionally been the theater of conflict and violence. Yet the title of Prestol Castillo's book reminds us that "the Massacre can be crossed on foot," implicitly introducing us to a porous border where the two peoples could easily engage in exchanges and form collaborative linkages.

The 1937 massacre of Haitians and Haitian Dominicans in the northern provinces of the Dominican Republic is generally referred to as *el Corte* (the Cutting) by Dominicans and as *kout kouto-a* (the stabbing) by Haitians because it was mostly carried out with machetes and knives in order to make it look like a popular insurrection against Haitians who were accused of stealing livestock. The killings began on September 28, 1937; intensified on October 2; and lasted until October 8, with sporadic murders continuing until November 5.³ The estimated number of victims is still disputed and ranges from 10,000 to 40,000; for the most part they were small farmers who had lived in the Dominican Republic for generations or who were even born there and therefore were in fact Dominican citizens, since until 2010 the Dominican constitution granted citizenship on the basis of *ius soli*.⁴

The idea that the massacre might have been a reaction to Haitians crossing the border to steal has now been discarded as an after-the-fact fabrication, but there is still a fair amount of debate surrounding the causes of the massacre.⁵ At the time, the Dominican and Haitian central governments did not have much control of the borderland and the border had been finalized only a year earlier as Trujillo and the Haitian president Sténio Vincent, encouraged by the United States, had signed additional clauses to a 1929 border agreement. Despite laws that aimed to make border crossings more difficult, people

continued to circulate more or less freely between the two countries, and migration from Haiti to the Dominican Republic continued, relatively undisturbed.⁶ The Dominican historian Bernardo Vega has argued that in 1935, after the return to Haiti of tens of thousands of braceros who had been expelled from Cuba, the Haitian presence in the area substantially increased, creating social, political, and racial tensions. One of the main factors that caused the massacre, Vega insists, was the desire of the Dominican ruling classes to “whiten” their nation.⁷ Lauren Derby and Richard Turits argue instead that the real aim of the massacre was to destroy the frontier’s bicultural, bilingual, and transnational Haitian Dominican communities.⁸ As Turits has eloquently put it, in fact, the 1937 massacre is also a story of “Dominicans versus Dominicans, Dominican elites versus Dominican peasants, the national state against Dominicans in the frontier, centralizing forces in opposition to local interests, and, following the massacre, the newly hegemonic anti-Haitian discourses of the nation vying with more culturally pluralist discourses and memories from the past.”⁹

In *El Masacre se pasa a pie*, victims and perpetrators are often related, have strong bonds of affection, or clearly depend on each other for their livelihood: Captain Ventarrón, who has been ordered to slaughter not only men but also old people, women, and children, suddenly remembers that his grandfather was born in Haiti and manages to continue with his horrific task only by getting increasingly drunk.¹⁰ Sargent Pío’s illegitimate sister had married the Haitian Yosefo Dis, a wealthy owner of crops and cattle who had lived for twenty years in the Dominican Republic, considered himself Dominican, and was in possession of official documents that legitimized his status. Yosefo and his Dominican wife had seven children, and Pío, who is one of the military men in charge of the killings, lets them escape to Haiti instead of slaughtering them: as he looks to his sister going to a country she doesn’t know and thinks about her children, destined to live among people who speak a language they do not know, Pío looks like a condemned man. Mistress Francina, the innkeeper of Dajabón and a member of the town’s elite, lies and risks her life in order to hide and help Moraime Luis, one of her workers who had grown up with her,

who was baptized in Dajabón in Spanish, and who considered the Dominican Republic her own country: when she is captured, raped, and, eventually, killed on the bank of the river, Moraima screams (crucially) in two languages. Don Sebusto, a landowner whose land and cattle, due to *el Corte*, are going to be left unattended, voices his worries about the financial loss that the elimination of the “Haitian” workforce will cause him (46).

The 1937 massacre, as we have seen, was perpetrated mostly by Trujillo’s army, and Dominican civilians responded in different ways to it. As Prestol Castillo shows, Francina is not the only Dominican who exposes herself to danger by hiding “Haitian” friends or relatives and helping them flee the soldiers. Others, however, usually civil local authorities loyal to Trujillo, collaborated with the regime, locating and identifying “Haitians” for the guards.¹¹ Some civilians were given the task of burying and burning the corpses, but it appears that, generally, they did not take an active part in the massacre, with the exception of prisoners recruited in Dominican jails and the destitute *reservistas* who were promised freedom and land for their services or were simply obliged to become assassins to save their own lives. The narrator calls them *obreros del crimen* (53) and points out that while some were callous murderers who had no problem with the atrocities they were asked to commit and were ready to take advantage of the situation to help themselves to the properties of their victims, others found it extremely difficult to participate in the killings and to cope with the pressure and the violence they were forced to witness and take part in. Some were executed for refusing to kill, and the many who lost their minds or were turned into desperate alcoholics by the experience are presented as victims of the dictatorship, which—not unproblematically, of course—is what is ultimately blamed for *el Corte*.

Apart from offering an important insight into the massacre, the multiethnic nature of the borderland, and the mechanics of Trujillo’s violent and oppressive regime, Prestol Castillo’s book also reveals how, due to the Dominican Republic’s proximity to Haiti, the Dominican elite of the time regarded the borderland (at best) as a series of half-civilized outposts: when the narrator first heard the name

“Dajabón” at school, during geography lesson, it was pronounced by a teacher who read the *Times*, had never visited the borderland, and had assumed that Dajabón and the nearby villages were uninteresting, unbearable, unpleasant, the opposite of everything he regarded as civilization (17). As a child the narrator was intrigued by the name, but as a young man he accepted to move to Dajabón very reluctantly and only because his landowning sugar family had lost its fortune and he could not find a better job; despite what seems a sympathetic approach to its inhabitants, the condescension with which he regards them and what he calls their “little peasant’s brains” is unmistakable (133).

Arguably, it was the publication of Edwidge Danticat’s award-winning *The Farming of Bones* in 1998, followed by the 1999 translation into English of Jacques Stephen Alexis’s *Compère général soleil* (1955) and, in 2005, of René Philoctète’s *Le peuple des terres mêlées* (1989), that greatly contributed to raise awareness, in the Anglophone world, about the 1937 massacre. These three texts differ in style but share important features: they are all fictional accounts, written years after the massacre, and while Philoctète and Alexis are Haitian writers, Danticat is a member of the Haitian diaspora in the United States. Danticat’s book, however, is written as if it were a first-person account or *testimonio*: this immediacy of tone has been identified as one of the reasons for its success. *El Masacre se pasa a pie*, instead, was written by a Dominican author who offers it as a personal account of the massacre by an eyewitness who was commenting on the facts as they unfolded in front of his eyes. Initially drafted in 1937, during Prestol Castillo’s stay in Dajabón, the book was not published until thirty-six years after the massacre and twelve years after Trujillo’s assassination, for fear of retaliation. To begin with, the manuscript was entrusted to “Doctor M” (9); retrieved from his office by a priest when the doctor was arrested by the “Secret Service” (11), it was sent to the author only years later. Hidden by the author’s mother and later buried by his sister in the family garden, the manuscript was finally dug up in poor condition, with torn pages, almost illegible in parts, and Prestol Castillo had to painstakingly reconstruct it. When it was published in 1973, *El Masacre se pasa a pie* sold twenty thousand copies in a

relatively short time and also became required reading in Dominican schools: its success can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that it tries to address, albeit in contradictory and sometimes controversial ways, the sense of guilt Dominicans might have felt and still feel about the massacre.

Stylistically, *El Masacre se pasa a pie* is not a polished work, but it can be argued that this only lends further poignancy to its content and that its little regard for structure and its chaotic nature mirror the urgency of the situation during the problematic times in which Prestol Castillo was living.¹² The author's presence is felt more palpably in the first and last parts of the book, where we are also presented with his love interest and one of the most striking figures of the novel, Angela Vargas. Angela is a young teacher from Azua who was sent to work in a school in the borderland, and she risks her life to protect her students during *el Corte*. Through Angela, the book also sheds light on the regime's gender politics and on its systemic sexual exploitation of Dominican women. Angela, however, refuses to succumb to the demands and threats of those who want to take advantage of her poverty, and, finally, she decides to leave the country in order to live her life with dignity and in freedom. In his preface, Prestol Castillo discloses that, like his narrator, he was repeatedly and forcefully exhorted to leave by his own fiancée, a schoolteacher who had already fled the country: it is perhaps as a tribute to the courage of this *guerrillera* (and, implicitly, to the courage of Prestol Castillo's mother and sister, who had refused to destroy his manuscript despite the danger they were facing by keeping it) that the narrator gives his own notes on *el Corte* not to a male friend but to Angela, whom he considers smart and valiant enough to guard what he describes as the equivalent of a "time bomb" (177).

The central section of *El Masacre se pasa a pie* can be seen instead as a series of sketches where the author seems to be reporting, verbatim (often reproducing local speech), dialogues between soldiers, victims, and local landowners that, however, he is unlikely to have actually heard. The distinction between facts and fiction, autobiography and novel, in fact, is intriguingly blurred in this book. As we have seen,

like his narrator, Prestol Castillo arrived to work as a magistrate in the border town of Dajabón during the massacre itself, and *El Masacre se pasa a pie* presents us with the point of view of someone observing the unfolding tragedy but who is imbricated—albeit reluctantly—with the Dominican regime. The narrator repeatedly calls himself a coward and even refers to himself as a *testigo cómplice*, that is, an eyewitness who is also an accomplice to the crimes he directly observes, for not speaking up against the atrocities (173).¹³ It is possible that Prestol Castillo wrote this manuscript at the same time in which, in his capacity as a judge, he was producing “accounts” of the massacre that were more in line with the official version of the facts that the regime was keen to circulate. *El Masacre se pasa a pie*, therefore, could be seen as the product of a conscience tortured by guilt and regret for not joining the many exiled intellectuals that the regime could not silence or pay off. In *Paisajes y meditaciones de una frontera* (“Landscapes of and meditations on the frontier”), published in 1943, for example, Prestol Castillo never mentions the 1937 massacre, but Trujillo (the volume’s dedicatee) is repeatedly praised for having “improved” the situation on the borderland of the Dominican Republic, an area of the country Prestol Castillo claims was in desperate need of being claimed back by the state.¹⁴ At the same time, however, while in Dajabón, Prestol Castillo painstakingly recorded compromising facts and impressions, clandestinely producing a manuscript that might have cost him his life had it been found by Trujillo’s secret police. Yet, like his narrator, who entrusts his own manuscript to friends and relatives for safekeeping, Prestol Castillo never took the decision to destroy this potentially explosive and incriminating work.

The author’s deep anxiety and his inability and unwillingness to either fully embrace or resolutely reject the regime and its dominant discourses are evident in the text’s many contradictions. Racist, xenophobic, and elitist prejudices abound: Haitians are described as a “primitive race” (95), but at the same time, the narrator is shocked and profoundly shaken by the violence perpetrated against them. In line with the regime’s propaganda, the narrator refers to “Haitians” as thieves who come in the night to steal cattle; however, the story

of Don Francisco, whose land straddled the frontier, offers a different perspective on the situation and sheds light on the hypocrisy of the landholding class. Before the massacre, when some of his cattle were stolen, Don Francisco was not too concerned because he knew that he would still make a huge profit with the low salary he was paying those who worked for (and occasionally stole from) him in order to support themselves and their families; like other local landowners, Don Francisco used instead to routinely curse taxes and other measures that hampered his profitable trade with the neighboring country. However, when his property is visited by the army engaged in *el Corte*, he vociferously complains only about the “Haitians” and their stealing.

In Prestol Castillo’s text, Haitian thieving appears to have ruined some Dominican families who had members in the army who were particularly keen to take part in the massacre in order to take revenge against those they considered responsible for their change of fortune and diminished circumstances. The narrator, however, also reveals that the “Haitians” mostly returned in the night to steal the produce they had grown on Dominican land for years, or came to take the livestock they had long nurtured as if it were part of their own family, showing that, in fact, some of the thievery at least took place after the massacre. The narrator also points out that, after *el Corte*, those who had left everything behind when they found refuge in Haiti had no choice but to turn to criminality and to enter into the Dominican Republic illegally to steal cattle or other produce in order to feed themselves and their starving children: while the narrator seems genuinely sympathetic and troubled about their suffering, the idea of more and more “hungry Haitians” crossing the border to steal from Dominicans (101) chimes with anti-Haitian discourses that depict the Dominican Republic as a nation threatened by a possible “invasion” of the disenfranchised poor of the neighboring country. At the same time, however, the narrator seems to suggest that these border crossers were somehow entitled to reclaim the fruit of their labor and goes as far as wondering to whom the land really belonged (88): to the “Haitians,” who had transformed it into orchards, or to those Dominicans who had left it uncultivated before 1937 and would continue to do so after

el Corte? After the massacre, the narrator continues, Dominicans recruited in Santo Domingo's underbelly, or destitute people who had been declared "vagrants" because they owned no land, were brought to the borderland in army trucks to substitute the workers who had been slaughtered. The difference between these new arrivals and the Haitians and Haitian Dominicans who cultivated the land and made it productive was very striking: they were neither keen nor able to work and only longed to go back to the city. As a result, he explains, a year after their arrival, most of the new arrivals were sent back to the capital, poorer than when they had arrived.

El Masacre se pasa a pie also reveals how the Dominicans' collective unconscious was deeply affected by nationalistic discourses that identified Haitians as cruel and savage invaders and perpetrators of horrific violence. During a delirious night, the narrator, feverish and deeply distressed by *el Corte*, has a nightmare during which he is "visited" by Toussaint Louverture, who professes that he will kill all the inhabitants of the Spanish side. Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Emperor Faustin Soulouque also appear to him in a bloodbath in which fierce Haitian *canibales* (181) destroy churches and slaughter both whites and blacks from Santo Domingo. This account ends with the narrator pondering the history of the crimes committed by the Haitians that he had learned at school when he was a child—for example, the trail of death and destruction left by the Haitian army led by Dessalines and Henri Christophe, the abuses committed by Jean-Pierre Boyer during the unification of the island (1822–44), and the policy of aggression orchestrated by Soulouque in 1849 and 1855—and, simultaneously, the present history, equally written in blood, that was unfolding in front of him. We are not told what conclusions the narrator draws from his meditation, but the mere contraposition and comparison between Dominican and Haitian brutality explodes the received notion that barbarism, cruelty, savagism, and ferocity pertained only to one side of the border.

El Masacre se pasa a pie also identifies Haitians with black magic: we are informed, in fact, that they resorted to supernatural assistance to secure protection. A case in point is the story of El Patú, a desperate

father and cunning cattle thief who solicited the help of a powerful *bocó*, or sorcerer, to avoid capture (95). However, when, after losing his mind and agonizing for fourteen nights, the callous Dominican executioner El Panchito finally dies, the narrator explains that the people who witnessed his death saw four green snakes coming out of his mouth speaking Haitian “Patois,” suggesting that they believed that his victims had somehow returned and possessed his body out of revenge for his cruelty (182). These stories show that Dominicans strongly credited and deeply feared the power of Haitian magic but also highlight that the two peoples shared the same system of belief, even if Haitians seem to have had what Derby has called the “monopoly of the sacred.”¹⁵

After the massacre, as Prestol Castillo illustrates, the northern province of Dajabón and the nearby city of Montecristi became the stage for what has been called *el gran teatro* (the great theater).¹⁶ It was there, in fact, that, in order to be seen to be responding to international pressure, the regime staged the trials and imprisonment of some of the (alleged) civilian perpetrators of the massacre. For that purpose, the *alcaldes pedáneos* (submunicipal political authorities) of the sites where the killings had taken place were ordered to select four or five reservists or “friends of Trujillo”; these young men were then taken to the prison of Montecristi and photographed dressed as convicts.¹⁷ During the trials, they were given clear instructions on what to say or, as Prestol Castillo’s narrator reveals, they were even provided with depositions prepared *ad hoc* by the judges themselves. Prestol Castillo’s narrator makes it all too clear that, far from establishing the inconvenient truth, the job of the judges was to distort it and to fabricate convenient lies in order to corroborate the idea that the killings sprung from a spontaneous insurrection of Dominicans against Haitians. The web of deceit that the Dominican judges sent to the border to investigate *el Corte* were forced to spin, the narrator adds, took its toll on some of them: one tried to kill himself, another became an alcoholic, and a third escaped but was later arrested by the secret police and put in jail. Those judges who complied without complaining or experiencing a nervous breakdown were later

betrayed by the system: they hoped for a reward but were instead sent home unceremoniously.¹⁸

El Masacre se pasa a pie ends in a rather abrupt way after our attention is refocused on the narrator, who, after having escaped from Dajabón, is pursued by the police and agonizes about whether he should leave the country or remain to support his family. When he finally decides to flee, hidden in a boat headed to Venezuela, he is captured by the coast guard because, in an ironic twist, he once again finds himself implicated in another atrocity—which, however, receives very little attention in the book—namely, the throwing overboard of a group of clandestine Chinese by a member of the crew who had robbed them, killed them, and then fed them to the sharks. Falsely accused by a terrified and subservient judge, the narrator is condemned to five years in prison: at that point, however, we know that his manuscript is safe with his mother, to whom it was dutifully delivered by Angela Vargas before her departure.

Arguably, reading *El Masacre se pasa a pie* can occasionally be a disturbing experience and not only because it describes a ruthless massacre. Its old-fashioned, frequently gauche, prose and its chaotic structure, in fact, present us with an equally frenzied and disorganized attempt to come to terms with personal and collective guilt and the simultaneous urges to comprehend the causes of the killings, denounce or justify its perpetrators, and commemorate or blame its victims. It is a book that often frustrates its readers and can even make them feel uncomfortable at times. However, this does not make it any less compelling.

NOTES

1. Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue. Avec des observations générales sur la population, sur le caractère & les moeurs de ses divers habitans; sur son climat, sa culture, ses productions, son administrations &c, &c. accompagnées des détails les plus propres à faire connaître l'état de cette colonie à l'époque du 18 Octobre 1789; Et d'une nouvelle carte de la totalité de l'isle*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: chez l'auteur, 1797–98), vol. 1, 108 (translation mine).

2. Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique et politique de la partie espagnole de l'isle Saint-Domingue. Avec des observations générales sur le climat, la population, les productions, le caractère & les moeurs des habitans de cette colonie et un tableau raisonné des différens parties de son administration; accompagnée d'une nouvelle carte de la totalité de l'isle*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: chez l'auteur, 1796), vol. 1, i–xxii.

3. Bernardo Vega, *Trujillo y Haití*, 3 vols. (Santo Domingo: Fundación Cultural Dominicana, 1988–2009), vol. 2, 39.

4. Vega, *Trujillo y Haití*, vol. 2, 352–53; Richard Lee Turits, “A World Destroyed, a Nation Imposed: The 1937 Haitian Massacre in the Dominican Republic,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82, no. 3 (2002): 590.

5. Vega, *Trujillo y Haití*, vol. 2, 33, 39; vol. 1, 323.

6. Samuel Martínez, *Peripheral Migrants: Haitians and Dominican Republic Sugar Plantations* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 44; Lauren Derby and Richard Turits, “Temwayaj Kout Kouto, 1937 / Eyewitness to the Genocide,” in *Revolutionary Freedoms: A History of Survival, Strength and Imagination in Haiti*, ed. C. Accilien, J. Adams, and E. Méléance (Coconut Creek, FL: Caribbean Studies Press, 2006), 137–43; Turits, “A World Destroyed”; Lauren Derby, “Haitians, Magic, and Money: *Raza* and Society in the Haitian-Dominican Borderlands, 1900 to 1937,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36, no. 3 (1994): 488–526.

7. Vega, *Trujillo y Haití*, vol. 2, 343–44, 23–26.

8. Turits, “A World Destroyed”; Derby, “Haitians, Magic, and Money”; Derby and Turits, “Temwayaj Kout Kouto, 1937.” Derby and Turits’s findings were further confirmed by Edward Paulino, who, like them, also conducted a series of interviews with eyewitnesses of the massacre. See Edward Paulino, *Dividing Hispaniola: The Dominican Republic’s Border Campaign against Haiti, 1930–1961* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 56–83.

9. Turits, “A World Destroyed,” 593.

10. Freddy Prestol Castillo, *El Masacre se pasa a pie* (Santo Domingo: Editora Taller, 1973). Hereafter, page references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text; translations from Spanish are mine.

11. The victims are generally identified collectively as “Haitians” even if the book makes it clear that many were Dominican citizens of Haitian descent or long-term residents who considered themselves Dominicans and had never been to Haiti.

12. For literary analysis in English of *El Masacre se pasa a pie*, see, among other books, Doris Somner, *One Master for Another: Populism as Patriarchal Rhetoric in Dominican Novels* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), chapter 5; Jean Franco, *Cruel Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), chap-

ter 1; Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *On the Edge: Writing the Border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), chapter 5; Lorgja García-Peña, *The Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation, and Archives of Contradiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), chapter 3.

13. Presto Castillo himself pointed out in an interview with Doris Somner that the circumstances of the narrator's escape and imprisonment were the only part of *El Masacre se pasa a pie* that were not autobiographical (Somner, *One Master for Another*, 190).

14. Freddy Prestol Castillo, *Paisajes y meditaciones de una frontera* (Ciudad Trujillo: Editorial Cosmopolita, 1943), 63.

15. Derby, "Haitians, Magic, and Money," 517.

16. Rafael Darío Herrera, *Montecristi entre campeches y bananos* (Santo Domingo: Editora Búho, 2006), 139.

17. Herrera, *Montecristi entre campeches y bananos*, 139–40.

18. Most likely, the narrator—and, crucially, Prestol Castillo himself—was one of these judges, even if the book does not make this absolutely clear.