

**Living on the Line: Fear of the Haitian-Dominican  
Border Dweller.**

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## *Living on the Line: Fear of the Haitian-Dominican Border Dweller*

Recent U.S. academic and artistic writing on national borders most of which refers to the U.S.-Mexico border—has moved from sociological considerations of life conditions in the region to a more abstract treatment, which takes the border as a synecdoche for an existential condition found far from the actual borderlands, and makes Chicanos everywhere necessarily the product of a border condition.<sup>1</sup> Chicana film critic Rosa Linda Fregoso warns of the dangers of using the border to designate an epistemological condition rather than as a geographical marker of a socioeconomic complex which is then elaborated in national imaginaries as a site of anxieties about citizenship, national culture and race. “The rigorous application of the border, border crossing and borderlands as concepts of transculturated experiences has not translated well for the analysis of the actual social conditions of the vast majority of ‘border crossers’, the undocumented immigrants who cross the U.S.-Mexico border daily, nor has it done so for the actual border inhabitants who literally live on the borderlands on a day to day basis.”<sup>2</sup>

I share Fregoso’s skepticism of the effects that this cycle of writings about the border has had as they moved from a salutary reevaluation of the everyday practices of border residents as a challenge to monolithic concepts of national identity to a facile detachment of culture from geopolitical configurations of power relations, where any

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<sup>1</sup> Representative of this trend are works by Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Gloria Anzaldúa and José David Saldívar.

<sup>2</sup> “From Il(l)egal to Legal Subject: Border Construction and Re-construction,” in *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993): 82-83.

and all cultural practices are celebrated as absolutely and sufficiently resistant to the juridical and economic dictates that bring them into being.<sup>3</sup> The dangers of adopting a celebratory mode in writing about national borders become especially clear when the border paradigm as it has been elaborated by Chicanos in the U.S. is transported to another context. If we take the case of the Dominican Republic, for example, where its border with Haiti has long occupied a seminal position both symbolically and materially in the matrix of anxieties generating the discursive forms of the nation, while we can also find border residents using their indeterminate citizenship to elaborate a series of practices which make the most of their liminal space,<sup>4</sup> interpreting their social position as completely independent from the coercive mandates of the State becomes a more difficult endeavor.

Dominican *letrados* from the late 19th Century to the present have elaborated narratives about the border as the permeable site of invasion by Haitian hordes, foreign and Black, Black therefore foreign. Traditional Dominican historiography has written the narrative of its national formation as one of disidentification with Haiti, where "la dominicanidad" (Dominican-ness) is defined using "Haitian-ness" as its perceived opposite, with these two terms standing in turn for whiteness and Blackness. Despite the advent of the alternate narratives offered by post-1959 Marxist historiography, this take on race and nationality still occupies a hegemonic position in the formulation of

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<sup>3</sup>As an example, Fregoso discusses Emily Hicks' Border Writing, where Hicks interprets the role of *coyotes* (smugglers who guide undocumented immigrants to the U.S. side) as that of a "shaman" figure, turning border crossing into a spiritual journey, thus erasing its quite material aspects, such as the exorbitant sums people pay to go across and the countless deaths of people who freeze and suffocate in the desert, waiting to be picked up from their *coyote*-designated hiding places. "From Il(l)egal to Legal Subjects," 83.

<sup>4</sup> See Louk Box and Barbara de la Rive-Box-Lasocki, "¿Sociedad Fronteriza o Frontera Social? Transformaciones sociales en la zona fronteriza de la República Dominicana 1907-1984," Boletín de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe 46 (1989): 46-49.

State policies, in pedagogical norms, in most of the popular press and in a large segment of popular opinion. The period at which the construction of a racialized, anti-Haitian nationalism consolidates itself in its strongest, most univocal manifestations, both at the discursive and policy-making levels, is during the dictatorship of Rafael L. Trujillo (1930-1961). The necessity of a Haitian adversary against which to define Dominican nationhood pervade official writings—historiographic, political and pedagogical—to such an extent that historian Roberto Cassá posits anti-Haitianism as one of the three ideological pillars of the dictatorship (along with Catholicism and anti-Communism).<sup>5</sup>

Broadly, I am interested in the way the State construct myths and narratives of national identity using a racially defined external object against which to define the internal subject. For the Dominican subject to become white, the State needed a Black Haitian Other, leaving no conceptual space for the non-white Dominican subject to exist except as dangerous surplus to a hermetic nation. In other words, in order for Dominicans to think of themselves as racially white and *mestizo*, but not *mulato*<sup>6</sup> or Black, Haitians were made to stand in for all Blacks, making the identity of a Black Dominican a logical near-impossibility. In this scheme, the inhabitants of the border, called *rayanos* (literally, those who live on the line), were most problematic because it became impossible to distinguish their nationality. Thus, the border becomes the stage where the most dramatic manifestations of racial-national anxieties are played out.

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<sup>5</sup> *Capitalismo y dictadura* (Santo Domingo: Editora de la UASD, 1982):751-779.

<sup>6</sup> I prefer the Spanish term *mulato* to the English "mulatto," because the latter term's meaning carries with it the history of U.S. racial relations, and I am instead working within the matrix of Caribbean racial relations.

Easily the most extreme of these racially motivated acts of national consolidation was the 1937 Haitian Massacre. In October 1937, a year into Trujillo's second presidential term, the dictator gave the order to kill all Haitians living in the Dominican side of the border. Tens of thousands of men, women and children were murdered in the space of a few weeks.<sup>7</sup> Historians have not been able to agree on the reasons that prompted Trujillo to give such an order. One apocryphal story tells how Trujillo, a *mulato* who had himself legally declared "white," gave the order at a party in a border town when the hostess, one of his lovers, complained there were too many Haitians around and that they bothered her. Other historians have more convincingly argued that the massacre was not a racist whim, but a premeditated plan that fulfilled several socioeconomic and demographic goals.<sup>8</sup>

The U.S Occupation of both sides of the island after WWI wrought a number of significant changes in the sugar industry and in the deployment of labor in both countries. Among the legacies left behind was the beginning of permanent reliance in the Dominican sugar industry on a migrant Haitian workers in the unskilled strata of labor, primarily cane cutting. In 1935, over 50,000 Haitians officially lived in the

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<sup>7</sup> Although flawed by the author's superimposition of U.S. racial dynamics onto a Caribbean context, Thomas Fiehrer's article, "Political Violence in the Periphery: The Haitian Massacre of 1937" provides a basic outline of the facts in the case. Historians in the Dominican Republic, Haiti and the U.S. have given little serious attention to this incident; in major history texts such as Moya Pons' and Cassá's the massacre only rates a paragraph. The most thorough historical exploration I have found is a series of articles published in the Dominican newspaper *¡Ahora!* in October 1981, which were later collected in a book. See Juan Manuel García, *La matanza de los haitianos; genocidio de Trujillo 1937* (Santo Domingo: Alfa y Omega, 1983). No one has been able to arrive at an accurate estimate of the people killed. Jean Price Mars estimated 12,000; Joaquín Balaguer, 17,000; Moya Pons, 18,000; Cassá 12-15,000.

<sup>8</sup> Veloz Maggiolo defends the racist motivation as the primary one; he writes that Trujillo was advised by intellectuals who "soñaron siempre con una venganza ejemplar: lanzar los haitianos al mar" [always dreamt with an exemplary vengeance: throwing the Haitians into the sea]. "Tipología del tema haitiano," 108. Fiehrer emphasizes socioeconomic motives, particularly the need to free up the western lands from squatters to relocate peasants whose more fertile lands had been granted to sugar companies.

Dominican Republic, though unofficial estimates place the population as high as 200,000. Figures from the 1935 census indicate that Haitians were the most numerous group of foreign-born residents in provinces which bordered with Haiti and in regions which had large U.S.-owned sugar plantations. Those living along the border for the most part worked in coffee farms and ranching.

Briefly, here are some of the factors which prompted the massacre. With the world market in a depression and sugar prices falling, the labor pool suddenly became larger than could be comfortably supported by local industries, though it is worth pointing out that none of the Haitians living inside foreign-owned plantations were killed, indicating that Trujillo was unwilling to anger those investors at the time.<sup>9</sup> Another reason was that he himself had begun expropriating fertile lands in the Cibao region for his own agribusinesses, and needed the lands in the less fertile border zone to resettle the landless peasants. A third factor involved Trujillo's machinations to bring Haiti under a certain measure of Dominican control, ingratiating himself with Stenio Vincent's government to influence decisions areas such as trade agreements which would benefit Trujillo's incipient industries in goods such as shoes and salt.

In historiographic writings by Joaquín Balaguer, the Haitian Massacre is the irreducible kernel which prevents the complete consolidation of a homogeneous national identity. For Balaguer, one of the elite of State-sponsored intellectuals, the Massacre becomes the unmentioned yet naturalized endpoint in a narrative of racial

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"Political Violence in the Periphery," 10. See also Cassá, Historia social, vol. 2, 254; Ferguson, Beyond the Lighthouse, 83-85; Maurice Lemoine, Bitter Sugar, 134-136.

<sup>9</sup> When national and international outrage broke out over the first reports of the massacre, part of the proof presented by the Trujillo government that the extent of the killings were greatly exaggerated were photos of smiling Haitian workers taken at the U.S.-owned sugar plantations in San Pedro de Macorís.

purity and national stability.<sup>10</sup> In the period between 1937 and 1940, Joaquín Balaguer was Subsecretary of State in Foreign Relations, and therefore part of the decision-making body involved in dealing with the massacre, its aftermath and the immigration projects that followed. Balaguer, who after Trujillo's death, would become president of the Dominican Republic for a total of 24 years, is not considered one of the dictatorship's primary ideologues. When Balaguer wrote La realidad Dominicana in 1947, from the safe distance of a diplomatic post in Colombia, ten years had passed since the massacre, yet it is clear that it is the unspoken point of reference, since the entire essay is structured around the bothersome foreign Black presence.

In La realidad dominicana, Balaguer offers not only a vindication of Trujillo's contemporary immigration and colonization policies, but builds a revisionary historiography to naturalize them, a technique he employs throughout the book in his creation of a seamless nationalizing narrative. According to him, earlier efforts to encourage immigrants to populate the country, and particularly the border, failed because previous to Trujillo's modernizing efforts there was no infrastructure to support them; three full chapters of the short volume are dedicated to detailing how Trujillo's policies around national security, sanitation and control over the internal economy created the necessary conditions for "spontaneous immigration" to occur. Although he specifically mentions a project to host Jewish refugees escaping WWII Europe as the only "organized immigration to arrive since the Republic was created," he makes no mention of the mass migrations from Spain, which introduced into the

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<sup>10</sup> Derby & Turits specifically point to the Massacre as the origin of a project of historiographic revision, carried out by writers such as Balaguer, Manuel Peña Batlle, and Emilio Rodríguez Demorizi, all important members of Trujillo's *letrado* corps, as part of the State's growing anti-Haitian politics.

country progressive intellectuals who later became the strongest allies for the various *antitrujillista* groups organizing in the 1940s and 1950s. Even more surprisingly, he does not advocate massive migration, but rather a slow process with strict controls, so that a sudden influx may not "contribuir a ahondar el problema de la desnacionalización progresiva creado por la vecindad del pueblo haitiano."<sup>11</sup>

Closely linked to Balaguer's concern with immigration is a preoccupation with demography. In Malthusian terms he explains how the sparsely populated border is the most fragile link in the defense against a "peaceful invasion" from Haitian "hordes." What a nation needs, and what the Dominican Republic lacks, is: a stable population; territory with clearly demarcated borders, and sovereignty, meaning financial independence. He makes constant reference to the "vegetative increase" of Haitians and "Blacks' characteristic fecundity" (Balaguer 20), and the "demographic decadence" of Dominicans. He writes,

El propósito de poblar las fronteras se vincula en la necesidad de atajar o de contener el avance lento pero incesante que viene operando el pueblo haitiano día tras día hacia nuestro territorio, sin que ese movimiento haya podido impedirlo ni siquiera la condición física de la línea divisoria, marcada en una gran extensión por ríos y montañas que le dan ante el derecho un carácter ostensiblemente inmutable y permanente.<sup>12</sup>

Balaguer constructs the "fact" of the country's "demographic decadence" within a tale of double colonization, first by the Spain and then by Haiti. The successive tragedies of the 1605 devastations ordered by the Spanish government in order to

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<sup>11</sup> "contribute to deepening the problem of progressive denationalization created by the proximity of the Haitian people" (Balaguer 69).

<sup>12</sup> "The purpose of population the frontiers is linked to the need to head off or contain the slow but unceasing advance of the Haitian people upon our territory day after day, of movement which has been impeded neither by the physical dividing line, marked in great stretches by rivers and mountains which by rights should give it an immutable and permanent character." *La realidad dominicana*, 5.



curtail contraband trade, the colony's economic decadence and the litany of "atrocities" committed during successive Haitian occupations in 1801, 1805, and 1822-1844,<sup>13</sup> all contribute to what he sees as the transhistorical Haitian goal to "exterminate...the white population in the Spanish side of the island." The struggle is thus figured as one between a besieged "white" nation and a "Black" colonizer (Spain quickly set aside as a threat), in an almost exact opposite of actual racial and class allegiances.<sup>14</sup>

### Rayanos and "Pure Races"

In conforming a binary racial/national division between "white" Dominicans and "Black" Haitians, Balaguer finds himself having to admit its limits when he encounters mixed, indeterminate subjects such as the *rayano* and the *castizo* (the offspring of a Haitian-Dominican union), which then forces him to create the myth of an untouched "white" nucleus at the geographic core of the country, the Cibao region.

He describes the *rayano* as a "sujeto de una nacionalidad dudosa que vive al margen de las dos fronteras y se expresa con la misma perfección en español y en el dialecto haitiano, participando en igual grado de ambas nacionalidades."<sup>15</sup> In this brief description are contained several of Balaguer's major anxieties around race and

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<sup>13</sup> According to Cassá, historians writing about the Haitian occupations after the fact decontextualized and greatly magnified the atrocities in the 1805 campaign, extending them to characterize all Haitian occupations of Dominican territory, *Historia social y económica*, vol. 1, 160-161. See also Cordero Michel, *La revolución haitiana*, 82-83 and 97-98.

<sup>14</sup> Cordero Michel's history of the Haitian revolution carefully separates class allegiances and interests among Haitians and Dominicans during the occupation periods and offers a nuanced account of how various Dominican classes worked with various factions of the Haitian occupying forces. As a minimal example, one can say that Black slaves in the Dominican Republic who were freed by the Haitian abolition of slavery most probably preferred being free under Haitian rule than slaves under Spanish or Dominican rule.

<sup>15</sup> "subject/type of a doubtful nationality who lives at the margins of both frontiers and expresses himself with equal perfection in Spanish and in the Haitian dialect [Créole], participating equally in both nationalities."

nationalism. The ambiguity in the term "sujeto," which can mean either a juridical "subject"<sup>16</sup> or a despective "so-and-so," is compounded by the *sujeto's* "doubtful nationality." Not only is the *sujeto* literally located at the margins of a margin, the border, but he<sup>17</sup> is symbolically located in a liminal space through his use of language. By code-switching between Spanish and Creole, without giving patriotic preference to one language, the *rayano* defies the metonymic identification the State requires.

However, this challenge had some disastrous consequences for some people. In several accounts of the massacre, it is reported that one of the ways the temporarily enlisted National Guards assigned to carry out the massacre was able to tell Dominicans from Haitians was to ask "suspicious" passersby to pronounce the Spanish word for parsley, "perejil." It is said that Creole speakers have trouble pronouncing the "r" and "j" sounds in this word, and those who did not pass the test were killed on the spot. A slip of the tongue thus became a death sentence.

The clincher to the description of the *rayano* is the fact that his dual national identification, his "equal participation in both nationalities," in fact makes him *anti-patriotic* and *anti-national*. He continues, "En caso de un conflicto entre Haití y la República Dominicana, hubiera sido difícil determinar hacia cuál de los dos países se hubiese inclinado la población de esa regiones."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting here that Balaguer was trained as a lawyer, and much of *La realidad dominicana* is structured like a legal argument, citing endless precedents for important terms and building a case to arrive at the desired judgment.

<sup>17</sup> I am deliberately using the masculine pronoun because Balaguer's specific references to women, discussed below, make it clear that he considers the male *rayano* a more dangerous *sujeto* than his female counterpart.

<sup>18</sup> "In case of a conflict between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, it would be difficult to determine toward which of the two countries the population of that region would be inclined" (Balaguer 98). In the introductory chapter of *Imagined Communities*, in which he defines nationalism, Benedict Anderson's discussion of soldiers, men willing to die for their countries, seems pertinent to indicate the magnitude of designating *rayanos* as hesitant to fight for their country.

In his indirect discussion of intermarriage, Balaguer expresses his fears through the trope of contagion. For him, when foreign (read: Haitians) Blacks move into the Dominican Republic and mix with local Blacks, the former instill in the latter their more exaggerated defects of sloth, delinquency and bad hygiene.<sup>19</sup> The closest we get to a direct reference to Dominican-Haitian intermarriage occurs in a footnote. He writes,

es curioso observar que la mujer dominicana se mezcla rara vez con el trabajador haitiano: una repugnancia instintiva la aparta generalmente de todo contacto con el inmigrante que, procedente de Haití, se radica en la República Dominicana. El hombre, por el contrario, no esquivo el trato con la mujer haitiana, por baja que sea su condición social, sin duda porque el dominicano, al igual que el español, carece de escrúpulos sexuales.<sup>20</sup>

Since anecdotal and statistical evidence shows this assessment of intermarriage to be completely false, this bizarre aside can perhaps best be understood as a last-ditch safeguard of the "national honor" by ascribing miscegenation to an old colonial pattern (Dominican men are "just like the Spanish"). Although there is no direct reference to the offspring of such a union, Balaguer's description of the *rayano* could well fit the *castizo*.<sup>21</sup>

Feeling threatened by these problematic "sujetos," Balaguer proceeds to create a fail-safe wellspring of "whiteness." He locates this space in the north-central provinces

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<sup>19</sup> Balaguer's cited model for this characterization is the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso. For a discussion of Lombroso's influence in Latin America, see Julio Ramos, "Untamed Tongues."

<sup>20</sup> "It is curious to observe that Dominican women rarely mix with Haitian workers: an instinctive repugnance generally separates her from all contact with the Haitian immigrants who settle in the Dominican Republic. Men, on the contrary, do not avoid consorting with Haitian women, no matter how low her condition, without a doubt because Dominican men, just like the Spanish, have no sexual scruples" (Balaguer 107 n. 37).

<sup>21</sup> The *rayano* and the *castizo* are similar not only in terms of their language use-speaking Spanish and Créole with equal ease-but the former's behavior with respect to citizenship- "participating equally in both nationalities"-mirrors the latter's actual indeterminate juridical citizenship status; although according to Dominican law, anyone born within the country is considered a Dominican citizen, children of Haitians or of mixed Haitian-Dominican unions have *de facto* been treated as "foreigners."

of El Cibao, which had traditionally been a center of regional power equal to, and sometimes superior to, the capital. Curiously enough, however, the province he takes as his case study, “[s]omáticamente... la zona menos mezclada del país,”<sup>22</sup> populated by “pure” Canary Islands stock, in Baní, which in fact is not in El Cibao, but in the southern region of the country, which in popular understanding is considered “Black.” I find his slip quite telling. His fears of cultural miscegenation are so great that not only does he require an uncontaminated “white” body, but he needs to locate this body inside an area which is metonymically made to stand in for the border with Haiti. The South becomes a sort of internalized border region, where whiteness is besieged by the multiple contagions of Blackness and foreignness.

In the section that follows, Balaguer recapitulates the narrative of Haitian violation he has built up throughout the text as an explanation for miscegenation:

Las únicas familias blancas que sobrevivieron a la ocupación haitiana fueron las que se resignaron a sufrir en el silencio aquella ignominia y las que se refugiaron en las montañas del Cibao. Hay aún sitios de la Cordillera Central, especialmente en las regiones del Jánico y de San José de las Matas, donde se conservan núcleos enteros de familias andaluzas que mantienen en toda su pureza sus caracteres somáticos por haber permanecido aisladas en aquellas atribaciones montañosas sin trato ni comercio alguno con el negro durante la época de las invasiones a mano armada y durante el tiempo en que la penetración tomó un carácter pacífico.<sup>23</sup>

Here it is not only Haitians who are a threat, but “local” Blacks as well, since they represent the weak link through which corrupting influences can enter the country. But

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<sup>22</sup> “somatically is the least mixed zone in the country” (Balaguer 111).

<sup>23</sup> “The only white families who survived the Haitian occupation were the ones who resigned themselves to suffer that ignominy in silence and those who took refuge in the mountains of El Cibao. There are still places in the Central Range, especially in Jánico and San José de las Matas, where whole nuclei of andalucian families are preserved in their full somatic characteristics because they were isolated in the

he unwittingly gives up the extent to which this figure of the *rayano/castizo*/ Black is in fact in the majority. He explains how Trujillo's policies regarding "nationalization of the border" attempt to "incorporar de nuevo al patrimonio de la República la tercera parte por lo menos de su población, espiritualmente desvinculada desde hacía más de un siglo de la heredad nacional."<sup>24</sup> Since the border region was rather sparsely populated, this "third part" of the population can only refer to Blacks, whose allegiances must be controlled to prevent slippage with Haitians. He is even more explicit on this point later in the text: "Lo que importa no es que en la República Dominicana no haya un fuerte núcleo de población de color sino que ese núcleo no llegue a ser, como en Haití, una mayoría dominante."<sup>25</sup>

So what we see here is that in the fear of the liminal figures of the *rayano*, and the *castizo* are elisions of a fear of a Black nation, and its potential organization into coalitions which would threaten the perpetuation of policies and attitudes that benefit very few people from very few families in the country.

To this day, Haitians and liminal, anti-nationalist figures—including a diasporic population which is perceived to also be primarily Black, also exhibiting split linguistic and cultural allegiances which have turned *trujillista* notions of national identity inside out—are perceived as a threat to the nation, which in fact no longer functions in the hermetic, uncontaminated space imagined by Trujillo and his followers. However, this discourse has a longevity unimaginable by many people, even those familiar with its

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mountains from contact and commerce with Blacks during the period of armed invasions and during the period in which these invasions turned peaceful" (Balaguer 86-87).

<sup>24</sup> "once again incorporate into the patrimony of the Republic at least a *third* of its population, which is spiritually unlinked for more than a century from its national inheritance" (Balaguer 90). My emphasis.

vexed history. La realidad dominicana was reprinted in 1983 under a different title, La isla al revés, with only a few cosmetic changes to the manuscript, and it was used to justify several periodic waves of massive deportations of Haitian migrant workers (and second-generation Dominican citizens working in sugar mills) ordered by Balaguer.

During last year's presidential elections, which were supposed to signal the end of the *trujillista* and neo-*trujillista* period since Balaguer was forced to not participate as a candidate, Haitian-Dominican activists had to mount an educational campaign to assure Haitian-descended Dominican citizens that, contrary to rumor, they would not be asked to pronounce the word "perejil" before being allowed to vote. A sign of this discourse's stubbornness can be found even in a speech last week by President Leonel Fernández, who justified yet another round of deportations of Haitians citing the "peaceful invasion" they represented.

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<sup>25</sup> "What matters is not so much that the Dominican Republic have a strong nucleus of people of color in its population, but rather that this nucleus should not become, as in Haiti, a dominant majority" (Balaguer 116).