

The Endurance of Anti-Haitian Rhetoric: How Racial Politics Became Embedded in Dominican Identity

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Cultural and political attitudes can become so established that their origins become unclear and unquestioned. Tension between the Dominican Republic (DR) and Haiti has been rationalized as something that has existed for as long as the two countries have existed, but as with all seemingly simple explanations, a more complex narrative lies underneath. The dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961 is thought of as the historical moment that solidified anti-Haitianism in the DR, but this understanding obscures the historical moments that enabled him, as well as solidified his legacy.

At the Archivo General de la Nacion, located in the capitol of the DR, Santo Domingo, I tracked mentions of Haitians in internal documents of the US Military Government (occupation) of the DR, preceding Trujillo's dictatorship, as well as in newspaper articles published after Trujillo's dictatorship. Focusing on these two periods of time highlighted governmental efforts that facilitated the development of Dominican national identity in connection to Haitian national identity, as well as the response to being placed in opposition to each other. Over the course of the summer, I wrote weekly reports placing my findings in context with each other, using documents I took photos of and catalogued based on content. In doing so, I was able to establish continuity between documents and visualize the development of anti-Haitian rhetoric across time in the DR and see how policies built upon each other.

According to internal documents of the US Military Government, a seasonal foreign worker program was established in the DR, tying Haitian identity with replaceable labor practices. This program worked to dehumanize and separate Haitians from Dominicans before Trujillo's rise to power, enabling him to enact direct policies to maintain a system of separation and expendability. After his assassination in 1961, the government continued to target Haitian immigrants in the DR, shifting focus to "political activities" that undermined in their eyes Dominican sovereignty, focusing on labor organizing and advocacy organizations.

In spite of governmental efforts for separation, Dominicans and Haitians across the DR developed and maintained strong ties. During the US occupation of the DR and following Trujillo's dictatorship, Dominicans and Haitians, especially in the rural borderlands, were resistant to policing by national agencies. In cities, they were united in labor and political organizations to advocate for better treatment and resist American imperial pursuits. While Trujillo can be understood as a mobilizing force behind anti-Haitian policy in the DR, the US Military Government preceding him and the years after his assassination highlighted the beginning of and resistance toward anti-Haitian rhetoric alongside its documented endurance. My research highlighted the adaptability of nationalist efforts in attempting to separate people, but also the strength of community-focused efforts to improve lives in bringing different people together. This research will be useful in my pursuit of Honors in the Africana department, connecting the development of anti-Haitian rhetoric in the past to anti-Haitian policies in the present, and developing spaces and strategies for resistance.

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