

*On the Edge: Writing the Border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic*

Maria Cristina Fumagalli

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The lived reality of the border shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic is one of charcoal workers, field labourers eking out a daily existence while surrounded by programme centres, deportations, migrants, fear of arrest and, some would even say, harassment by immigration officials. Whether viewed from one side of the border or the other, it is clear that the decision by the government of the Dominican Republic to crack down on immigration to its country is disturbing; at best, it is a disquieting decision by a government, as they attempt to stem the onerous migrant occupation of Dominican land; at worst, it signals a xenophobic country determined to never repeat the terror felt by the takeover and occupation of their lands by the Haitian government. This Dominican/Haitian area of the Caribbean region is the focus of Maria Cristina Fumagalli's edited volume, *On the Edge: Writing the Border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic*. This is indeed a historical study which begins by tracing the trajectory of these two countries which make up the island of Hispaniola, as well as the traumatic discord which exists at the heart of Dominican/Haitian relations. Fumagalli describes, on the one hand, the Dominican understanding of the border conflict as one comparable with a new siege of the country, but on the other hand, the Haitian understanding is presented as one of stripped citizenry in some instances, or among the majority of Haitians, as a situation where there is simply no issue with regard to border-related matters. Whatever the dominant feelings among the various classes in the two countries, Fumagalli puts forth a heady and persuasive argument highlighting identities on both sides of the border which are forged in relation to each other and which rely on each other for continuity and survival.

The first two chapters of the book offer an introductory landscaping of border relations by describing the island during the period ranging from 1789 to 1791. Lengthy and weighty, these chapters make for laborious reading yet they contain invaluable material for anyone (scholars or students) interested in obtaining an in-depth knowledge of the situation in the two former colonies which make up the island of Saint Domingue. Most importantly, the chapters cover the political, social, geographical and economic ambience and interactions between the two sides of the island so that the reader is able to understand the complicated history of resentment and struggle which marks (and mars) the island.

One of the most interesting chapters of the book is Chapter Three, “This place was here before our nations: Anacaona’s Jaragua.” It takes the reader on a stroll through history and myth by examining three fictional reconstructions of the life of Anacaona (the Taino Queen), which ultimately show the way/s in which national narratives can and oftentimes do write national histories and even shift demarcation lines in terms of identifications and rebellions. The chapter describes in detail the interethnic make-up of the Jaragua community, its formation and importance to the people of the island, before moving to compare Salomé Ureña de Henríquez’s version of the story of Anacaona with that presented in the works of the Haitian poet and novelist Jean Métellus as well as by Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat. Fumagalli suggests that all of these writers found differing moments of inspiration in the myth of Anacaona. This notion is important not simply to the history and mythology of the entire island but also to the survival of its creole culture.

It would be impossible to talk of the island of Hispaniola without examining in minute detail the Black revolt. 1804 saw the creation of Haiti as the first Black republic. In Chapter Four, “Servants turned masters: Santo Domingo and the Black revolt,” Fumagalli argues for a nuanced understanding of not only the revolt but also the Haitian religious beliefs and practices in a bid to understand the ideology of power in Haiti, on the one hand, and the demonization of Haitian culture by the Dominican Republic, on the other. Thus the reader comes to understand the current law of 1943 outlawing Vodú in the Dominican Republic and the concomitant effect of making it absolutely “alien” to Dominicanity. In this chapter, Fumagalli analyses Carlos Esteban Deive’s *Viento Negro, Bosque del Caiman* published in 2002 in which Deive seeks to reconstruct Spanish Santo Domingo’s situation at the time immediately preceding the revolt. The novella presents a positivist take on relations between the two sides of the country and Fumagalli points out that it generally leaves the reader with a sense that racial equality and social justice were on the brink of realisation in the Hispaniola of that time. Therefore she stresses that Deive presents us with a tome which is an attempt to “reimagine the future of Hispaniola” (128).

Chapter Five, “A fragile and beautiful world: the northern borderland and the 1937 massacre,” is superbly written. In it Fumagalli uses the writings of José Martí as well as Manuel Rueda, Freddy Prestol Castillo and Polibio Díaz to describe the large bilingual population of the borderland in the period preceding 1937, to illustrate the cosmopolitan or transnational nature of the community at the time and the processes behind the massacre of 1937. But it is clear that the vision of a united Haiti and Dominican Republic continues to be a tortured, and at the same time utopic, condition. In Chapter Six, “The dream of creating one people from two lands mixed together: 1937 and borderland Utopia,” Fumagalli describes the ideological apparatus of the Dominican dictator Trujillo, who is able to both glorify and deify himself. The massacre is described in detail and Fumagalli agrees with various authors who argue that the massacre was not supported by all

Dominicans; indeed there were those who worked underground to smuggle Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans across the border to safety. But she also presents the fact that there was a presence of anti-Haitianism in the borderland and especially among the Dominican elite which cannot be ignored.

In Chapter Seven, “A geography of living flesh; bearing the unbearable,” Fumagalli uses memoir writing to analyse and concisely describe the creation of proposed agricultural communities on the Haitian side of the border. The communities failed, not least because the land used was not agricultural, but also because the families who populated the area were substantially greater in number than those originally catered for by the government. The chapter shows that the Trujillo programme to Dominicanize the frontier was a massive failure; both because of the Haitians who were massacred and whose land had been essentially stolen, and because the Dominicans who were forced to repatriate to ‘La Frontera’ were in a sense imprisoned there despite any misgivings which they may have felt.

Both Chapter Eight, “The forgotten heart-breaking epic of border struggle,” and Chapter Nine, “Some are born to endless night: structural violence across-the-border,” attempt to give clues as to how the Haitian dream first envisioned by the maroons and the revolt of 1791 could have turned into such a nightmare that Haiti could become, several decades later, a destitute and paradoxical state. Fictional accounts by both Haitians and Dominicans are analysed but Fumagalli concludes that disasters (both natural and unnatural) are in the main responsible for the state of the island. She presents structural violence as one of the contributing factors to the destruction of the border exchange.

The last two chapters of the text move toward analyses of the present-day border context. In Chapter Ten, “Borderlands of the mind: present, past, and future,” Fumagalli examines the effects of the earthquake of 2010 and specifically the Dominican response to the Haitian disaster. She points out that despite a warm and charismatic response by the Dominican Republic, a renewed Dominican fear of a Haitian invasion has risen to the surface. Moreover, along with this fear all of the old stereotypes also resurface: that is, the idea of an evil, savage Haitian presence among powerless Dominicans. Nevertheless Fumagalli’s final chapter, “The writing is on the wall: towards an open island and a complete structure,” is powerfully optimistic. Through art—from sculptures, photography, video, and fiction, to, perhaps most interestingly, body art—Fumagalli marks and maps a clear design of the new politics necessary for the acceptance of diversity between the two nations, in order for a positive shift in relations to occur.

One further point of interest is that an extensive and comprehensive Bibliography is included in the volume. This will undoubtedly prove extremely useful to students, in the main as an introduction to further study in the field of Haitian/Dominican relations. Overall, *On the Edge: Writing the Border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic* is a remarkably detailed and well-written volume of literary as well as cultural importance to scholars in the

fields of literary and cultural studies. Therefore, its critical understanding of the Haitian/Dominican borderland renders it essential reading to historians, journalists and, I would argue, even politicians interested in the geo-political importance of Haiti, the Dominican Republic and the Caribbean as a whole.