

Dominican *bateyes* and the Haitians

New reconfigurations of a colonial legacy

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On 14 April 2024, during an interview broadcast on Al Jazeera, the Foreign Minister of the Dominican Republic, Roberto Álvarez Gil, commented on the outbreak of gang violence in the Haitian capital of Port-Au-Prince, which had started in March, as ‘the most profound existential crisis that the country has faced ... where law and order has basically broken down’ (Al Jazeera 2024). He then continued: ‘it is indeed an issue of national security to the Dominican Republic’, and ‘that is why we have up to 10,000 of our armed forces members at the border’.

Along that border, to counter irregular immigration from Haiti, the Dominican government initiated the construction of a fortified wall as early as February 2022. When asked about the deportation of Haitians and Haitian descendants that the Dominican Republic has been carrying out since 2013, and the possibility of initiating humanitarian corridors or opening camps to shelter the recent inflow of refugees, Álvarez stated: ‘We cannot allow, when you have a country that has a very different culture, very different language, very different customs, [people] to come into our own country in such large numbers as we already have, and use our social services, use our space to a point where frictions are created inevitably.’

Disregarding the shared history of the two countries, and a past of transnational solidarity and alliance (Eller 2016), Álvarez was thus voicing the racialized and class basis of Dominican national identity, with its array of prejudices against Haitian immigrants and Haitian descendants, all classified as ‘black’, as opposed to the ‘white’ and wealthy upper class (Paulino 2016) to which he himself belonged.

Contrary to what one may expect, however, it is not the border with Haiti but the country’s eastern hinterland, the historical and beating heart of the sugar economy, which is the privileged observatory for considering Dominican colourism and exclusionary forms of citizenship (Mayes 2022). Here, conflicts over race, class and immigration status cast shadows over everyday life. Since the 1930s, Haitian labourers have kept the Dominican sugar economy going, living in settlements, known as *bateyes*, scattered among the sugar-cane plantations.

With a population of about 200,000 people, mostly Haitians or people of Haitian descent, *bateyes* embody both the lingering after-effects of colonialism and slavery and the 20th- and 21st-century patterns of capitalist exploi-

tation, social segregation and legal discrimination driven by predatory neoliberal economic reforms. According to Horn (2016), the roots of Dominican class ideology were cross-fertilized by US notions of white supremacy during the American military occupation of 1916-1924 and again in 1965-1966. Over the last 20 years, restrictive regulatory developments have severely impacted the lives of Haitian immigrants and Haitian descendants (Zecca Castel 2015; 2018; 2021).

By welcoming me into their community, and engaging, since 2013, with my ethnographic efforts, the men and women of the Dominican *batey* of Las Pajas have introduced me to the complex interplay of historical continuities and contemporary challenges that shape, and constrain, Caribbean lower-class lifeworlds on the ground. When I first arrived in 2013, the effects of the sugar industry privatization, initiated in 1999, were dramatically visible. The process of denationalizing Haitian migrants and their descendants, initiated by the Dominican Republic in 2010, was also a profoundly felt issue within the community.

Bateyes through time

The *batey* was originally an open space where the Taíno natives – the original population of the Greater Antilles¹ – practised *batú*, a team sport similar to the Mayan ballgame (Las Casas 1909 [1536]; Oviedo y Valdés 2007 [1535]). A series of stones delimited this space, which served also as a ceremonial plaza. The *batey* was the recreational and ritual centre of Taíno settlements. Columbus’s second voyage in 1493 introduced sugar-cane cultivation in Hispaniola, and by the early 16th century several sugar mills operated on the island using animal and indigenous labour. Spanish settlers re-signified the term *batey* to indicate the quarters where the enslaved Taíno population lived on the early sugar plantations (Torres 2017). Its recreational and ceremonial role forgotten, the *batey* became a site of segregation, exploitation and death (Fraginals 1981: 12).

The importing of African slaves, which began in the early 16th century, expanded along with the exploitation of the Taíno natives. On the western side of the island, over which the French claimed control by the end of the 17th century, slavery and the slave trade ended with the revolution that brought about the birth of the Republic of Haiti in 1804. The provision was extended to the eastern side

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1. Cuba, Puerto Rico and Hispaniola were named thus by Columbus after his first voyage (1492). The island’s original name is disputed: Haitians claim the original Taíno name of Ayiti (‘land of high mountains’), while Dominicans use another Taíno term, Quisqueya (‘mother of all lands’).

2. The literature has extensively shown how, since the era of slavery, provision grounds and gardens have provided a means for survival and a level of autonomy to plantation workers (Mintz 1974; 1989; Trouillot 2002).

3. Investigations into the living and working conditions of the labourers employed in the Dominican sugar-cane plantations began in 2013. The US Department of Labor has conducted periodic inspections in the field to verify compliance with the US-Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), stipulated in 2004 to regulate, among other things, the imports of Dominican sugar into the US.



Fig. 1. *Dajabón. Dominican-Haitian border.*

when it fell under Haitian rule in 1822. The 1844 revolt against Haitians marked the beginning of the contemporary Dominican Republic (1865). Plantations reacted to the transition to wage labour by recruiting from the peasant population, which mostly consisted of freed slaves (Moya Pons 1986: 20). Harsh working conditions and low wages soon fed discontent, strikes and protests. The solution was migrant labour. From the 1880s, plantations recruited agricultural workers from Puerto Rico and then from the Lesser Antilles under British, Danish, Dutch and French rule.

The First World War (1914-1918), which devastated the European sugar beet industry, and the military occupation of the Dominican Republic by the US (1916-1924), which invested heavily in the sugar sector, marked a period of prosperity for the national sugar economy, raising the demand for plantation labour. Companies turned to the Haitian workforce, which was easy to recruit because of its geographical proximity. While until 1920 almost all plantation workers came from the nearby Caribbean Windward Islands, by 1930 Haitians became the main foreign workforce in the Dominican Republic (Martínez 2007: 23). Between 1952 and 1986, the Dominican Republic and Haiti signed a series of bilateral contracts to meet the labour demands of the Dominican sugar plantations. The sector had become a private monopoly of the dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, in power since 1930. At his death in 1961, the monopoly was nationalized. During the period of bilateral contracts, up to 20,000 Haitians per year regularly entered the Dominican Republic as plantation labourers.

In 1991, after almost 40 years of labour migration, the Dominican national census recorded the presence of 245,000 Haitians, mostly living in *bateyes*. At this point, the term *batey* meant a permanent settlement of Haitian labourers inside a plantation. While bilateral agreements envisaged repatriation at the end of the harvest season, the Dominican government never truly committed to it. The population of the *bateyes* grew exponentially, partly due to the creation of the first family units. Finally, in 1999, the state plantations were privatized.

The consequences of privatization

My most recent visit to Las Pajas was in 2023. In the span of 10 years, the *batey* transformed itself before my eyes. In 2013, the majority of men were employed as agricultural labourers on nearby sugar-cane plantations. All suffered the effects of the 1999 privatization of the Dominican sugar industry, which Wooding and Moseley-Williams had described as a 'return to the horrors of the past' (2004: 45). Non-governmental organizations and international media were denouncing forms of labour exploitation akin to slavery. New private enterprises taking over the old industries eliminated the provision grounds (*conucos*)² that had flourished in the period of bilateral contracts. To optimize investments and maximize profits, enterprises expanded the sugar monoculture at the expense of the small plots where *bateyes*' inhabitants grew vegetables and raised livestock during plantation downtime, as Alexandre, an elderly labourer, explained:

Here we used to have some pieces of land to use, for the animals, then they took all the land to plant cane... Many people had a garden, they planted beans, corn and raised some animals, but then everyone had to sell the cows and goats because there's no place left to pasture them, you can't even have a piglet. Look, we are surrounded by cane, everywhere ... And if they find a free animal in the plantations, they confiscate it, and you must pay a fine to get it back ... So, tell me, how do we live?... There's nothing left here. That's why the young people leave. We're going through a hard time, it's a bad situation, all we can do is leave from here. (14 December 2017)

The disappearance of provision grounds reinforced people's dependence on plantation labour while transforming

Las Pajas into a place of expulsion, marking the beginning of a diaspora from the *batey*. In 2023, while the population of Las Pajas had grown, the inhabitants' engagement in plantation labour had reduced considerably. Though in 2013 nearly all adult men living in the *batey* worked as agricultural hands in sugar-cane cutting, by 2023 the majority relied on alternative income sources outside the *batey*, accessed by moving into the capital city and other urban centres. They informally integrated into construction, tourism and commercial sectors. At the San Pedro de Macoris open-air landfill, I met Juan, a young man from Las Pajas who earned a meagre living collecting and selling recyclable materials, who said: 'You know, there's no more work for us on the plantations. They pay too little; you can't live on that. For me, it's better to work here, at the landfill' (10 July 2023).

While many men had left Las Pajas seeking opportunities, others had returned or never left, as the *batey* protected them from persecutions due to their irregular migration status. Jean, a young man born in Las Pajas to Haitian parents, explained:

I am afraid to move out of Las Pajas, I have no documents. If Immigration catches you, it is a problem. You get arrested and deported to Haiti ... It happened to my brother and many other people I know. (23 July 2023)

The prolongation of the Haitian crisis and the tightening of Dominican migration policies, strongly advocated by Minister Álvarez, have exacerbated longstanding tensions that find their most evident expression in the *bateyes*. As illustrated by the case of Las Pajas, these settlements have proven to be simultaneously and paradoxically places of confinement and expulsion.

Disenfranchisement

When people started moving out of *bateyes* in the early 2000s due to privatization, they became visible to the larger Dominican population. The sanctuary role these settlements acquired stems from the 2010 constitutional reform and *Sentencia 168/13*, issued by the Dominican Constitutional Court in September 2013. This ruling withdrew Dominican nationality from tens of thousands of people born on Dominican territory to foreign parents, the vast majority from Haiti, exposing them to deportation. The effects were clearly visible in Las Pajas, where workers felt their only choice was to stay on the plantation, regardless of employment.

The 1929 Constitution based Dominican nationality on *jus soli*, applying regardless of parents' immigrant status, provided they were not considered 'in transit': persons passing through the country for less than 10 days. The 2010 constitutional reform left *jus sanguinis* as the only criterion for acquiring Dominican nationality. *Sentencia 168/13* rejected the appeal of Mrs Juliana Deguis Pierre, denied a Dominican identity card because her parents were irregular Haitian migrants. This ruling set a precedent: the *jus sanguinis* rule could apply retroactively from 1929, affecting all people born on Dominican soil to foreign parents. More than 200,000 people found themselves stateless, and in just one year, between 2015 and 2016, over 100,000 were deported to Haiti (AI 2016; IACHR 2013: 5). In October 2024, the Dominican government launched an operation to repatriate up to 10,000 Haitians per week.

Sentencia 168/13 marked a decisive shift in the state's approach to the Haitian population, institutionalizing their exclusion. These former sugar plantation camps have evolved into spaces where bureaucratic barriers effectively imprison their residents. The tacit aim behind the new citizenship policies appears to be transcending the outdated approach of controlling the Haitian minority through physical segregation and violence, moving

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(From left to right, above to below)

Fig. 2. Batey Las Pajas. Hato Mayor del Rey Province, Dominican Republic.

Fig. 3. Barracón (shack) for housing Haitian workers in the batey Las Pajas.

Fig. 4. Batey Las Pajas. A brigade of sugar-cane cutters.

Fig. 5. Alexandre. Haitian sugar-cane cutter.

Fig. 6. An elderly worker with his Dominican documents.

Fig. 7. A young girl in the batey, Las Pajas.

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- towards more nuanced forms of 'biopolitical' confinement (Martínez & Wooding 2017) through bureaucratic mechanisms blocking access to Dominican avenues of social and economic advancement.
- The true objective was not deportation but the creation of a subaltern class, stripped of rights and providing exploitable labour to the sugar industry and other emerging sectors. Since the 19th century, Dominican elites have promoted anti-Haitian racist and nationalist ideologies to maintain class dominance over migrant labour (Mayes 2022: 23). This racial discrimination has become increasingly pervasive, resulting in systematic exclusion of the largest ethnic minority group from citizenship rights. Since 2013, Haitians and their descendants have faced arbitrary deportations, exploitative working conditions and widespread social prejudice, creating what has been described as potential genocidal violence (Paulino 2006).
- As Eller (2024: 405) notes, national independence and emancipation from slavery, both in the Dominican Republic and across the Caribbean, did not automatically lead to sovereignty, freedom and social justice. Instead, they often concealed new forms of oppression and structural violence. As Bonilla (2015: xiv) notes, people across the Caribbean – especially those excluded from elite power – often lack the language to imagine alternatives to postcolonial disillusionment, shaped by categories rooted in histories of racism and imperialism. This conceptual imprisonment effectively renders them subjects of biopolitical experiments that perpetuate discrimination and marginalization.
- Las Pajas had become a sanctuary from police raids. For this reason, even facing labour exploitation, Haitian migrants find in the *bateyes* a paradoxical space of freedom. As Fransua, a young Haitian descendant, explained in answer to my question on police raids:
- No, we're not afraid of raids here, we're calm, no one bothers us, even if we don't have documents. The problem is if you want to leave, because then you're in danger, because they can just take you away in a moment ... But they don't come in here, because they know we work day and night in the fields, so they leave us alone. (16 May 2018)
- Sentencia 168/13* permeates every aspect of life in Las Pajas and other Dominican *bateyes*. In addition to the immediate legal consequences, the inability to obtain documents generates numerous vulnerabilities. While contending with declining economic prospects, residents are subjected to extortion, precarity and severely restricted mobility. The effects, transmitted through social relationships, exacerbate the physical and social isolation of *batey* communities.
- As Arielle, whose Dominican citizenship was revoked, reflected: 'The truth is that Dominicans don't want us. We Haitians always feel in danger because they hate us. But if it weren't for us Haitians, how would they live? We are the ones doing all the hardest and most exhausting jobs' (12 June 2018). Her words capture the fundamental paradox: while *batey* residents face systematic exclusion and discrimination, their labour remains essential to the Dominican economy.
- ### History continues
- Although the Dominican economy increasingly relies on the tertiary sector and tourism, sugar remains a strategic commodity for domestic and external geopolitics. The three main sugar companies, led by the Central Romana Corporation (CRC), the Dominican Republic's first sugar producer, produce over 600,000 metric tonnes of sugar annually, almost entirely exported to the US, which is currently the only major export market for Dominican Republic sugar, benefiting from the highest annual US Tariff Rate Quota (TRQ). The question of what Dominicans would do without sugar gains significance considering recent developments.
- In December 2017, I accompanied a US Department of Labor delegation visiting two Dominican *bateyes*, including Las Pajas. Living and working conditions were under international scrutiny for indications of forced labour. Five years later, on 23 November 2022, US Customs and Border Protection issued a Withhold Release Order against CRC.³
- With immediate effect, CRC sugar was detained at all US ports of entry after the US Department of Labor identified indicators of forced labour in their operations. The economic impact should have been enormous. Nevertheless, according to evidence from the Corporate Accountability Lab, during 2023 'Central Romana has chosen to implement only superficial changes for workers while pulling political strings in an apparent effort to make the import ban disappear' (CAL 2023). The company also invested heavily in 'lobbying on the withhold release order on sugar before the House of Representatives'. Jesus Nuñez, a local unionist advocating for sugar workers' rights, suggested that CRC may have reached a mutual profit agreement with the country's second-largest sugar company, the Consorcio Azucarero de Empresas Industriales (CAEI), to which Las Pajas belonged. This would mean CAEI is also exporting CRC's sugar, circumventing the US ban.
- The 2022 US sugar import ban marked a significant international effort to address exploitation in Dominican sugar plantations. However, attempts to circumvent it underline the persistence of colonial power dynamics.
- The 2024 Haitian crisis has intensified longstanding tensions in Dominican-Haitian relations. While the Dominican state responds with heightened border security, deportations and wall construction, Haitian labour remains crucial for the national economy. The *bateyes* occupy an increasingly complex position: simultaneously spaces of confinement and refuge, exploitation and survival.
- As observed in Las Pajas between 2013 and 2023, old forms of exploitation have been reconfigured through bureaucratic citizenship restrictions and changing labour practices. Yet residents have developed strategies for mutual support and survival, even as many young people seek opportunities elsewhere. With global scrutiny of labour conditions and growing regional instability, the experiences of *batey* residents continue to reflect the unresolved tensions between economic necessity and social exclusion that have characterized Dominican-Haitian relations since the colonial era.
- ### Conclusion
- The transformation of Las Pajas between 2013 and 2023 reveals how colonial patterns of exploitation persist through evolving forms of social and legal exclusion. While physical segregation defined earlier periods, contemporary mechanisms of control operate through bureaucratic citizenship restrictions and labour precarity. The *batey* has become simultaneously a space of confinement and refuge. Though safe from deportation, for now, these communities remain trapped by barriers to work and movement.
- Recent developments – from the 2022 US sugar import ban to the 2024 Haitian crisis – suggest these dynamics still operate. As the Dominican state responds with intensified border control and deportations, the paradoxical position of *batey* communities grows increasingly precarious. Yet the case of Las Pajas shows how residents maintain strategies for survival and mutual support, even as historical patterns of exploitation take new forms through bureaucratic and legal mechanisms. Their experiences reveal the complex interplay between labour dependence and social exclusion that continues to shape life in the Dominican-Haitian borderlands. ●