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■ AQ FEATURE

The Dominican Republic and Haiti: A Shared View from the Diaspora

BY [Richard André](#)

A conversation with Edwidge Danticat and Junot Díaz.

In a landmark ruling, the Dominican Republic's Constitutional Court last September stripped an estimated 210,000 individuals—most of whom are Dominicans born to Haitian sugar cane workers—of their citizenship, effectively leaving them stateless. The ensuing outcry from the international community has included Junot Díaz and Edwidge Danticat—two of the best-known contemporary authors from the island of Hispaniola. Friends for over 20 years, Danticat (from Haiti) and Díaz (from the D.R.) have been

relentless in their condemnation of the ruling. In a written exchange moderated by *Americas Quarterly* production editor and Haitian-American Richard André, Díaz and Danticat discuss the roots and legacies of racism and conflict in the neighboring nations, the impact of the court's ruling, and the responsibility of the diaspora to build bridges between Dominicans and Haitians and defend human rights at home and abroad.

What do you think most Haitians/Dominicans don't understand about the other side?

DIAZ: Depends on who you're asking. Some folks on the D.R. side know a lot more about their neighbor than others. Some Dominicans are in fact descended from said neighbor and might know a thing or two because of it.

Yet there is no question that there's not enough real contact, and that the anti-Haitian derangements of certain sectors in the Dominican Republic have helped to widen the gulf between the two nations, and have made it harder for our communities to be in fruitful communion except through the most reductive, divisive, and—on the Dominican side—sensationally racist generalizations about one another. But if I have to answer you most specifically: [neither side understands] we're sisters and brothers, that we share a poor, fragile island, and that without true solidarity we won't make it.

DANTICAT: I agree that it has a lot to do with who you're asking, and also where you are. There are many mixed families, of course; and in many places on the island, people who grow up in close proximity to one another are practically indistinguishable physically. There are also a lot of people who understand that we share a common struggle, and especially that poor people on both sides of the island are battling similar types of detention and immigration policies in the diaspora. Perhaps we need to hear more about these people. Often in the dialogue we bring up our historical scars, but not our historical bridges. Because our neighbors are solely defined by what they did to us, rather than what we can do together.

That being said, I think some—certainly not all—Dominicans have a very limited, almost stereotypical idea of what a Haitian person looks and acts like. And it often has to do with the people some are most prejudiced against: the people who work in the *bateys* [sugar plantation towns]. When I used to travel to the D.R., I would have to spend the first 15 minutes of a lot of conversations going back and forth with someone trying to convince me that I'm not really Haitian because they feel they know what a Haitian is supposed to be. I know many people who never left Haiti and who've also had that experience. It is grounded in a kind of inflexibility of sorts; an inability on the part of some to see us in a variety of ways: as neighbors, friends, allies, and as brothers and sisters in both a looser and broader sense.

What role, in your opinion, does history play in the way the two nations interact?

DIAZ: Quite a lot. But for me to say simply that “history plays a role” without at least trying to examine the hard facts of what actually happened would only serve to obfuscate both the complexity of the situation and also the profound culpability that the European and North American powers bear in Haiti's immiseration and in the conflict between Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

History indeed plays a role in what you're seeing today. But it's a complex, multivalenced history that involves former dictator Rafael Trujillo and genocide [against Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent] — a history over which looms the predations of Europe and the U.S. and Haitian elites and, yes, the Dominican Republic.

There's no question that many Dominican elites have historically deployed a metaphysics of Haiti-hating to curry favor with the colonial powers and also as a way to modulate all manners of internal contradictions within the Dominican state (and as a way of consolidating power through nationalist practices). But the Dominican Republic's tortured history with Haiti can never be understood in isolation from the larger histories of the colonial powers that helped initiate the D.R. into the metaphysics of Haiti-hating in the first

place.



"I am Dominican like you." Dominican-born Haitian descendants demonstrate to demand their citizenship in front of the Central Election Board. Photo courtesy of Erika Santelices/AFP/Getty.



DANTICAT: History plays a huge role of course. Not just the history we can't avoid but speak out about—the time when the leaders of our side of the island were also on your side of the island. Or Trujillo's massacre in 1937. One thing that is not mentioned as often is that early in the twentieth century (1915 to 1934 for Haiti, and 1916 to 1924 for the D.R.), the entire island was occupied by the United States. Then again, in the D.R. in the 1960s, Trujillo—who not only organized a

massacre, but wiped out several generations of Dominican families—was trained during the occupation by U.S. Marines and put in power when they pulled out. Same with the Haitian army that terrorized Haitians for generations. It is not a matter of blame but a matter of historical record.

The U.S. sugar interests grew more and more powerful during that first occupation, and the U.S. even had a hand in deciding where the two countries' borders should be. So we have had our own internal problems, but there has also been this very powerful historical meddling to make sure that we stay divided—for our resources to be pilfered more easily, as in the case of sugar production; or to serve as a wall against communism. When people talk about colorism in the Dominican Republic—and I am sure this is not the only source of it—you can imagine these Marines from the southern U.S. who came during the U.S. occupations and set up their clubs and their hierarchies, just as they did in Haiti, rewarding any kind of proximity to whiteness, pushing us beyond colorism to a version of the U.S. Jim Crow system.

What can be done to heal those historical scars?

DANTICAT: We have to keep talking to each other and air the different layers of truth. We have to be willing to listen to the other side and accept being questioned as we, too, question others. Not just here where it's easier, but on the island, too. Often, when you talk healing, people think you mean cultural occupation. We have to find ways to have difficult conversations about how we got here.

I know those conversations are being held. I know a lot of activists are having them, and students and friends. But people who speak the loudest speak with the laws they create, or with the notion that there is a whole nationalistic machine behind them.

We must keep dialoguing, and not just in the way that heads of governments employ to give the appearance that “they got this,” while we wait for them to come up with some kind of solution that will probably mean more money in the pockets of the people at the top who want license and our silence so they can go forward with their trade and tourism projects, etc.

But we must keep talking to each other without dismissing the other side altogether. It is always a very painful thing to me to remember that very few Haitian leaders have shown much care or concern about the people working in the cane fields in the Dominican Republic. During the [Francois and Jean-Claude] Duvalier dictatorship, people were picked up by the *Tonton Macoutes* [Duvalier’s militia] and practically sold across the border. As a child, I knew many people this happened to. After the 1937 massacre, outsiders had to urge our then-president to give a damn. The Haitian government was totally silent for weeks after the recent Constitutional Court ruling. The reaction reminded us—as if we needed to be reminded—that our governments, regardless of which side of the island they’re on, discriminate against the poor.

But to cite someone I know you like, Oscar Wilde, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, writes, “The curves of your lips rewrite history.” So let’s all keep talking.

DIAZ: All of us who want to see a better future for our nations need to fight the toxicologies of the past by practicing the simple revolutionary techniques of contact, compassion and critical solidarity. And we really do have to find a way to get our elites out from between us. They have done more to promote the circulation of hate and suspicion than anyone else. I keep imagining what might be possible if our elites weren’t constantly shouting in our ears.

What role, in your opinion, does race and class play in the conflicts—past and present—between Haitians and Dominicans?

DIAZ: Anti-Haitianism is a racist ideology, whether it’s practiced by France, the U.S., the Dominican Republic, or Haitian elites. So race is clearly at the core. It is a racism born of colonialism, whose foundational tenet is that people of color are not human. It’s not only white folks who avail themselves of its bestial logic. If only white people were implicated in white supremacy it would have been a lot easier to extirpate, but, alas, the hydra has planted a hissing head in all of us.

DANTICAT: We also have a situation, I think, on both sides of the island—or maybe all over the world really, but it might seem more pronounced in these two poor countries—where light skin color is a kind of currency, where skin color can be perceived as a kind of class of its own. Even in the world’s first black republic, we are still not exempt from that.

Where do you think Haitians and Dominicans can find common ground?

DIAZ: Are we not one African diasporic people, survivors of this world’s greatest act of sustained inhumanity, sharing one beautiful island? Are not all of us being slowly destroyed by the same forces that colonialism put into play? Doesn’t the fact that our elites spend so much energy keeping us apart suggest that our ultimate liberation begins with us coming together?

Many of us already work together both at home and in the diaspora. One day, we will become the majority, and I suspect that in the revolutionary eschatology of the future, this will be the first seal whose opening signals our liberation.

DANTICAT: I don't want to be "kumbaya"-esque about this, but we share a common vulnerability—an environmental vulnerability. Certainly we share some nasty fault lines. Our people often end up in the same boats in the same oceans. Haitians spend millions of dollars on Dominican products, so we are trade partners, formally and informally. Some people share bloodlines, a common history.

Two novelists are not going to solve this problem. It will require some real give and take to get to some point of balance in the exchange, and maybe the basic understanding that Haitians are not trying to destroy the Dominican Republic any more than Dominicans are trying to destroy the United States when they come here. And the "kumbaya" part, of course, is that we are always stronger together than torn apart.

What was your first thought when you heard about the ruling?

DIAZ: That the political leadership in the D.R. is both mad and cruel beyond measure. And also that when it comes to destroying immigrant lives, ex-President Leonel Fernández and current President Danilo Medina have learned well at the feet of the United States. What's going on in the D.R. is a nightmare in its own right, but has to be understood as part of a larger global movement to demonize and marginalize immigrants—and as part of the U.S.'s post-9/11 push to "strengthen borders"—which is really to militarize them. The U.S. helped the D.R. militarize its border, helped the D.R. create its very own border patrol based on a U.S. model. The world is slowly dying and our elites are draining it to the lees, and yet this is what our idiot politicians want us to focus on.

DANTICAT: I remember feeling very sad. There is always this sense of ultra-vulnerability when you are an immigrant or the child of immigrants. But it's something you hope goes away with the generations. Or diminishes. I remember thinking, "What are all these people going to do now?" especially when I heard that the ruling was irreversible. But soon after, I was heartened by how many people spoke up: ordinary people as well as international organizations....Dominicans who are not of Haitian descent speaking up for their brothers and sisters.

I spent time with two amazing women activists in Miami, Ana María Belique Delba and Noemi Mendez, who are part of an organization called *Reconocido* (Recognized). They are so unified in this struggle. That was also very inspiring. I also remember missing Sonia Pierre, the founder of the *Movimiento de Mujeres Dominicano-Haitiana* (Movement for Dominican Women of Haitian Descent—MUDHA). I kept thinking, "She is going to have a lot of work to do." Then I remembered that she died of a heart attack at 48, two years ago. This citizenship struggle, which was sealed but did not begin with this ruling, has been going on for decades. And it had broken her heart.

Where do you see things going next?

DIAZ: Fortunately, the mobilization against the *sentencia* has been strong and the international reaction unanimously negative. (Though it's worth noting that the [Barack] Obama administration, no friend of immigrant rights, has been pretty muted in its condemnation.) I am very sad to say that the politicians who masterminded this vast human rights violation clearly weren't expecting this kind of backlash. But we'll see how it goes. Right now, the party in power, the *Partido de la Liberación Dominicana* (Dominican Liberation Party—PLD), is trying to save face by making it seem as though they never intended this as an assault against our citizens of Haitian descent—just an attempt to "regularize" a broken system, which clearly is just a bold-faced lie. Like I said, we'll see. We'll keep fighting, of course. But it goes to show you that it takes more than helping out during an earthquake for a country to unlearn the metaphysics of Haiti-hating.

DANTICAT: I think it will probably go the way of individual action. People will start asking themselves if they can spend their money in a place where people can be treated this way in a legal fashion, which then of course gives license to others to act on what this ruling says or take it even further. I wish the commercial

interests, the tourist boards etc., would jump into the conversation and become more vocal, because ultimately it comes down to money. Where pocketbooks are concerned, people are nudged into action.

Why should the world—and especially citizens of the Americas—be paying attention to what’s going on in the Dominican Republic? Given that you are both children of the island of Hispaniola living in the U.S., why is this issue important to you?

DIAZ: First, the world should always be concerned whenever a vast human rights violation occurs anywhere on the planet. There’s a reason it’s called human rights: a blow to one is a blow to all. Injustices have a way of birthing horrors if left unchecked, and right now we have enough horrors in the world.

And why is it important for me? Because that island is my birthplace and one of my two homes; and if people like me don’t fight its injustices, don’t fight for the better future we deserve, who will? As a Dominican living in the U.S., it matters to me a whole hell of a lot that political elites in the D.R. are inflaming ethnic-racial hatred against Haitians to divide the *pueblo* and keep it from organizing against its real enemies—the elites themselves.

Supporters of the *sentencia* defend it with a lot of high-flying gibberish about bureaucratic necessity, etc., but the reality is that the ruling is all about creating a permanent group of second-class citizens in the Dominican Republic. As for the human cost, all one has to do is travel to the D.R. and you will see the terrible damage this kind of politics has caused and continues to cause. At a structural level, I know people who have had their papers taken away and others who are unable to secure documentation to travel or even to be educated. But on a more basic level, the anti-Haitian mood has reached a level I’ve never experienced before. It’s a disaster. This is the type of deforming political sorcery that’s going to take a lot of work and good faith to undo.

DANTICAT: Both Junot and I—correct me here if I am wrong, Junot—grew up in relative poverty on our respective sides of the island....

DIAZ: Oh yes, poverty aplenty.

DANTICAT: In both our lives, even when we were living on the island, we were also aware of our relative privilege when we traveled to see the relatives or spent time in the *campo* or the *pwovens* [rural provinces]. That makes you extraordinarily aware of what opportunity means. And it makes you hypersensitive to seeing not just a few but a slew of rights and opportunities being taken away in one swoop.

You hope you would always speak up. Even when the issue is not as clear as this. You hope you would speak up if someone is sleeping on the floor in an immigration cell in Texas, or if people are being tortured in Guantánamo, no matter what their nationality. People’s lives are being affected here in a way that touches their children and their children’s children.

Even in the name of self-interest, the people in power in the Dominican Republic should see that they are creating an even greater problem here. They are trying to kick a Sisyphean boulder down the road for political gain or as a bargaining chip for trade. Maybe they are hoping that several generations of their citizens will “self deport” to Haiti if you take their identity away. But what they’re doing is creating a tier of people who cannot contribute, beyond perhaps their limited physical strength, to a growing society. You take away their ability to learn, to work, and you also take away their ability to continue to build a society that they’ve helped sustain for many generations now.

What should be the domestic and international response by individuals and policymakers? What role can you play in advocating on this issue?

DANTICAT: Recently, members of the Dominican senate and lower house approved a citizenship bill. But, at least at this point, it looks like people who were never able to get their birth certificates in the first place will still have a hard time using the channels offered by the bill.

When the lower house unanimously voted in favor of the bill, Juliana Deguis Pierre, who was the plaintiff in the Constitutional Court case that was central to the ruling, told journalists, “I hope to God they give [my citizenship] back to me because of everything I’ve been through and everything I’ve suffered.” Just for those who doubt that the ruling has real consequences, Deguis was not able to travel to the U.S. because, with as much attention as she’d gotten given her involvement in a landmark case, she did not have the papers to travel.

Imagine what it’s like for someone who is much less visible living on a *batey*.

A Haiti/D.R. bilateral commission has met a few times, and as of the time that we’re talking now, in mid-May, it has not produced conclusive results. The initial international interest in this has cooled a bit. News cycles are short and people move on quickly, but it’s important to remain vigilant. There might have initially been a perception that this ruling would go undetected. But the little progress we’ve had, that the Dominican (and even the Haitian) government has been forced to take some action at all, has a lot to do with the fact that people have spoken out all over the world, that there have been calls for boycotts, that people have written letters and taken to the airwaves—and that some groups have canceled their conferences and taken their dollars elsewhere.

All this has helped and will continue to help. We must continue to listen closely to the leaders on the ground, to the people who are taking the heat every day. I am sure they are not ready to rest any time soon. And neither can we. Struggles like this are long and hard, and people have to keep their eyes on the prize. And when you have a just outcome, it not only improves the specific situation we’re talking about; it is also a step forward for oppressed people everywhere. This is why we can still learn lessons from the U.S. civil rights movement and the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. The right outcome in situations like this can eventually make the world itself a better place.

DIAZ: We need to throw everything we can at the Dominican government to stop this travesty. We need protests and letters and emails. People are talking about a boycott against the country until the *sentencia* is dropped. Fortunately, there are plenty of organizations and individuals fighting this. One could always reach out to them. On my side of the island, there’s *Comité de Solidaridad con Personas Desnacionalizadas* (Committee of Solidarity with Stateless People) and *Reconocido*. There’s *Dominicanos Por Derecho* (Dominicans for Rights) and Sonia Pierre’s MUDHA. As for myself, I do what I can. I fight these idiots with all my strength. But if you’re like me, you always feel you can do more.

DANTICAT: And more, and more, and more....

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**lala** • 5 days ago

sorry but my country has the right to defend its borders.

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**Sandy** → **lala** • 5 days ago

So does America. But that does not stop Dominicans from doing everything they can to get here illegally. I propose stripping Dominicans born in America of their American citizenship. But that won't happen, America is civilised.

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

**LSM** → **lala** • 5 days ago

You wouldn't have a country if it wasn't for Haitians during much better historical times in the Island of Hispaniola.

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

**AM** → **LSM** • 4 days ago

The better times you fail to elaborate on was a cruel and bloody invasion by Haiti and occupation for 22 years (1822-1844). The atrocities committed during that time by Haitians against Dominicans are hardly ever mentioned (certainly not above) as a source of the Dominican "fear" towards Haiti. The DR fought hard and bravely to gain its independence from the invader Haiti and also from the European colonial powers.

Unfortunately, most of the diaspora, including its intelligentsia, tend to be ignorant of simple facts, perhaps because never got to study national history early in school. Just the same, most outside are quick to jump to "a good cause" persuaded by controlled media and irresponsible reporting. How come the sentiment above is not shared by most Dominicans in the country? Because the reality is much more complex than the poor description, explanation and suggestions given in the interview above. What is Haiti doing about all this? Not much because as a State it has failed its own people, long ago, and this is just another instance. If I was Haitian and part of the 99.99%, I would try to cross the border as well, even if that meant to risk my life in the process.

1 ^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

**Ulises Jorge Bidó** • 16 hours ago

Junot Diaz went to live to the U.S. when he was 6 years old; why is he considered an expert in the Dominican Republic? I grew up in the DR and left for Puerto Rico when I was 18th. I visited almost every year after that and read as much as possible about the country online.

Yet, every time I go back I feel like the country I left is no more. People change, attitudes change and this is very significant. I don't think that I can provide an honest assessment of what the country is and I don't see that Diaz is doing that.

Every time I read his opinions about the country is not a Dominican talking, but an American. He just doesn't know what he's talking about and worse... I don't think he knows...

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Ayendy Bonifacio • 5 days ago

The bigger issue here hardly regards border defense. This type of citizenship is a symptom of postcolonial policy-making at its most virulent and backward form. As a Dominican-American who has spent time on the Island, I have seen prejudice against Haitians as well as dark skinned Dominicans. Danticat and Diaz make excellent points regarding the violation of basic human-rights in the D.R. Dominican-born Haitians are being stripped of not only their citizenship but also their rights to education, travel and work. Further, such a policy creates more colorism within the DR itself. Racism and prejudice against darker, "Haitian-looking people" will now be lawfully acceptable and associated with citizenry (a linkage very common in the US). This type of Dominican citizenship does not leave room for integration.

As Danticat and Diaz rightly argue, we must pay more attention to the postcolonial apparatus, the border patrol model the DR has adopted from the U.S. The DR should stop following the latest American-political trend and develop policies and laws that bring the Island together instead of further apart: think of ways to enrich the Island's culture, languages and peoples (Kumbaya moments). The DR will never be the US and should stop moving toward that direction. We should rather be more critical of our political moves on the Island and be more sensitive of laws that play such direct roles in people's personhoods, their rights to citizenry and placement.

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