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## Reimagining the Strange and Familiar in National Belonging: Memory, Heritage, and Exclusion in the Dominican Republic

In the Dominican Republic (DR), recent constitutional reforms and high court decisions have made an estimated 200,000 Dominicans of Haitian descent stateless, with rulings retroactive to 1929 invalidating their *jus soli* birthright citizenship. These judicial decisions have accompanied intensifying xenophobia against Haitian migrants, whose presence in neighboring DR has steadily increased in the aftermath of the devastating 2005 earthquake in Haiti. Civil society actors, the international community, and diasporic Dominicans and Haitians in the United States (US) are among those who have condemned the DR's exclusionary state policies. In response to heightened anti-Haitianism, some have turned attention to the nation's difficult past to address commonly held meanings about Dominican national belonging. They do so through new social memory sites and practices that recall the infamous 1937 state violence against Haitians and other black bodies, an atrocity which some consider genocide (Paulino 2006). Through memory activism, the legacy of state violence and its aftermath is linked to foundational and historical processes of modern nation-building, in particular the construction of "Dominicanidad" (being Dominican) as anti-Haitian and anti-black. There are efforts to transform these familiar and accepted understandings of the meaning of national belonging in the DR,

specifically the popular negativity that assigns strange “otherness” to Haitians and blacks. To do so, new social memory projects are turning a critical lens on the historical dynamics of nation building with a focus on the difficult heritage of 1937 state violence. In the process, “the strange is made familiar” and “the familiar is made strange” and Dominicans are provided “access to the conventions within which lasting structures are concealed” (Kosseleck 1985:288).<sup>1</sup>

My ethnographic research in the DR examines how civil society and other non-state actors are addressing the nation’s difficult heritage today through collective “memory interventions” (MacDonald 2009: 94) to contest and transform the nation’s popular definitions of the familiar and strange, with the aim of improving current conditions and changing expectations for the nation’s future. Through new public practices of social memory, a chapter of the nation’s heritage that escapes the attention of tourism’s representations, has become a site from which a more inclusive nation is being imagined. Pedagogically speaking, the activities bring attention to the historical processes that construct ideas about the nation and the nation’s “others,” illustrating how meanings about the nation and national belonging, like so many cultural elements, may appear to us as timeless, natural, and unchanging. By bringing attention to the power dynamics of nation-state formation and the inherent project of constructing boundaries of difference, the memory work strives to make “the familiar strange”

and “the strange familiar”. This activity parallels foundational efforts in anthropology to increase human understanding and to address biases against “otherness”.

#### Transforming Meanings of the Familiar and the Strange:

Through our scholarly representations, as well as our teaching, anthropologists illustrate how our common human heritage includes a rich variety of social and cultural practices as well as other culturally relative markers of our diverse humankind. Through our research, some of us endeavor to combat ethnocentrism, or to illuminate and better understand the work of racism and other systems and structures of inequality, and through engaged anthropology, others seek to transform such systems and structures. Besides describing human diversity past and present, anthropologists increasingly illustrate the historical processes by which particular notions of “the familiar” and “the strange” are constructed, reproduced, and maintained in society. The study of the historical and ongoing processes of modern nation-building is a perfect arena for examining how ideas of collective similitude and alterity are instrumental for generating borders (geographical and otherwise) or producing distance between those considered familiar and those considered strange. Beyond borders, research can focus on the ongoing processes by which dominant ideas about national heritage can also foster enmity and antagonisms based

on promoting distinctions between “us” and “them” or can create estrangement through exclusion and marginalization. Whether the “strange” others are located outside *or* within territorial boundaries, they can nonetheless figure centrally in hegemonic meanings about the past and present, and as emblems of difference against which those considered familiar by the nation are to be understood.

Beyond explaining how boundaries between “us” and “them” are constructed and function, another way we can consider the dynamics of the familiar and the strange is in linked epistemological and ontological terms by which we come to know what we know about the world and what we experience being within it. In this regard, the historical process of state formation and nation-building that intentionally constructs and represents collective identity, including definitions of the “other”, and that centrally informs our understanding of the world and our place within it, is itself a process that may be “strange” to most citizens, as are most such practices of social construction and ideology. Instead of being familiar with a more transparent, if not more truthful, understanding of history, culture, and power, society is estranged from such understandings. The result is the tendency for society to naturalize the national order instead of viewing it as a power-laden and contingent social construction.

Research can also focus on how the national order of “who belongs” is challenged as societies imagine and reimagine what it

means to belong to a nation. Some societies are becoming familiar enough with historical processes of nation-building to begin to contest shared meanings that marginalize and exclude. Among the factors that motivate a fresh examination of the meaning of the nation and national belonging is the present globalizing moment that leaves few nations uninfluenced by migration, diaspora, and transnational or international dynamics. Anthropological research on unfolding challenges to a nation's status quo can illuminate the ways in which people strive to transform meanings about the nation and their experiences within it. We can document how processes that maintain the strangeness of the nation's "other" are made visible and familiar.

One of anthropology's primordial goals is to challenge ideas that certain populations and their customs are "strange", by demonstrating in part how one's own culture is historical and contingent, only one among many possible variations, and as such can appear "strange" to others. Further, the "other" can be made more understandable, recognizable, and familiar by emphasizing similarities, including being a member of the same human race or co-existing in shared animated worlds. Beyond its use for anthropology, making the "familiar strange" and the "strange familiar" has broad implications. It has the potential to transform what we know about the world and our very experience of being and belonging in it. One way in which this can be facilitated is through experience with and about a nation's difficult heritage. We can

engage social, cultural and political contexts in ways that “obliges us to rework our understandings of relation to others...” (Waterton and Watson 2013: 555).

Essential to historical and ongoing processes of nation-building is the defining of collective identity that influences experiences of national belonging. It involves the construction and reinforcement of borders and boundaries of difference: external difference to mark one nation-state from the “other”, and internal difference that designates and marginalizes minorities as “others”. These boundaries emphasize dissimilarities of race, ethnicity, religion, and more. Anthropological research on the nation-state and its margins illuminates the production of collective identity and “otherness”, reminding us of the always ongoing project of nation-building (e.g. Herzfeld 1986; Kohl 1998; Williams 1989; Nugent 1994; DeLugan 2012). A historical and present-day examination can explore who and what is deemed familiar and akin to the idea of the nation, and who or what is defined as “strange” or “other”. Further, attention to the global context of contemporary nation-building requires that we investigate how migration and transnationalism disturb hegemonic definitions of national belonging as people establish in new homelands while finding ways to stay connected to original homelands. (e.g., Basch, et al. 1995; Phizacklea & Westwood 2013; Vertovec 1999).

Migration, diaspora, and national belonging:

Many Dominicans living abroad, especially in the United States, experience what it means to be considered the nation's "other." International migration and generational experiences highlight ethnic difference from mainstream society. Beyond ethnicity, ideas about racial identity in the DR that afforded privilege to some lighter-skinned Dominicans do not function the same way off the island (Roth 2012). Some in the US are likely to be treated as "black"—whereas cultural capital in the DR protects them by assigning "blackness" foremost to Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent.

Long-distance and transnational connections to the original homeland across generations are bringing members of the Dominican and Haitian diaspora to the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, which the two nations share, to commemorate the past violence so influential in reinforcing the geographical and cultural boundaries that separate Haiti and the DR today. Transnational Dominicans and Haitians have joined in the protests against DR court decisions and policies of exclusion. They take to social media to express their concern and outrage. The instrumental participation of members of the diaspora in 1937 memory activism is illustrated by Border of Lights, a collective that organizes the annual commemoration of the event (discussed in detail below).<sup>2</sup> Their role illustrates the power of national belonging across international geographies and across generations. As they strive



to re-imagine a more just and inclusive nation, coming to terms with the DR's past is essential to their own sense of belonging.

The memory activism in the DR challenges the government's current policies against Dominicans of Haitian-descent and Haitian migrants. It contests the overall lack of attention to the 1937 state violence and its aftermath, including its role in skewing meanings about national belonging. How the state promotes a nation's past is a powerful way to shape a population's sense of unity and belonging, and acts of commemoration can uphold the core values of a people (e.g., Gillis 1996; Nora 2001; Spillman 1997; Turner 2006). However, official history can also be silent about and even suppress accounts of difficult episodes of state violence (Trouillot 1995). The official narrative can also exclude recognition of minority and other populations relegated to the margins of the nation-state. Today in the DR, in response to the increase in anti-Haitianism, civil society actors and members of the diaspora have created new sites of social memory that bring attention to foundational state violence against Haitians and the rejection of blackness so instrumental in shaping ideas of what it means to be Dominican today.

### Hispaniola: An Island Divided

Anti-Haitianism and anti-black racism in the DR have deep historical roots that precede and influence the modern nation-state. In

the late 14<sup>th</sup> – early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries Spain began colonizing the Caribbean island that the native Tainos called Quisqueya, renaming it Hispaniola. Though indigenous populations were decimated earlier on, hundreds of years intermixed indigenous populations, African slaves, and Spanish colonizers. Mestizos (indigenous and Spanish), mulattos (Spanish and Africans), and other admixtures generated a racially blended population that was Spanish speaking and Catholic (Franco Pichardo 2009). Much later, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, France colonized the opposite end of the island. With a majority population of African slaves relegated to labor in the plantation economy that developed, the interactions here did not result in a predominantly racially blended population. Blackness plus differences in language (French and Kreyol) and religion (Voodoo and other African-based belief systems) differentiated the two colonies that shared one island.

Scholars have noted that despite a majority Afro-descendant population, Dominicans have more affinity for their Spanish and Taino heritage than their African roots, and that this ties into the prevailing notion that neighboring Haiti is black, but Dominicans are not black (e.g., Wigginton 2005). This deeply rooted racial logic informs ideas about Dominican belonging. While reinforcing boundaries between Haiti and the DR, the value system also marginalizes dark-skinned bodies in Dominican society.

Political tensions, but also cooperation, have existed between Haiti and the DR prior to the establishment of the island's two modern nation-states. Still, early modern nation-building underpinned by authoritarianism in the DR exacerbated ideas about the strangeness of Haiti in contrast with the familiar of the DR. The 1937 massacre in the DR of upwards of tens of thousands of Haitians and other black bodies illustrates the extremes of nation-building fueled by racism and xenophobia.

In October 1937 then-dictator Rafael Leonel Trujillo ordered the massacre of Haitians by machete. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century violence is known as "*El Corte*" ("the Cutting" in Spanish), "*Kout Kouto a*" ("the Knife Blow" in Kreyol), and more recently, "*Masacre Perejil*" ("Parsley Massacre" in Spanish, to refer to a possibly true account that it was Haitian difficulty pronouncing "*perejil*" that identified them for slaughter) (Turits 2002; Wucker 1999; Fiehrer 1990; Derby 1994; Danticat 1998; Crassweller 1966; Castillo 1973). Vega (1988) presents sources with various estimates of the total number of deaths. The estimates range from a low of 547 to a high of 20,000 deaths over a period of days. The 1937 violence was central to the demarcation and consolidation of the political border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic (Paulino 2015). The decades of authoritarianism that followed in the DR were essential to constructing national borders and

boundaries, with blackness and Haiti marking the nation's strange "other".

The 1937 violence fortified hegemonic ideas that to be Dominican meant not being Haitian and not being black. As April Mayes (2014) reminds us, this is not the sole or original explanation for racial and ethnic boundaries between the two nations that share Hispaniola. From colonial times on, anti-black racism was fostered among a predominantly African descendent Dominican population (Franco Pichardo 2009, 2015). Ginetta Candelario (2007) explores the common DR expression "*negro detras de la oreja*" ("black behind the ear") to examine that while most Dominicans do have Black African ancestry, they may not admit or valorize it. Addressing a dynamic social context, Kimberly Simmons (2011) argues that due to contact with the US, Dominicans are increasingly identifying as Black. Still, by linking today's current crisis of ethnic and racial exclusions in the DR to 1937 and historical processes of nation-building, memory activists are increasing awareness about how taken-for-granted ideas about national belonging are concomitantly divisive, exclusionary, and power-laden products of history.

### The Current Crisis of Exclusion

In the DR, recent high court decisions and constitutional reforms have stripped citizenship from an estimated 200,000 Dominicans of

Haitian descent. On September 23, 2013 the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling TC/0168/13, popularly referred to as "*La Sentencia*" ("the Sentence"), expanded the earlier national constitution reform that withdrew birthright citizenship. It redefined what is meant by those who are "in transit" and thereby excluded from birthright citizenship.<sup>3</sup> Previously "in transit" was understood as applying to diplomats and tourists in the country for fewer than 10 days. The new court ruling expanded "in transit" to apply to Haitian migrant workers who for decades have worked the DR sugar plantations. Over time, some migrant workers stayed in the DR when the seasonal plantation work ended, particularly when their employer did not pay the costs of their travel back to Haiti. Some of these individuals established families and had children born in the DR. DR society has long included a number of Dominicans of Haitian descent as well as newer migrants from Haiti. With Haitians making up 87.3% of all immigration to the DR, it is of little doubt that the high court's revision of "in transit" status was intended to address the increased presence of Haitians in the DR. The court made its ruling retroactive to 1929. With the controversial ruling, Dominicans of Haitian descent such as Juliana Deguis Pierre, who previously held Dominican citizenship, had their citizenship revoked.

Juliana Deguis Pierre was born in the DR of Haitian parents who migrated there in the 1960s when contracted to work in the sugarcane fields. Her birth was entered into the civil registry, and she received a

Dominican birth certificate. In 2008 she attempted to apply for a national identification card. The *Junta Central Electoral*, the government office that authorizes birth certificates, marriage certificates, and national identification cards, informed Deguis Pierre that she was ineligible for a *cédula*. They also confiscated her birth certificate. In the 1990s the government office had begun to refuse *cédulas* to Dominicans with Haitian names or faces. The identification card is required to work legally, marry, register for high school or university, open a bank account, obtain a driver's license, or vote. Deguis Pierre and other plaintiffs sued the government of the Dominican Republic. The case reached the Constitutional Tribunal, the DR's highest court. On September 23, 2013 the ruling TC/0168/13 revoked Deguis' citizenship, declaring that at the time of her birth her undocumented parents were "in transit" and therefore she was not entitled to receive birthright citizenship. The court's decision was estimated to impact 210,000 Dominicans of Haitian descent who overnight became classified as "foreigners" rather than "nationals". Accompanying the constitutional reforms in the DR is an increase in negative public attitudes against the growing population of Haitian migrants.

While Haitians have long migrated to the DR especially for seasonal sugarcane plantation work, general migration increased following the January 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti. The natural disaster caused

200,000 deaths and left 1.5 million Haitians homeless. In 2012, the DR's *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* conducted the First National Survey of Immigrants (*Primera Encuesta Nacional de Inmigrantes*) (ENI 2012). The survey counted 668,145 registered immigrants from Haiti and 209,912 children born of Haitian parents (*Oficina Nacional de Estadística* 2013). Compared to the 2010 national census that counted 311,969 individuals reportedly from Haiti (<http://censo2010.one.gob.do>), the recent study suggests that the Haitian population in the DR has more than doubled in five years. While this population growth is a factor driving the recent constitutional reforms, it is important to note that in the DR, national identity has been long constructed against the otherness of Haiti (Franco Pichardo 2003).

These actions to exclude Dominicans of Haitian descent from citizenship, which the court made retroactive to 1929, are receiving international attention and criticism. Some defend the state's sovereign right to determine immigration and citizenship policy, while others urge a more plural view of society in a world where migration and blending can generate hyphenated collective identities. As international and transnational migrants, Dominicans in new lands seek inclusion for themselves and their families. What if they were to experience the same legal exclusions being imposed on Haitian migrants and on Dominicans of Haitian descent?

## New Public Memory Sites of 1937:

Responding to this current crisis of exclusion, social justice oriented non-state actors in the DR and elsewhere have created new public memory sites. My ethnographic fieldwork involves participant-observation at the Border of Lights annual 1937 commemoration taking place simultaneously in the adjacent towns of Dajabón in the DR and Ouanaminthe, Haiti. It also involves site visits to the *Museo Memorial de la Resistencia Dominicana* (Memorial Museum of Dominican Resistance, hereinafter MMRD), located in the capital Santo Domingo. The first annual Border of Lights commemoration took place in October 2012, the same year that the museum opened in the touristic colonial center of Santo Domingo with a focus on the impact of authoritarianism on the modern nation and its valiant struggles against repression. The MMRD has a small but central exhibit on the “1937 Haitian Genocide”. The annual commemoration at the border between Haiti and the DR and the new museum raise public awareness about the nation’s modern history of anti-Haitianism and anti-black racism by specifically linking them to the effects of state violence, dictatorship, and authoritarianism. The forces that have dominated the nation’s political leadership through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have shaped national society, including ideas about belonging and exclusion, and about the “familiar” and the “strange”. Today the DR



continues to democratize. Grappling with its difficult heritage is part of the process of reimagining state-society dynamics and addressing national exclusions (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003).

My research focuses on two memory sites endeavoring to generate new meanings in the DR: Border of Lights' annual commemoration and the *Museo Memorial de la Resistencia Dominicana (MMRD)*. These memory sites and practices challenge hegemonic narratives of national history, culture, and identity. They also illuminate the link between the political and the ontological, as they engage social memory to critique and also to generate collective understandings and shared experiences. Tom Boellstorff (2016) examines the somewhat recent ontological turn in anthropology (e.g. Carrithers 2010; Peterson 2012; Holbraad et al. 2014) to remind us that "highlighting how similitude, as much as difference (indeed, in generative conjunction with difference), is at the core of being and worlding" (393), an analysis that is very apt for this exploration of the dynamics of national belonging. The silences that historical accounts can produce (Rolph-Trouillot 1995), and instances where individual and collective memory is tenuously maintained (Passerini 2003), engage bodies in space and time (Connerton 2011; Ricouer 2004; Heidegger 1962 [1927]) in experiences that can profoundly influence one's very sense of being. They reveal the power dynamics that can surround contests between history and memory. My research also draws upon

political anthropology, influenced specifically by scholars who analyze the nation-state and its margins (e.g., Vincent, et al. 2002; Nugent & Vincent 2008; Shore, Wright & Peró 2011; Sharma & Gupta 2006; Das & Poole 2004). How does the nation-state influence our sense of being, of community, of belonging? How is one's positioning as "familiar" or "strange" experienced and understood? How is the status quo reinforced by policy, structural violence, and entrenched hegemonic meanings about the nation? Anthropological research can highlight the historical dimensions, as well as the ongoing dynamics that solidify and reproduce, but also transform, national belonging.

Today, ideas about national belonging and not belonging, reinforced through the example of the state violence of 1937, are linked to current events to reveal how hegemonic meanings about being Dominican have long been constructed through ideas of anti-black racism, xenophobia against Haitians, and authoritarian rule. New social memory sites seek to transform boundaries of national exclusion. They endeavor to remind the public that Dominicans are conditioned to reject Haitians (and other black bodies), and that this is a product of colonialism and modern nation-building. It is something that can change.

Inspiring Fieldwork:

During 2013-2016 I made four separate fieldwork visits to the DR to understand why and how the infamous 1937 state violence is receiving new public attention today, more than 75 years later. My interest in the topic connects to my previous research on post-civil war nation-building in El Salvador. In 1992 El Salvador ended a 12-year civil war, and my research sought to understand how new meanings about the nation were being generated. I studied how, after 1992, a 1932 massacre of indigenous people in western El Salvador received new attention from scholars, in museums, through popular media, and through public commemorative practices both in El Salvador and among the Salvadoran diaspora (DeLugan 2013). These memory sites and practices followed decades of official silence about the “*Matanza*” (“Massacre”). While some historical scholarship and literary references did exist about 1932, in the post-civil war period, this chapter of the nation’s past began to be more widely re-examined to illustrate how the state violence and its aftermath shaped national belonging, and in particular how devastating its impact had been on indigenous populations. My longitudinal research in El Salvador continues to document a process whereby 1932 has been increasingly brought into the present with the goal of improving the status of El Salvador’s indigenous minority population. The memory activism challenged the historical and ongoing nation-state exclusion of indigenous people from national belonging. It also endeavored to valorize indigenous culture

and heritage as something nearly all Salvadorans could claim as a source of pride. Recently, major changes have taken place in El Salvador, including state apologies for the 1932 massacre and its legacies of violence against indigenous people; modification of the national constitution to recognize original people (*pueblos originarios*); and new national policies to turn the constitutional reform into meaningful actions. While it is impossible to assign sole credit to the 1932 memory work for recent advances, public sites of memory did raise awareness of the links between early modern nation-building and racism against indigenous populations. For decades, state violence and discrimination maintained indigenous populations as “strange” in relation to ideas about the modern nation, despite a predominantly mestizo population wherein the majority of Salvadorans can claim indigenous ancestry. I would argue that in El Salvador the public memory sites and practices are informing ongoing efforts to shape the experience of being and belonging in the nation. When a colleague brought to my attention the parallels of this research to emerging memory activism in the DR regarding early 20<sup>th</sup> century state violence and nation-building, I was compelled to learn more.<sup>4</sup>

This paper references my recent ethnographic fieldwork in the DR, including participation in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> annual Border of Lights 1937 commemorations, in 2014 and 2016 respectively, to examine how activists, academics and other civil society actors, including

diasporic Haitians and Dominicans in the US and other international social justice advocates, challenge popular and official imaginaries that make Dominicans of Haitian-descent, Haitian migrants, and other black bodies “strangers” to “familiar” understandings of national belonging in the DR.

On my first visit in May 2013 to the island of Hispaniola, while riding from the airport to Santo Domingo, the capital of the DR, a casual conversation with the taxi driver touched upon the contemporary crisis. Without my prompting, he told me that there are too many Haitians in the DR today. In his next breath, he complained that “*nos están haciendo negro*” (“they are making us black”). This sentiment was shared by others, but by no means by everyone with whom I spoke in an intensive effort to learn more about the nation’s past and present. People were generous with their time, and I was able to meet with local government officials in the Ministry of Culture, with staff at non-governmental organizations including Centro Bonó, El Movimiento de Mujeres Dominico-Haitiana (MUDHA), regional migration monitors, activists organizing protests and other actions directed against growing anti-Haitianism, a number of Dominican anthropologists (Juan Rodriguez, Carlos Andujar, Jose Guerrero, and Dario Tejeda), and with other scholars, including at the Archivo General de la Nación, the Academia de la Historia, and local universities. By monitoring the local print, television, and radio media I followed

debates, commentaries, and public sentiment regarding what some pejoratively referred to as a “Haitian invasion”.

*Museo Memorial de la Resistencia Dominicana:*

In each of my stays in Santo Domingo, I visited the *Museo Memorial de la Resistencia Dominicana (MMRD)* in the touristic colonial center of the capital. The museum is focused primarily on difficult heritage of dictatorship, political repression, and citizens’ acts of resistance. As briefly mentioned earlier, the museum also brings attention to the 1937 state violence, naming it the “Haitian genocide”. The *MMRD* illustrates the important role of museums to address difficult histories and heritage and to promote justice, human rights, and inclusive societies. Discussing museum exhibitions that tackle difficult topics, Bonnell and Simon (2007) ask what can be achieved by making painful memories public when difficult exhibitions can bring forward feelings of grief, anger, shame, horror, frustration, guilt, and even complicity. Despite arguments for not bringing troublesome pasts into the present, all reflection on the past is also about the present moment and future aspirations. Museums that address a nation’s history of state violence and human rights abuse can thereby demonstrate what international entities such as the United Nations refer to as the moral obligation to improve both state and society in the aftermath of atrocity.

[There are] ways which public history might animate a critical

consciousness, a way of living with and within history as a never-ending

question that constantly probes the adequacy of the ethical character

and social arrangements of daily life (Bonnell and Simon, 2007: 65).

It also reaffirms the argument of Benedict Anderson (1983) and others of the important role that museums have in the ongoing process of imagining and reimagining national belonging (Duncan 1994).

Through the new museum, the DR joins other Latin American nations that today are grappling with the effects of repressive dictatorship and state violence (e.g., Atencio 2014; Billingsley 2014; De Brito et al. 2001; Gómez-Barris 2008; Jelin 2007; Kaiser 2005). While the *MMRD*'s goal was to promote democracy and human rights in the DR, it also addressed state violence including the 1937 massacre. Under the directorship of Luisa de Peña Diaz, the *MMRD* participates in the International Committee of Memorial Museums in Remembrance of the Victims of Public Crimes (ICMEMO).

“The purpose of these Memorial Museums is to commemorate victims

of State, socially determined and ideologically motivated crimes.

The

institutions are frequently located at the original historical sites,

or at places chosen by survivors of such crimes for the purposes of commemoration. They seek to convey information about historical events in a way which retains a historical perspective while also making strong links to the present.”

<http://icom.museum/the-committees/international-committees/international-committee/international-committee-of-memorial-museums-in-remembrance-of-the-victims-of-public-crimes/>

Accessed July 1, 2016.

Inclusion in ICMEMO’s international network gives MMRD crucial legitimacy and recognition. In addition, the *MMRD* is a member of Sites of Consciousness, a global network of historic sites, museums, and memory initiatives "... activating the power of places of memory to engage the public in connecting past and present in order to envision and shape a more just and humane future" (

<http://www.sitesofconscience.org> Accessed July 1, 2016). The MMRD

has an important role in the ongoing memory activism that offers reflection to reshape ideas about the nation.

Border of Lights:



In October 2012, in Dajabón, at the border between the DR and Haiti, a place considered the epicenter of the 1937 massacre, the first annual public commemoration of the victims of that violence took place. The commemoration was bi-national with social justice organizations in Haiti and in the Dominican Republic. It was also transnational due to the instrumental participation of diasporic Dominican-American and Haitian-American activists, who, through the collective Border of Lights (<http://www.borderoflights.org> Accessed August 19, 2016), organized the commemoration. In October 2014 and October 2016 I was able to personally participate in “the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual commemoration” and the “5<sup>th</sup> annual commemoration”, and speak with the organizers and participants. A description of that experience follows.

In early October 2014 I traveled from California to the DR to attend the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual Border of Lights 1937 commemoration. While activities were planned in the two border towns of Dajabón, DR and Ounaminthe, Haiti, I joined the events taking place on the DR side of the Massacre River that separates the two towns.<sup>5</sup> My flight into Santiago, the nation’s second largest city, was followed by a two-hour bus ride through the countryside to Dajabón. I had visited Dajabón twice before, in 2013 and 2014, to visit the Jesuit-run Solidaridad Fronteriza, an organization well-known for advocating on behalf of Haitian migrants, and to see the commemorative mural painted on a

wall outside of the Catholic Church after the annual 1937 commemoration. I also experienced Dajabón's well-known market. On Mondays and Fridays, the border is opened from morning to dusk, permitting Haitians to attend the bustling, if not chaotic, market without the necessity of a visa. The market is a boon to DR economy as Haitians are the primary consumers of products ranging from fresh produce and other foodstuffs to housewares and clothing; I saw mountains of used clothes, bootleg CD's, tools and building supplies, live chickens, and more. Between my visits in 2013 and 2014, the guarding of the border region had noticeably intensified. In the summer of 2014, we were stopped no less than six times at checkpoints as we drove out of Dajabón on the long journey back to Santo Domingo. The military guards at the checkpoints were looking for Haitians who may have stowed away or were otherwise unauthorized to be in the DR. At each checkpoint, I observed groups of detained young men, presumably Haitian, huddled together on the side of the road. I was told that at the end of the day they would be returned to the border and ordered back into Haiti. From the border region, the contradiction between the sociality and cooperation of the binational market exchange and the policy of anti-Haitian migration was strong.

The town of Dajabón feels very much like a frontier town with lots of activity in the streets. Many genres of island music blare from

passing cars and open shops. The heat is high and so is the humidity. Arriving to attend the 2014 commemoration, I make my way to the recommended, though not fancy, downtown hotel where most of the Border of Lights crew were staying. They are busy coordinating with the team in Ounaminthe and also taking care of last minute details in Dajabón. The following day, Saturday, is the main event. Art and culture activities take place all day in the central park across the street from Nuestra Señora de Rosario Catholic church where a special evening mass would be celebrated in the name of the victims of 1937. The energy in the park is raised with the arrival of busloads of young people, involved with non-profits dedicated to educating and empowering young people on the island, especially young women<sup>6</sup>. Collective art projects in the park focus on positive affirmations of binational cooperation, peace, and understanding. Throughout the day people join in: there are folks from the Peace Corps, others from the US, and yet others from Haiti. Later in the day, a local restaurant provides dinner for the hundreds of people participating in the pre-commemoration activities. Following dinner, we head to the church for mass during which the parishioners receive a history lesson about 1937 and a message about the importance of solidarity with Haitians. As we leave the church, we are handed candles set in waxed paper cups designed to block its flame from the wind. We form a procession of perhaps 100 people, and we wind our way through the intermittently

lit but mostly dark streets of Dajabón to the closed border gate while we chant and sing songs of protest and liberation. Once at the border gate, we intersperse brief speeches and testimonials with singing. We place our candles on the ledge of the steel border gate while peering into the darkness trying to discern the same activity occurring simultaneously in Haiti, on the other side of the river. The activities of the commemoration were poignant, and there was a powerful sense of *comunitas*, as awareness was increased about how we understand the nation and national belonging, including the difficult heritage of the 1937 state violence.

In October 2016, I returned to Dajabón to participate in the annual commemoration. Being attentive, though (hopefully) not too obtrusive, over three days I learned more about the Border of Lights collective, about the local efforts associated with the commemoration, and about the ongoing crisis of statelessness and xenophobia effecting Dominicans of Haitian descent and Haitian immigrants. The commemoration took place days following a fierce hurricane that while sparing the area near Dajabón, had devastated parts of Haiti and was also threatening the Southeast seaboard of the US. The storm interrupted the travel plans of some of the Border of Lights organizers, and activities on the Haitian side of the commemoration were not vibrant as in years past. Still, there were familiar faces from 2014 and similar activities of commemoration. Following the collective memory

work in Dajabón, the Border of Lights crew moved to the city of Santiago. It was from the comfort of a restaurant in the city that the global on-line vigil took place during the evening. The next morning, I felt privileged to be invited to the de-briefing meeting where activists from the social justice organizations Reconocido and Centro Bonó updated the group about the still ongoing conditions of statelessness of Dominicans of Haitian descent, despite efforts of the government of the DR to spin a public message that the situation is improved. Plans for 2017 were already getting underway with a desire to make the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary activities even more memorable and impactful.

Conclusion:

In the DR today, new memory projects focus attention on the 1937 massacre of upwards of tens of thousands of Haitians on order of then-dictator Rafael Leonel Trujillo. The memory work responds to the current crisis of an estimated 200,000 Dominicans of Haitian descent being made stateless. Already in 2016 many thousands of people have been forcibly or voluntarily deported from the DR to Haiti. A recent Amnesty International report estimates that of the 100,000 people deported, 15% claim to be born in the Dominican Republic.<sup>7</sup> Some of the displaced are currently living in makeshift camps in the southern Haitian border town of Anse-à-Pitre. They are refugees, stateless and nation-less.

In this paper I have explored how new public social memory projects in the DR strive to make “familiar” the historic process of nation-building that constructs Haitians and other black bodies as the nation’s other, rendering them “strange”. While it is the work of nation-building to establish meanings about internal and external “others”, in our increasingly globalizing world factors such as migration, decolonization, and international expectations challenge such historically constructed borders of difference. What role can a new museum and annual commemorations at the border between Haiti and the DR have in bringing attention to the nation’s heritage of state violence and in illuminating historical nation-building constructs of the Other? Are these efforts able to contribute to transforming the DR into a more inclusive, democratic, and just nation? In the current crisis against Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent in the DR, there is a concern to not repeat the violence of the past (Paulino 2006).

Through my research, I am interested in what ethnography can reveal about how societies imagine and reimagine what it means to belong to the nation and how it illuminates the historical and ongoing project of constructing boundaries between “us” and “them”, and between the “familiar” and the “strange”. As I link my research to current anthropological debates about the political and the ontological, the lesson is that anthropologists can study the processes whereby ideas of the nation and national belonging are naturalized and

reproduced, but also the unfolding ways in which they are challenged. More than a theoretical concern, in the DR today, the safety and wellbeing of many thousands of people are at stake, and thus should be a concern for us all.

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhardt Kosseleck's meta-analysis was referring to the historian's craft. Following Michael Pickering (2004), I argue that the analysis can also be applied to the ethnographic everyday.

<sup>2</sup> According to historian Edward Paulino, one of the founders of Border of Lights (BOL), it was following the death in 2011 of Sonia Pierre, respected DR activist who fought against anti-Haitianism, the collective was formed, inspired by an idea of noted Dominican novelist, Julia Alvarez who participates in each annual commemoration. Writers Junot Diaz ("The Strange Life of Oscar Wao") and Edwidge Danticat ("The Farming of the Bones") are also among the high profile BOL collaborators from the Dominican and the Haitian diaspora. Some key members of BOL from the US do not have roots in Hispaniola but instead are dedicated to efforts of improving conditions in the Dominican Republic and in Haiti

<sup>3</sup> Article 18 of the new constitution states that Dominicans are "people born in the national territory, with the exception of the sons and daughters...of foreigners who are in transit or reside illegally in Dominican territory" (my translation).

<sup>4</sup> Special thanks to Dr. Catherine Ramirez at the University of California, Santa Cruz for her insightful recommendation.

<sup>5</sup> The Massacre River was named not for the 1937 violence, but for an earlier colonial struggle with French troops.

<sup>6</sup> The participating organizations included the Mariposa DR Foundation (<http://www.mariposadrfoundation.org>), the Esperanza Project (<http://www.esperanzaproject.ca>), and Yspaniola (<http://yspaniola.org>).

<sup>7</sup> Amnesty International, "Dominican Republic: Reckless deportation to Haiti leaving thousands in limbo", June 14, 2016. <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/dominican-republic-reckless-deportations-haiti-leaving-thousands-limbo-new-report> (Accessed August 20, 2016).