

### Maria Cristina Fumagalli

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

Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015. xviii + 430 pp. (Cloth US\$120.00)

Long a site of outrages, the Haitian-Dominican border is once again drawing international attention. Fleeing threats of deportation and violence in the Dominican Republic, some 3,000 Haitian-Dominican refugees have been abandoned to their fate, like so much human refuse, in squalid conditions and legal limbo in the southwest of Hispaniola's borderland. The catalyst was the decision of the Dominican Republic's Constitutional Court in September 2013 to strip Juliana Deguis, who had been born in the Dominican Republic in 1984 to Haitian parents, of her birth-right citizenship. Concomitantly ruling that birth registries dating back to 1929 should be reviewed for "erroneous" registrations of Dominican citizenship, the Court's decision affects more than 250,000 Dominican citizens of Haitian ancestry, leaving them stateless and without juridical personality. *On the Edge* offers an extended consideration of literary and cultural responses to what we might consider the long background to this most recent iteration of human immiseration in this borderland.

Under examination are over 30 fictional and nonfictional literary texts, including novels and short stories, biographies and memoirs, plays, poetry, and travel writings that have "the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic at their core" (p. 1). These textual materials are complemented by film, photography, sculpture, paintings, and graffiti. The multifarious assemblage emphasizes works produced by Haitians and Dominicans and places them in dialogue with works by writers and artists "born in Europe, the rest of the Americas, Algeria, New Zealand, and Japan who have also dealt with both the politics of borderline-crossing and the poetics of borderland dwelling" (p. 14). The historical purview is as extensive as the primary materials are diverse, stretching from the early modern period through the twenty-first century.

The book excavates the troubled history of the "longest and most significant land boundary in all the Antilles" (p. 1) and, following Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes* (1992), argues that it constitutes a "complex 'contact zone' characterized by conflict and violence but also by many collaborative linkages, often established against the directives of the central colonial, national, and occupying authorities" (p. 2). It thus adds nuance to the history of Haitian-Dominican animosity while also challenging dominant Dominican nationalistic discourses that rely on Haiti as a "negative foil." The falsity of this construct is revealed by attention to the porosity of the frontier: "the borderland has traditionally been identified as the site where this particular version of Dominicanness ('not Haitian') is most under threat" (p. 9). By tracing the "complex

web of border relations” (p. 23), Fumagalli optimistically posits that “a more enabling past on which to build a better future for Hispaniola” (p. 91) might be unveiled.

Although *On the Edge* touches on many important moments in the history of Hispaniola’s borderland two events receive particularly detailed treatment: the 1791 slave revolt and the notorious 1937 massacre of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans at the order of the Dominican dictator, Rafael Trujillo. However, the majority of the book is given to investigating works from the 1990s onward that grapple “with recent events and topical issues such as the 2010 earthquake, unregulated migration, and environmental degradation” in order to “refute, requalify, interrogate, or reinforce dominant images of Hispaniola’s border and borderland” (p. 15). Attention is also given in one chapter to three works of fiction—one each from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries—that reimagine the life of the sixteenth-century Taíno Queen Anacaona, whose chiefdom of Jaragua is thought to have straddled the modern Haitian-Dominican border. By this means, Fumagalli reveals a deep history of complex border (re)negotiations and argues that Anacaona should be regarded as “a figure important for the island as a whole rather than (exclusively) for one or the other of the two nations which share its territory” (p. 106).

*On the Edge* constitutes a multicultural critical archive of an impressive range of cultural materials. However, depth of analysis is often sacrificed in favor of sprawling coverage. It is most persuasive when it is most rigorous. For example, through the detailed critical readings of Moreau de Saint-Méry’s late-eighteenth-century works concerning French Saint-Domingue and Spanish Santo-Domingo, we learn that his reactionary project was schizophrenic when it came to Hispaniola’s colonial frontier, oscillating “between its erasure and its reinforcement” (p. 25). Among other highlights is an incisive and illuminating close reading of Junot Díaz’s recent science-fiction short story “Monstro,” which elucidates the politics and black-comedy of his dystopian excoriation of anti-Haitianism. While I yearned for deeper contextual analysis and greater attention to the primary materials’ aesthetic registers, Fumagalli succeeds in bringing the multilayered cultural-political history of the Haitian–Dominican border to the fore while refusing to comply “with the idea that an acceptable future is unattainable” (p. 391).

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