Conference Update: Expert Witnessing: On Haiti and the Dominican Republic (York College, CUNY)

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On May 26, I decided to make the trip to York College (CUNY) for a series of pre-Latin American Studies Association micro-lectures on Haitian and Dominican relations following the Constitutional Tribunal’s sentencia 168-13. The 2013 sentencia retroactively denies Dominican-born children of non-Dominican parents the right to citizenship for those born from 1928 until the present day, rendering thousands of Dominicans stateless. The event, organized by Kiran Jayaram (York College), ultimately sought to provide expert perspectives on the issue, its historical context, and the impact on the Haitian/Dominican diaspora in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and the United States.

I was immediately struck by Jayaram’s framing of the event as a safe space where undergraduate and graduate students would share the floor with leading specialists in Dominican studies, geography, literature, international politics, and anthropology. Citing bell hooks, Jayaram emphasized the need to provide witness and testimony as pedagogical praxis. Ultimately, Jayaram urged the participants and the audience to share their intellects and their emotions because Haitian/Dominican relations should not be separated from the humans they impact. Speakers and performers were given 5-7 minutes to present in order to ensure that those who wished to speak had the opportunity.

There were nine speakers – Edward Paulino (John Jay College), Cindy Ariez (York College), Eve Hayes de Kalaf (University of Aberdeen, UK), April Mayes (Pomona College), Raj Chetty (St. Johns University), Tess Kulstadt (Grinnell College), Marion Warner (SUNY, Buffalo), Sophie Mariñez (BMCC) and Henry Carey (Georgia State University) – and an undergraduate performer from York College. Below I provide a summary of each of their presentations (see my Storify for the live-Tweet summary of the entire event).

Edward Paulino began the set of micro-lectures drawing on the etymological and cultural origins of “diaspora” in order to address the activist interventions of the Haitian diaspora in the Dominican Republic and the Dominican diaspora in New York. Making reference to many Dominican human rights groups, Paulino wished to dispel the myth that all Dominicans accept la sentencia as legitimate and just law. Paulino ended his presentation by insisting that we further interrogate “Dominicaness.”

The next speaker was a York College undergraduate student who performed a beautiful rendition of Viejo by Emeline Michel to piano accompaniment as a way of reflecting on Haitian and Dominican relations. The next speaker, Cindy Ariez, also an undergraduate at York College reflected on her experience as self-identified Afro-Dominican. Ariez’s micro-lecture helped to question group cohesion amongst Dominicans in relation to hair politics and race.

Eve Hayes de Kalaf of the Haiti Support Group spoke next, arguing that the term “migrant” has lost its meaning, challenging the audience to move beyond the term to something that refers to the
humanity of the people involved in migrations. We should, de Kalaf urged, be talking about people as belonging to a place or having the ability to choose how they identify. De Kalaf also pointed out that the situation in the Dominican Republic and Haiti is historically grounded, it did not start with la sentencia.

April Mayes followed up de Kalaf by asking why states choose to manipulate the most vulnerable members of society. La sentencia, according to Mayes, is about the making and unmaking of citizens. Echoing de Kalaf, Mayes referred to work by Sara E. Johnson (The Fear of French Negroes; Transcolonial Collaboration in the Revolutionary Americas) and Lara Putnam (Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age) arguing that the relations between Haiti and the Dominican Republic are historically constructed and interwoven with the Western neoliberalism. Mayes concluded by alluding to Kimberlé Crenshaw and the need for more intersectional approaches to Haitian/Dominican relations that include citizenship among race, class, and gender expression.

Tess Kulstadt spoke next, evoking about her experience in the Dominican Republic when the January 12 earthquake shook Port-au-Prince. Kulstadt positioned herself as an “anthropologist of disaster,” insisting that disasters are not self-contained events, but processes. Kulstadt, referring to the work of scholar Mark Schuller, that the international community failed Haiti during the earthquake reconstruction, the effects of which are spilling over into the Dominican Republic.

Raj Chetty from St. John’s University spoke next about discourses of race and blackness in the Dominican Republic and the United States. Chetty asked why, for US onlookers, is it necessary to equate racial understanding in the Dominican Republic to ours in order for the United States to pay attention to the issues taking place abroad? Insisting on understanding race as spaces, which differ according to the country, Chetty argued that people move in and out of certain discourses of race. Chetty evoked activist, artist, anthropologist Gina Athena Ulysse’s use of the term “a certain kind of black” when referring to Haitians and Afro-Dominicans in the Dominican Republic suggesting that Black Lives Matter has helped Dominican human rights groups gain increased visibility. Chetty ended with a series of questions including: who gets to determine which Dominicans are black and who gets to reposition themselves within the space of blackness?

Marion Warner, a specialist of geography, continued in a similar vein to Kulstadt, arguing that we need to understand how Haiti and the Dominican Republic have diverged from one another during neoliberal period (1973-the present day). Warner suggested that this could be possible through an analysis of uneven development in both countries where the Dominican Republic ultimately shares in the United States’ profits from earthquake reconstruction contracts.

The penultimate speaker, Sophie Marinez, discussed the way that Haitians have been constructed, throughout the course of history, as the Dominican enemy. Marinez asked, given the history of US occupation in both countries, why the US is not considered the enemy the Dominican Republic. Henry Carey of Georgia State University was the final speaker and he sought to question power relations between both Haiti and the Dominican Republic and the United States.

I was incredibly impressed with the micro-lectures and their quality, but perhaps the most important aspect of the day was the sense of community fostered by the non-hierarchical structure and
pedagogical intent of the event. The micro-lectures were filmed and will be uploaded for use as a teaching tool in the near future. Fittingly, the question and answer gave precedence to undergraduate reflections on the lectures, further emphasizing the point that Jayaram made at the beginning of the event about what bell hooks refers to as “teaching to transgress.”

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