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Life in the Dominican Republic's Sugar Fields: Resistance from the Bateyes

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Abstract

This paper addresses the manipulation of the relationship between the people of the Dominican Republic and Haiti and how this distortion used for political power currently affects the status of Haitians living and working within the Dominican Republic. This paper explores the use of Haitian labor in the Dominican agricultural sector, and the widespread human rights violations these workers face, particularly in the country's sugar cane batey communities. Resistance movements that challenge the systemic human rights abuses of Haitian migrants are also explored. Finally, suggestions for how U.S. consumers can stand in solidarity with Haitian workers in the Dominican Republic is also discussed.

KEY WORDS: Dominican Republic, labor, free trade, migration, rights

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The Dominican Republic is a Caribbean state that comprises the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola, with Haiti comprising the western portion of the island (Purdy, 2006). Through the process of colonization its economy has historically been driven by agriculture, through the export of sugar, coffee, and tobacco (Purdy, 2006). However, globalization has more recently brought free trade and tourism to the island, with 83% of Dominicans being employed in the service sector (Seager, 2009). This paper defines globalization as “a set of social and economic processes that entail intensified global interconnectedness (and subsequent changes in local livelihoods), via the mobility of culture, capital, information, resistance, technologies, people, commodities, images, and ideologies” (Gunewardena & Kingsolver, p. 7-8, 2007). The process of globalization has played an important role in the shift in jobs held by Dominicans, as well as a change in culture, attitudes, and quality of life. As many Dominicans have now left low-paying and unsafe agricultural jobs, the group now performing these jobs is almost exclusively Haitian migrants. The Dominican public generally does not welcome Haitian migrants, yet they remain necessary as they fill these undesirable positions (Pierre, 2006). The beginning of this paper evaluates the impact of globalization on Dominican society while contextualizing the Dominican experience of globalization through acts of privatization, structural adjustment policies, labor standards, and trade liberalization. This contextualization will then aid in the investigation of the role of Haitian migrants in the Dominican economy, their marginalized status in the country, and the structures that uphold this position.

Establishing Context

Tourist propaganda presents an image of the Dominican Republic as a beach paradise, however it is one of the most urbanized and violent states outside of current war zones (Howard,

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2007, p. 726). A great deal of Dominican violence is perpetrated against Haitian migrants, or dark-skinned Dominicans perceived to be of Haitian descent (Howard, 2007). The concept of “anti-haitianismo” or “anti-Haitianism” is important in understanding the Dominican reality. Although official discourse has underscored the hatred of Haitians in the Dominican Republic as stemming from the 22-year-long Haitian “occupation” of the Dominican Republic in the early 19th century (Howard, 2007, p. 728), this national narrative is challenged as being a false one that became central to the Dominican identity through the dictator Rafael Trujillo, who ruled from 1930-1961 (Martínez, 2003). Trujillo, a vicious dictator supported by the United States, played an integral role in creating a national discourse of fear for Haitians, through a sensationalized “history of domination” between the two states and the supposed threat of Haitians toward Dominican livelihood and liberty (Martínez, 2003). He aggressively centralized this ideology into the Dominican mind through the channels of schools, broadcast and print media, and national commemoration and holidays (Martínez, 2003, p. 82). Trujillo used anti-haitianismo in order to divert the Dominican population’s attention away from the threat posed by U.S. neoimperialism (Martínez, 2003, p. 94).

In an attempt to create a national narrative against Haitians and to “purify” his country, Trujillo ordered the massacre of over 12,000 Haitians in 1937. To further rid the Dominican Republic of Haitians, Trujillo encouraged the immigration of eastern Europeans and Japanese to the Dominican-Haitian border in an attempt to “lighten” the border region and stimulate economic development (Howard, 2007, p. 733). This desire to exclude black Haitians from economic development is directly related to the current status of Haitian migrants as modern day slaves on sugar plantations in the Dominican Republic. Since the 1937 state sanctioned Haitian massacre, each successive Dominican government has maintained disproportionate deportations

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of Haitians over all other migrant groups (Howard, 2007, p. 733). These same governments have allowed violence against Haitians to continue, unprosecuted. This is a direct result of state policy that structurally fails to protect the rights of black Haitian migrants (Howard, 2007). The government and Dominican elites use the discourse of imminent Haitian-Dominican conflict as a means to control the poor Dominican masses, through fear. Politicians and elites use this platform to strengthen the idea that uncontrolled Haitian migration threatens the Dominican economy. This idea is further developed to place blame and responsibility on Haitians for low wages and economic issues facing the Dominican Republic. The development of this false concept is critical in permitting the government and elite to evade responsibility for issues facing the country. This also allows them to maintain their wealth, power, and position in society, while avoiding the root causes of various social issues (Martínez, 2003).

U.S. relations with the Dominican Republic have historically been rooted in unequal power and distribution of benefits. The U.S. created the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) to cover trade with Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic later joined negotiations (Pinder, 2009). DR-CAFTA does not require labor laws in the Dominican Republic (nor in the signatory states of Central America) to meet International Labor Organization standards, including the right to form unions and strike (Pinder, 2009). The lack of protections have allowed for a decline in organized labor and formal labor contracts. This trend in informal and part-time employment at the expense of local economic and natural resources are features of global economic restructuring (Desai & Naples, 2002, p. 11). DR-CAFTA caters to the powerful economy of the U.S. by protecting foreign investment trade interests through the establishment of uniform international standards and binding enforcement measures that do not include environmental provisions. Therefore a race to the bottom, both

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environmentally and socially, was successfully created as the Dominican Republic was forced to disregard environmental protections and labor rights in order to compete for investment trade and receive some type of benefit from the agreement, even if minimal and at a high cost (Lewis, 2007).

In further efforts to become part of the global economy, structural adjustment programs that devalued the Dominican peso in order to facilitate the competition for foreign investment in the state were enacted in the 1970s (Cabezas, 2008). In addition, to further stimulate foreign investment in order to pay off loans and foreign debt, generate revenue, and create employment opportunities, the government created large tax exemptions for investment in tourism development in the 1990s (Cabezas, 2008). Although these tax concessions were supposedly aimed to help the Dominican poor, the few who benefited were the small group of national elites. The majority of Dominicans remained impoverished and were employed in low-paid, seasonal, and unstable jobs that reduced their skill development and devalued them, a phenomenon that continues to mark today's Dominican workers (Cabezas, 2008).

Many Dominicans experience poverty, causing them to migrate either within the Caribbean to neighboring islands like Puerto Rico, or to the United States for economic opportunity and prospects of a better life (Ferguson, 2003). Within the Caribbean emigration is popular and not stigmatized, however the receiving societies “perceive immigrants as poor and inferior” (Ferguson, 2003, p. 2). Although the International Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and the Members of their Families came into force in July 2003 in efforts to protect migrants, it has yet to be ratified by any Caribbean state, and the Dominican Republic has yet to become a signatory state (United Nations Treaty Collection, 2015). It is within this context that

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this paper will look at the growing resistance to the systemic human rights abuses of Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic.

Globalization

The Dominican Republic has the largest influx of migrants within the Caribbean because of its proximity to Haiti (Ferguson, 2003). It is unclear how many Haitians or Dominicans of Haitian descent live in the Dominican Republic as there is no “reliable census material and estimates are generally ideologically motivated” (Ferguson, 2003, p. 8). However, as cited in Ferguson (2003), the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights estimates a figure of 500,000 to 700,000 Haitians living in the Dominican Republic, most of whom are undocumented. Although the Dominican Republic receives migrants from other Caribbean states like Barbados and Jamaica, there is a particular hatred for Haitians.

Impact on the Population

Similar to other states with large migrant populations, the Dominican media and politicians portray Haitians as a threat to national identity and unity (Ferguson, 2003). The Spanish-speaking Dominican population is made up of 73% of Dominicans who identify as mixed race, 16% as white, and only 11% as black (*Nations of the World*, 2005, p. 433), whereas in Haitian Creole and French speaking Haiti, 95% of the population identify as Afro Caribbean, with the remainder identifying as white or mixed race (*Nations of the World*, 2005, p. 639). Finally, religious differences separate the two states, with 95% of Dominicans being Roman Catholic, while only 80% of Haitians are Roman Catholic, 16% Protestant, with around half of the population also practicing voodoo, an African-derived belief. Perceived racial differences along with linguistic and religious differences, are used by the Dominican government to make Dominicans fear the threat Haitians living within their borders pose to their culture. In addition,

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these differences are used by those in power to make the Dominican masses feel superior because of their “lighter” skin and more “civilized” religion that makes them more modern and similar to world hegemony, while Haitians remain “other,” backwards, and the root of all Dominican social, political, and economic problems.

This, in turn, perpetuates racist, anti-immigrant attitudes among Dominicans that keep Haitians and those of Haitian descent living in the Dominican Republic marginalized and with few rights or allies to improve their condition. Many Haitian migrant workers give birth to children while working in the Dominican Republic. However, regardless if a child is born in Haiti or to Haitian parents in the Dominican Republic, these children face a multitude of human rights violations as they are generally forced to start work at an early age, prevented from registering for school, and prevented from claiming citizenship even when they are entitled to do so (Ferguson, 2003).

Although these human rights violations are well known to the Dominican government, it has done little to improve the status of Haitian migrants, or to protect their rights at all (Ferguson, 2003). The Dominican government profits off of Haitian migrants through their labor in the agricultural sector doing necessary jobs that would otherwise go unfilled, as most Dominicans no longer want these low paying jobs. As previously stated, globalization has made tourism one of the most profitable sectors in the Dominican Republic (Seager, 2009). However, unknown to a majority of the tourists staying in the luxurious Dominican hotels on beautiful beaches, a few miles away from paradise are hundreds of bateyes, or concrete barrack communities that house the country's poorest – those who cut sugar cane on plantations (Ferguson, 2003). Most of the batey dwellers are Haitians who are either smuggled across the border by traffickers, or Dominican-Haitians, those born in the Dominican Republic to Haitian

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parents (Ferguson, 2003). Many Haitians are lured into the Dominican Republic under false pretenses of finding fair work with good pay (*The Price of Sugar*, 2007). Once they make the journey over with Dominican smugglers they are stripped of their identification documents, leaving them stateless and without the documentation to escape the bateyes (*The Price of Sugar*, 2007).

The life expectancy at birth in Haiti is 63 years (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013) compared to 77 years in the Dominican Republic (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013). HIV/AIDS has hit those in Haiti particularly hard, with 190,000 people living with HIV/AIDS in Haiti compared to 66,000 in the Dominican Republic (Seager, 2009). These statistics clearly demonstrate the dire situation in Haiti that has forced many to migrate to the Dominican Republic in hopes of finding a better life and escaping poor health and living conditions, as well as government repression. Although the Dominican Republic has ensured that a “number of their labor laws, beyond those governing occupational health and safety, apply to all workers” (Earle & Heymann, 2010, p. 80), Haitians working in the Dominican Republic are met with poor labor conditions that are comparable to those of slavery. Although Haitians migrate to the Dominican Republic in hopes of escaping poverty, finding better living conditions, and sending remittances back to Haiti (*Price of Sugar*, 2007), they are met with the same conditions of poverty as well as ill treatment and racist attitudes (Ferguson, 2003).

The high influx of Haitians in the Dominican Republic can be understood through a close examination of the vastly different realities of the two countries. The GDP per capita average annual growth rate (percent) in the Dominican Republic went up from 2.0 in 1970-1990 to 3.8 from 1990-2005 (State of the World's Children, 2007), whereas Haiti went from -0.3 from 1970-1999, to -2.0 in 1990-2005, making its downward progression worse than that of Central African

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Republic's, which went from -1.3 to -0.6 (State of the World's Children, 2007). Other ways to measure the wellbeing of the people in a given country is the "under 5" mortality rate. In the Dominican Republic, the "under 5" mortality rate has gone down significantly in the past three decades, starting at 127 in 1970, dropping to 65 in 1990, and finally falling to 31 in 2005 (State of the World's Children, 2007). In Haiti, however, the indicator from 2005 puts "under 5" mortality rate at 120, placing it essentially where the Dominican Republic was over 30 years ago. In the risk assessment of the Dominican Republic in *Nations of the World* (2005), it is economically labeled as "poor" but improving, its political situation is labeled as "good," and its regional stability is similarly labeled as "good" (p. 432). In Haiti, however, the risk assessment shows its economic situation as being "poor" and not improving, with 80% of its population living below the poverty line, its political situation as also being "poor," and only regional stability being labeled as "good" (pp. 638-9).

Impact on the Economy

In 1961, after the assassination of dictator Rafael Trujillo, "his personal sugar interests were reorganized into the state-owned State Sugar Council (CEA)" (Ferguson, 2003, p. 10). The CEA created a partnership with Haitian dictators François "Papa Doc" Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, who provided the Dominican Republic with laborers. Since the 1960s Haitians have been a stable source of cheap labor for Dominican sugar plantations (Ferguson, 2003). Recruiting agents were hired to persuade Haitians into the Dominican Republic with the promise of good work and pay, yet a majority of their recruiting measures were equivalent to kidnapping (Ferguson, 2003). The suffering and human rights abuses that plagued the lives of Haitian sugarcane workers in the bateyes attracted international attention in the 1980s, with Maurice Lemoine's book *Bitter Sugar* (1981) and Roger Plant's *Sugar and*

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Modern Slavery (1987) (Ferguson, 2003). In 1999 the privatization of a majority of sugar plantations campaigned that they would bring in better working conditions. Major CEA assets were leased to various private companies such as the Vicini family (Ferguson, 2003). The idea of improved conditions were refuted in a 2001 New York-based Haiti Support Network report that revealed conditions in bateyes had, in fact, worsened since privatization. Similarly, the Dominican Human Rights Committee's report stated that the conditions of work for cane cutters had deteriorated since the industry's privatization in 1999 (Ferguson, 2003).

Today 220 of the 500 bateyes in the Dominican Republic belong to the CEA, while the majority belongs to private companies (Ferguson, 2003). On these bateyes, state-owned and privately-owned alike, Haitian cane cutters and their families are subject to abuse by the Dominican military, police, and plantation personnel (Ferguson, 2003). As presented in Ferguson (2003), a 2001 report done by the State Enterprise Commission reported that 32% of the CEA's bateyes had no drinking water supply and 66% had no proper sanitation facilities. It is a well-known fact throughout the Dominican Republic that Haitian sugar plantation workers are modern day slaves. They are unable to leave the bateyes, wages are withheld from them, or they are paid far less than what they have earned. Furthermore, they are under the watch of armed guards and they have no legal rights in the Dominican Republic (Ferguson, 2003).

Impact on Women

The Caribbean has experienced a marked rise in the percentage of the paid labor force that was comprised of women from 1960 to 2006, from 26% to 39% (Earle & Heymann, 2010). With this increase comes the related rise of women cane cutters in bateyes. As discussed by Pettman (2006), "global restructuring is presently being carried out at the expense of women and children" (p. 437). Although performing the same tasks as men, women are paid half of what

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their male counterparts earn. Similar to the poor compensation of women, children aid their parents in the sugarcane fields from a young age without much pay. In addition to cutting cane for a much lower rate than men, women are in charge of taking care of children in batey communities, cooking, and cleaning. The reality of Haitian women in the Dominican Republic can be connected to Pettman's argument that globalization further impoverishes women and that "development" depends on the cheap labor of women in informal and subsistence sectors as well as in household work and community care (p. 439).

While bateyes are plagued with human rights abuses, women are at a heightened risk of these violations. If abandoned by their male counterpart, many women are forced into prostitution in order to feed themselves and their children. In addition, they are constantly subjected to sexual violence from the Dominican army, police and camp guards, and other workers (Ferguson, 2003). Research from the nongovernmental organization MUDHA, an organization created in 1983 to work with the Dominican-Haitian population in the sugar plantation shantytowns shows that 20% of children living in or around bateyes live with a single mother, while 61.5% of households calculated to live in extreme poverty are those of single women (as cited in Ferguson, 2003).

Impact on Labor

Trade union organization in most bateyes is nearly non-existent, as those who take part in union activities are threatened with their lives and in many cases refused negotiation rights (Ferguson, 2003). The union movement's inability to challenge the abuses in the bateyes has resulted in the rise of other forms of resistance. Although the conditions have not much improved since they were first deplored in writing in the 1980s, improvements have come about through the work of national and international nongovernmental organizations. Nongovernmental

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organizations (NGOs) are generally understood as consisting of members of civil society that are separate from states and untainted by corporate interest (Gautney, 2010, p. 93). “NGOs attempt to shape public opinion and engage in media crusades to force changes in domestic policy, and to protect citizens from abuses generated or ignored by their own government” (Gautney, 2010, p. 95). The Movimiento Socio Cultural de los Trabajadores Haitianos (MOSCTHA), MUDHA, and the Organización de la Defensa de los Moradores de los Bateyes (ODEMOBA) have worked with international donors to implement advocacy and health care projects within the bateyes and neighboring communities (Ferguson, 2003). In addition, overseas fundraising from groups like the Batey Relief Alliance has helped fund health and education facilities, along with church and human rights activists contributing to the fight for improved conditions.

One particular resistance movement that gained widespread attention throughout the world regarding the plight of Haitian sugarcane cutters in the Dominican Republic was that of a community of sugarcane workers in Los Llanos, Dominican Republic. This movement can be seen as going beyond fundraising efforts that address suffering, to engaging in actions that actually challenge the systems of power that inflict the structural violence that deprive people of adequate sanitation, food, and medical care. In the documentary film *The Price of Sugar* (2007) directed by Bill Haney, the efforts of Haitian cane cutters and Catholic priest Father Christopher Hartley are documented. Although Father Hartley is sent to Los Llanos to help “the poor” through typical religious activities like conducting mass ceremonies, he goes beyond the perceived traditional role. As a respected religious leader, Father Hartley stands in solidarity with Haitian migrant workers living in bateyes to bring attention to their reality.

Father Hartley is able to convince the workers that it is their right as stated by the church to go on strike for better working conditions. He serves as an organizer with other Haitian

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workers to challenge this system of abuse that exploits the most essential worker in the production of sugar, the cane cutters. A great deal of the barriers faced by the workers are created by the Vicini family – the owners of the sugarcane fields of Los Llanos. The Vicini family's control extends beyond owning the sugarcane fields to their influence on and in the media. As the family supports the media with investments and advertising, very few journalists report anything negative about the bateyes or the work of Father Hartley to bring attention to these abuses. In addition to fear of losing funding, the Vicini family uses fear of death to control sources that may otherwise challenge their role in the human rights abuses in the bateyes (*The Price of Sugar*, 2007).

As support from the media was not a viable option for fighting the structural violence inflicted upon the workers, Father Hartley and Haitian migrants in the bateyes of Los Llanos recognized the power of going on strike together to demand better conditions (*The Price of Sugar*, 2007). Through the community organizing that led to a strike, the workers won various demands like being informed of how much they would earn for their work, and the guards in charge of overseeing them no longer carrying guns and other arms used to intimidate and abuse them.

Although there are successes in this resistance movement, a great deal of the power came from the fact that Father Hartley was an ally of the Haitian workers. This fact is reiterated through powerful employees of the Vicini who repeatedly tell the workers that once the Father is inevitably forced out of the country all of the changes that have taken place will come to an end and those who have collaborated with the Father and who have resisted their condition as slaves will be harmed. It is clear that the Vicini family wishes to influence Dominicans of all socioeconomic backgrounds to oppose the Father in order to have him exiled from the country,

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so as to kill the movement, and continue making maximum profit at the cost of the basic human rights of workers. Various Dominicans in the film acknowledge the pay offs carried out by the Vicini to poor Dominicans to start riots demanding the expulsion of the priest and the Haitians that are “invading” their town (*The Price of Sugar*, 2007). Although the documentary shows the power of the Haitian batey community, Father Hartley and a few Dominican allies working together, the power of the Vicini in paralyzing this movement through attempts at exiling Father Hartley and intimidation of Haitian workers and any supporters is clear.

Global issue/global solution

The actions needed to improve the rights and conditions of Haitian migrants working in the Dominican Republic can be connected to resistance movements happening worldwide. As presented by Hensman (2002), Indian workers in the informal or unorganized sector experience a great level of human rights violations that include child labor and gender discrimination (p. 159). Although legal protections exist, they are minimal and rarely implemented because employers simply dismiss workers when they try to form unions and take action against these violations (p. 159). Similarly in the Dominican Republic, cane cutters who attempt to form unions are generally not recognized by the companies they work for, or are simply persecuted for trying to stand against the company's abuse of power. Hensman (2002) states that international action in support of minimum labor standards should go beyond blocking exports of a country, and should include positive incentives (p.162). Although Hensman is speaking to the context of India, this can be applied to the sugar industry in the Dominican Republic. As previously stated, women are paid less than men for their work cutting cane, and children often work alongside their parents in the sugarcane fields from an early age. Therefore, in order to improve the labor standards of

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Haitian sugarcane workers in the Dominican Republic, positive incentives for cooperation should be implemented to support such a change.

Other suggestions for positive change can be connected to the analysis made by Senator Frank Church (2002) of the industry-U.S. government relationship that is one marked by secrecy and one that is not transparent to the U.S. public (p. 96). Senator Church presents the fact that the American people are not provided with comprehensive explanations about foreign policy decisions (p. 96). Although Senator Church is speaking directly to multinational corporations, the ideas and statements can also be applied to policy decisions with the Dominican Republic that have to do with sugar. Most Americans are unaware of the Dominican Republic's preferential access to U.S. markets (Ferguson, 2003) and the fact that "the sugar industry is of particular interest to United States trade officials, because the Dominican sugar industry is subsidized by an import quota system providing that Dominican sugar prices in the United States are higher than in other markets" (*Vicini Lluberes & Vicini Lluberes v. Uncommon Productions, LLC & Haney III*, 2010, p. #). Consumers are equally unaware of the conditions in which the sugar they consume was cultivated and the treatment of the persons who cut the sugar they enjoy. This is clearly intentional because most Americans would be appalled by the suffering of Haitian cane cutters and would do something to express this outrage, either by purchasing sugar whose cane was not grown there, or participating in other forms of resistance to improve the conditions of cane cutters.

The human rights abuses of Haitian cane cutters in the Dominican Republic continue to be an issue today. Although a resistance movement in Los Llanos, Dominican Republic is documented in the 2007 documentary film *The Price of Sugar*, Father Christopher Hartley has since been removed from the country and those attempting to resist along with their allies

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continue to be persecuted by the state as well as the powerful companies like the Vicini family, who privately own sugarcane plantations. This issue is not one free of global implications. The reality of Haitian migrant workers in the Dominican Republic exists as a consequence of globalization and the nature of free trade, whose basic principles devalue labor rights and basic human rights- particularly those of marginalized groups like migrants, women, and people of color, for maximum profit. The resistance of Haitian cane cutters in batey communities in the Dominican Republic can be strengthened through increased allies, particularly from the United States. U.S. consumers have the potential to play an enormously positive role in changing the rights of Haitian cane cutters because of consumer power. Although many nongovernmental organizations in the Dominican Republic and abroad aim to provide resources like food and medical care to those living in bateyes, resistance movements like that of the batey communities in Los Llanos, as seen in *The Price of Sugar*, and movements that go beyond providing basic needs through fundraising need increased allies. These resistance movements are essential in creating a lasting change as they go beyond addressing human rights violations through fundraising and aim to fundamentally challenge and change the systems that allow for such grave human suffering and abuses.

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