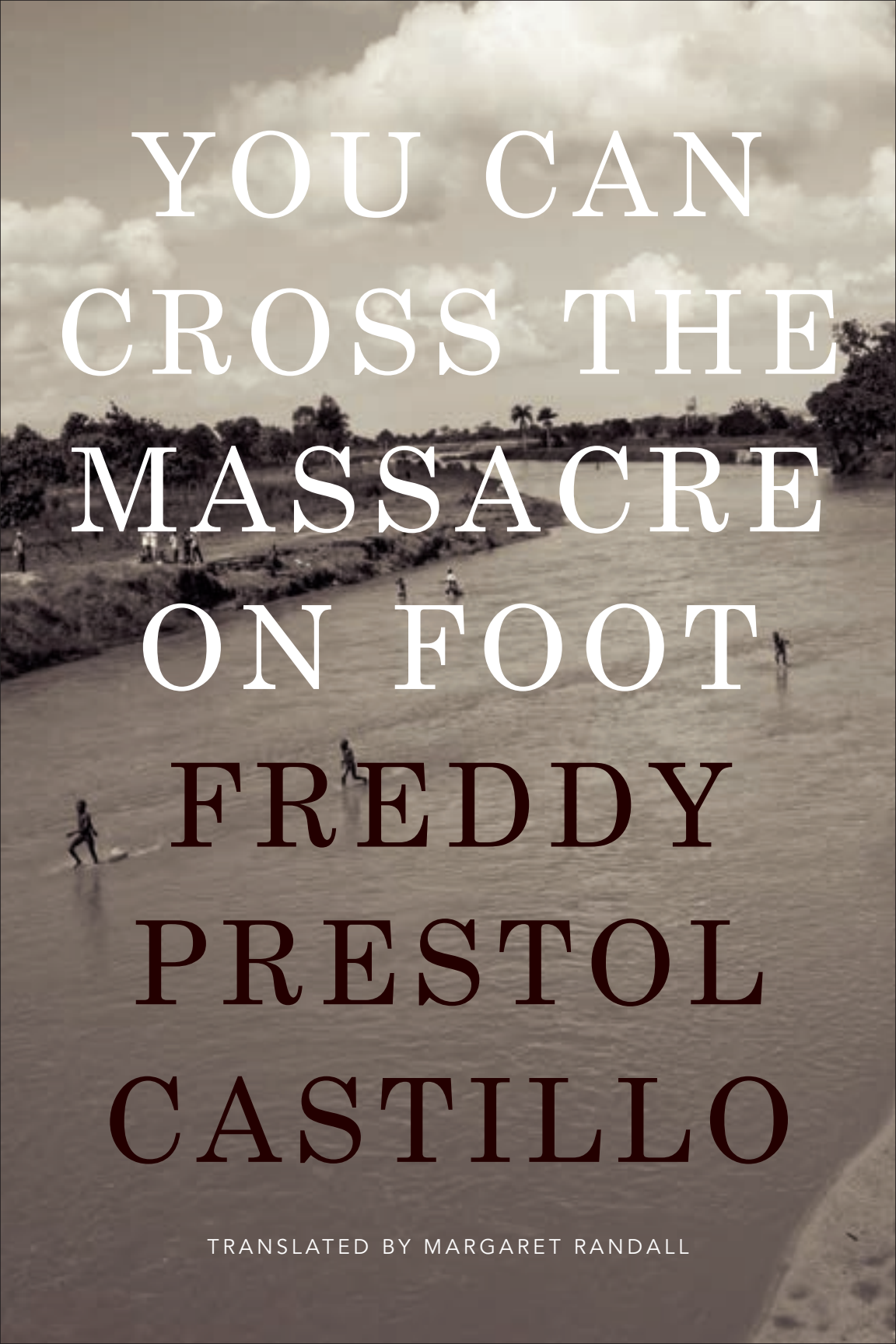

YOU CAN CROSS THE MASSACRE ON FOOT

FREDDY PRESTOL CASTILLO

TRANSLATED BY MARGARET RANDALL

PRAISE FOR

YOU CAN CROSS THE MASSACRE ON FOOT

Freddy Prestol Castillo's testimonial novel, *You Can Cross the Massacre on Foot*, is a key text in understanding the thirty-one-year dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo and the little-known racist massacre that occurred in 1937, the slaughter of 10,000–40,000 Haitians who found themselves on the wrong side of the border. (The total is still under debate—as corpses cannot report on casualties, many of them thrown in the sea.) Had it not been for an American journalist, Quentin Reynolds, who reported on the massacre in *Collier's Magazine*, the world might not have known about this atrocity. Even so, international attention was focused on Europe and the rumors and rumbles of the oncoming war. The Trujillo regime repressed all reporting, so the massacre was never officially or sufficiently addressed or redressed.

Until the publication of Prestol Castillo's novel thirty-six years later, in 1973, no Dominican writer dared tackle this atrocity. The value of Prestol Castillo's book is its basis in the eyewitness reporting of the author, who at the time of the massacre was a judge stationed at the border. Troubling and eye-opening, the novel displays the origins of such genocides and the complicity of all those who remain silent. It's why the telling of the story is so important, as we consider the pervasive racism and violence toward others that persist throughout our hemisphere and within our own borders.

Margaret Randall turns her considerable talent and compassionate imagination to a translation of this work, continuing in the footsteps of Quentin Reynolds and her own trajectory as an author-translator-activist who has spent a lifetime giving voice to the silenced stories of our América. Her work has been instrumental in introducing many North American readers to our neighbors to the south, their history, literature, and struggles.

—JULIA ALVAREZ, author of *In the Time of the Butterflies*

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TRANSLATED BY MARGARET RANDALL

AND WITH A FOREWORD BY MARIA CRISTINA FUMAGALLI

FREDDY PRESTOL CASTILLO

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FOREWORD

MARIA CRISTINA FUMAGALLI

The book you are about to read chronicles, primarily, the 1937 massacre of Haitians and Haitian Dominicans carried out by the army of the Dominican dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. The Massacre River, living up to its name, became one of the bloodiest sites in the onslaught.

Initially colonized by the Spanish who arrived on the island in 1492, Hispaniola became contested territory when the French slowly began to invade the northern side of the island in the seventeenth century. In his *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue* (1797), Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry explains that the Massacre River owes its name to "ancient murderous acts reciprocally committed by the Buccaneers and the Spaniards in their disputes over the territory."[1] Saint-Méry, however, is cautious not to highlight the fact that the French had de facto occupied a portion of the island: more precisely, in fact, the Massacre River was named after the slaughter of a company of French boucaniers and border trespassers killed by the Spanish in 1728, when the island was still officially a Spanish colony.

In his *Description topographique et politique de la partie espagnole de l'isle Saint-Domingue* (1796), Saint-Méry includes an *Abrégé historique*, a historical summary which records the history of Hispaniola's

colonial border between Spain and France up to 1777, when the two nations signed the Treaty of Aranjuez that legitimized the French occupation of the island. According to the treaty, the border begins with the d'Ajabon, or Massacre River, in the north of the island and ends with the Anse à Pitre, or Pedernales River, in the south.[2]

The Treaty of Aranjuez and Saint-Méry's comment cast the line of demarcation between the two colonies, on which the events at the core of Freddy Prestol Castillo's *El Masacre se pasa a pie* unfold, as a "natural" border that had traditionally been the theater of conflict and violence. Yet the title of Prestol Castillo's book reminds us that "the Massacre can be crossed on foot," implicitly introducing us to a porous border where the two peoples could easily engage in exchanges and form collaborative linkages.

The 1937 massacre of Haitians and Haitian Dominicans in the northern provinces of the Dominican Republic is generally referred to as *el Corte* (the Cutting) by Dominicans and as *kout kouto-a* (the stabbing) by Haitians because it was mostly carried out with machetes and knives in order to make it look like a popular insurrection against Haitians who were accused of stealing livestock. The killings began on September 28, 1937; intensified on October 2; and lasted until October 8, with sporadic murders continuing until November 5.[3] The estimated number of victims is still disputed and ranges from 10,000 to 40,000; for the most part they were small farmers who had lived in the Dominican Republic for generations or who were even born there and therefore were in fact Dominican citizens, since until 2010 the Dominican constitution granted citizenship on the basis of ius soli.[4]

The idea that the massacre might have been a reaction to Haitians crossing the border to steal has now been discarded as an after-the-fact fabrication, but there is still a fair amount of debate surrounding the causes of the massacre.[5] At the time, the Dominican and Haitian central governments did not have much control of the borderland and the border had been finalized only a year earlier as Trujillo and the Haitian president Sténio Vincent, encouraged by the United States, had signed additional clauses to a 1929 border agreement. Despite laws that aimed to make border crossings more difficult, people

continued to circulate more or less freely between the two countries, and migration from Haiti to the Dominican Republic continued, relatively undisturbed.[6] The Dominican historian Bernardo Vega has argued that in 1935, after the return to Haiti of tens of thousands of braceros who had been expelled from Cuba, the Haitian presence in the area substantially increased, creating social, political, and racial tensions. One of the main factors that caused the massacre, Vega insists, was the desire of the Dominican ruling classes to "whiten" their nation.[7] Lauren Derby and Richard Turits argue instead that the real aim of the massacre was to destroy the frontier's bicultural, bilingual, and transnational Haitian Dominican communities.[8] As Turits has eloquently put it, in fact, the 1937 massacre is also a story of "Dominicans versus Dominicans, Dominican elites versus Dominican peasants, the national state against Dominicans in the frontier, centralizing forces in opposition to local interests, and, following the massacre, the newly hegemonic anti-Haitian discourses of the nation vying with more culturally pluralist discourses and memories from the past."[9]

In *El Masacre se pasa a pie*, victims and perpetrators are often related, have strong bonds of affection, or clearly depend on each other for their livelihood: Captain Ventarrón, who has been ordered to slaughter not only men but also old people, women, and children, suddenly remembers that his grandfather was born in Haiti and manages to continue with his horrific task only by getting increasingly drunk.[10] Sargent Pío's illegitimate sister had married the Haitian Yosefo Dis, a wealthy owner of crops and cattle who had lived for twenty years in the Dominican Republic, considered himself Dominican, and was in possession of official documents that legitimized his status. Yosefo and his Dominican wife had seven children, and Pío, who is one of the military men in charge of the killings, lets them escape to Haiti instead of slaughtering them: as he looks to his sister going to a country she doesn't know and thinks about her children, destined to live among people who speak a language they do not know, Pío looks like a condemned man. Mistress Francina, the innkeeper of Dajabón and a member of the town's elite, lies and risks her life in order to hide and help Moraime Luis, one of her workers who had grown up with her,

who was baptized in Dajabón in Spanish, and who considered the Dominican Republic her own country: when she is captured, raped, and, eventually, killed on the bank of the river, Moraime screams (crucially) in two languages. Don Sebusto, a landowner whose land and cattle, due to *el Corte*, are going to be left unattended, voices his worries about the financial loss that the elimination of the "Haitian" workforce will cause him (46).

The 1937 massacre, as we have seen, was perpetrated mostly by Trujillo's army, and Dominican civilians responded in different ways to it. As Prestol Castillo shows, Francina is not the only Dominican who exposes herself to danger by hiding "Haitian" friends or relatives and helping them flee the soldiers. Others, however, usually civil local authorities loyal to Trujillo, collaborated with the regime, locating and identifying "Haitians" for the guards.[11] Some civilians were given the task of burying and burning the corpses, but it appears that, generally, they did not take an active part in the massacre, with the exception of prisoners recruited in Dominican jails and the destitute *reservistas* who were promised freedom and land for their services or were simply obliged to become assassins to save their own lives. The narrator calls them *obreros del crimen* (53) and points out that while some were callous murderers who had no problem with the atrocities they were asked to commit and were ready to take advantage of the situation to help themselves to the properties of their victims, others found it extremely difficult to participate in the killings and to cope with the pressure and the violence they were forced to witness and take part in. Some were executed for refusing to kill, and the many who lost their minds or were turned into desperate alcoholics by the experience are presented as victims of the dictatorship, which—not unproblematically, of course—is what is ultimately blamed for *el Corte*.

Apart from offering an important insight into the massacre, the multiethnic nature of the borderland, and the mechanics of Trujillo's violent and oppressive regime, Prestol Castillo's book also reveals how, due to the Dominican Republic's proximity to Haiti, the Dominican elite of the time regarded the borderland (at best) as a series of half-civilized outposts: when the narrator first heard the name

"Dajabón" at school, during geography lesson, it was pronounced by a teacher who read the *Times*, had never visited the borderland, and had assumed that Dajabón and the nearby villages were uninteresting, unbearable, unpleasant, the opposite of everything he regarded as civilization (17). As a child the narrator was intrigued by the name, but as a young man he accepted to move to Dajabón very reluctantly and only because his landowning sugar family had lost its fortune and he could not find a better job; despite what seems a sympathetic approach to its inhabitants, the condescension with which he regards them and what he calls their "little peasant's brains" is unmistakable (133).

Arguably, it was the publication of Edwidge Danticat's award-winning *The Farming of Bones* in 1998, followed by the 1999 translation into English of Jacques Stephen Alexis's *Compère général soleil* (1955) and, in 2005, of René Philoctète's *Le peuple des terres mêlées* (1989), that greatly contributed to raise awareness, in the Anglophone world, about the 1937 massacre. These three texts differ in style but share important features: they are all fictional accounts, written years after the massacre, and while Philoctète and Alexis are Haitian writers, Danticat is a member of the Haitian diaspora in the United States. Danticat's book, however, is written as if it were a first-person account or *testimonio*: this immediacy of tone has been identified as one of the reasons for its success. *El Masacre se pasa a pie*, instead, was written by a Dominican author who offers it as a personal account of the massacre by an eyewitness who was commenting on the facts as they unfolded in front of his eyes. Initially drafted in 1937, during Prestol Castillo's stay in Dajabón, the book was not published until thirty-six years after the massacre and twelve years after Trujillo's assassination, for fear of retaliation. To begin with, the manuscript was entrusted to "Doctor M" (9); retrieved from his office by a priest when the doctor was arrested by the "Secret Service" (11), it was sent to the author only years later. Hidden by the author's mother and later buried by his sister in the family garden, the manuscript was finally dug up in poor condition, with torn pages, almost illegible in parts, and Prestol Castillo had to painstakingly reconstruct it. When it was published in 1973, *El Masacre se pasa a pie* sold twenty thousand copies in a

relatively short time and also became required reading in Dominican schools: its success can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that it tries to address, albeit in contradictory and sometimes controversial ways, the sense of guilt Dominicans might have felt and still feel about the massacre.

Stylistically, *El Masacre se pasa a pie* is not a polished work, but it can be argued that this only lends further poignancy to its content and that its little regard for structure and its chaotic nature mirror the urgency of the situation during the problematic times in which Prestol Castillo was living.[12] The author's presence is felt more palpably in the first and last parts of the book, where we are also presented with his love interest and one of the most striking figures of the novel, Angela Vargas. Angela is a young teacher from Azua who was sent to work in a school in the borderland, and she risks her life to protect her students during *el Corte*. Through Angela, the book also sheds light on the regime's gender politics and on its systemic sexual exploitation of Dominican women. Angela, however, refuses to succumb to the demands and threats of those who want to take advantage of her poverty, and, finally, she decides to leave the country in order to live her life with dignity and in freedom. In his preface, Prestol Castillo discloses that, like his narrator, he was repeatedly and forcefully exhorted to leave by his own fiancée, a schoolteacher who had already fled the country: it is perhaps as a tribute to the courage of this *guerrillera* (and, implicitly, to the courage of Prestol Castillo's mother and sister, who had refused to destroy his manuscript despite the danger they were facing by keeping it) that the narrator gives his own notes on *el Corte* not to a male friend but to Angela, whom he considers smart and valiant enough to guard what he describes as the equivalent of a "time bomb" (177).

The central section of *El Masacre se pasa a pie* can be seen instead as a series of sketches where the author seems to be reporting, verbatim (often reproducing local speech), dialogues between soldiers, victims, and local landowners that, however, he is unlikely to have actually heard. The distinction between facts and fiction, autobiography and novel, in fact, is intriguingly blurred in this book. As we have seen,

like his narrator, Prestol Castillo arrived to work as a magistrate in the border town of Dajabón during the massacre itself, and *El Masacre se pasa a pie* presents us with the point of view of someone observing the unfolding tragedy but who is imbricated—albeit reluctantly—with the Dominican regime. The narrator repeatedly calls himself a coward and even refers to himself as a *testigo cómplice*, that is, an eyewitness who is also an accomplice to the crimes he directly observes, for not speaking up against the atrocities (173).[13] It is possible that Prestol Castillo wrote this manuscript at the same time in which, in his capacity as a judge, he was producing "accounts" of the massacre that were more in line with the official version of the facts that the regime was keen to circulate. *El Masacre se pasa a pie*, therefore, could be seen as the product of a conscience tortured by guilt and regret for not joining the many exiled intellectuals that the regime could not silence or pay off. In *Paisajes y meditaciones de una frontera* ("Landscapes of and meditations on the frontier"), published in 1943, for example, Prestol Castillo never mentions the 1937 massacre, but Trujillo (the volume's dedicatee) is repeatedly praised for having "improved" the situation on the borderland of the Dominican Republic, an area of the country Prestol Castillo claims was in desperate need of being claimed back by the state.[14] At the same time, however, while in Dajabón, Prestol Castillo painstakingly recorded compromising facts and impressions, clandestinely producing a manuscript that might have cost him his life had it been found by Trujillo's secret police. Yet, like his narrator, who entrusts his own manuscript to friends and relatives for safekeeping, Prestol Castillo never took the decision to destroy this potentially explosive and incriminating work.

The author's deep anxiety and his inability and unwillingness to either fully embrace or resolutely reject the regime and its dominant discourses are evident in the text's many contradictions. Racist, xenophobic, and elitist prejudices abound: Haitians are described as a "primitive race" (95), but at the same time, the narrator is shocked and profoundly shaken by the violence perpetrated against them. In line with the regime's propaganda, the narrator refers to "Haitians" as thieves who come in the night to steal cattle; however, the story

of Don Francisco, whose land straddled the frontier, offers a different perspective on the situation and sheds light on the hypocrisy of the landholding class. Before the massacre, when some of his cattle were stolen, Don Francisco was not too concerned because he knew that he would still make a huge profit with the low salary he was paying those who worked for (and occasionally stole from) him in order to support themselves and their families; like other local landowners, Don Francisco used instead to routinely curse taxes and other measures that hampered his profitable trade with the neighboring country. However, when his property is visited by the army engaged in *el Corte*, he vociferously complains only about the "Haitians" and their stealing.

In Prestol Castillo's text, Haitian thieving appears to have ruined some Dominican families who had members in the army who were particularly keen to take part in the massacre in order to take revenge against those they considered responsible for their change of fortune and diminished circumstances. The narrator, however, also reveals that the "Haitians" mostly returned in the night to steal the produce they had grown on Dominican land for years, or came to take the livestock they had long nurtured as if it were part of their own family, showing that, in fact, some of the thievery at least took place after the massacre. The narrator also points out that, after *el Corte*, those who had left everything behind when they found refuge in Haiti had no choice but to turn to criminality and to enter into the Dominican Republic illegally to steal cattle or other produce in order to feed themselves and their starving children: while the narrator seems genuinely sympathetic and troubled about their suffering, the idea of more and more "hungry Haitians" crossing the border to steal from Dominicans (101) chimes with anti-Haitian discourses that depict the Dominican Republic as a nation threatened by a possible "invasion" of the disenfranchised poor of the neighboring country. At the same time, however, the narrator seems to suggests that these border crossers were somehow entitled to reclaim the fruit of their labor and goes as far as wondering to whom the land really belonged (88): to the "Haitians," who had transformed it into orchards, or to those Dominicans who had left it uncultivated before 1937 and would continue to do so after

el Corte? After the massacre, the narrator continues, Dominicans recruited in Santo Domingo's underbelly, or destitute people who had been declared "vagrants" because they owned no land, were brought to the borderland in army trucks to substitute the workers who had been slaughtered. The difference between these new arrivals and the Haitians and Haitian Dominicans who cultivated the land and made it productive was very striking: they were neither keen nor able to work and only longed to go back to the city. As a result, he explains, a year after their arrival, most of the new arrivals were sent back to the capital, poorer than when they had arrived.

El Masacre se pasa a pie also reveals how the Dominicans' collective unconscious was deeply affected by nationalistic discourses that identified Haitians as cruel and savage invaders and perpetrators of horrific violence. During a delirious night, the narrator, feverish and deeply distressed by *el Corte*, has a nightmare during which he is "visited" by Toussaint Louverture, who professes that he will kill all the inhabitants of the Spanish side. Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Emperor Faustin Soulouque also appear to him in a bloodbath in which fierce Haitian *caníbales* (181) destroy churches and slaughter both whites and blacks from Santo Domingo. This account ends with the narrator pondering the history of the crimes committed by the Haitians that he had learned at school when he was a child—for example, the trail of death and destruction left by the Haitian army led by Dessalines and Henri Christophe, the abuses committed by Jean-Pierre Boyer during the unification of the island (1822–44), and the policy of aggression orchestrated by Soulouque in 1849 and 1855—and, simultaneously, the present history, equally written in blood, that was unfolding in front of him. We are not told what conclusions the narrator draws from his meditation, but the mere contraposition and comparison between Dominican and Haitian brutality explodes the received notion that barbarism, cruelty, savagism, and ferocity pertained only to one side of the border.

El Masacre se pasa a pie also identifies Haitians with black magic: we are informed, in fact, that they resorted to supernatural assistance to secure protection. A case in point is the story of El Patú, a desperate

father and cunning cattle thief who solicited the help of a powerful *bocó*, or sorcerer, to avoid capture (95). However, when, after losing his mind and agonizing for fourteen nights, the callous Dominican executioner El Panchito finally dies, the narrator explains that the people who witnessed his death saw four green snakes coming out of his mouth speaking Haitian "Patois," suggesting that they believed that his victims had somehow returned and possessed his body out of revenge for his cruelty (182). These stories show that Dominicans strongly credited and deeply feared the power of Haitian magic but also highlight that the two peoples shared the same system of belief, even if Haitians seem to have had what Derby has called the "monopoly of the sacred."[15]

After the massacre, as Prestol Castillo illustrates, the northern province of Dajabón and the nearby city of Montecristi became the stage for what has been called *el gran teatro* (the great theater).[16] It was there, in fact, that, in order to be seen to be responding to international pressure, the regime staged the trials and imprisonment of some of the (alleged) civilian perpetrators of the massacre. For that purpose, the *alcaldes pedáneos* (submunicipal political authorities) of the sites where the killings had taken place were ordered to select four or five reservists or "friends of Trujillo"; these young men were then taken to the prison of Montecristi and photographed dressed as convicts.[17] During the trials, they were given clear instructions on what to say or, as Prestol Castillo's narrator reveals, they were even provided with depositions prepared *ad hoc* by the judges themselves. Prestol Castillo's narrator makes it all too clear that, far from establishing the inconvenient truth, the job of the judges was to distort it and to fabricate convenient lies in order to corroborate the idea that the killings sprung from a spontaneous insurrection of Dominicans against Haitians. The web of deceit that the Dominican judges sent to the border to investigate *el Corte* were forced to spin, the narrator adds, took its toll on some of them: one tried to kill himself, another became an alcoholic, and a third escaped but was later arrested by the secret police and put in jail. Those judges who complied without complaining or experiencing a nervous breakdown were later

betrayed by the system: they hoped for a reward but were instead sent home unceremoniously.[18]

El Masacre se pasa a pie ends in a rather abrupt way after our attention is refocused on the narrator, who, after having escaped from Dajabón, is pursued by the police and agonizes about whether he should leave the country or remain to support his family. When he finally decides to flee, hidden in a boat headed to Venezuela, he is captured by the coast guard because, in an ironic twist, he once again finds himself implicated in another atrocity—which, however, receives very little attention in the book—namely, the throwing overboard of a group of clandestine Chinese by a member of the crew who had robbed them, killed them, and then fed them to the sharks. Falsely accused by a terrified and subservient judge, the narrator is condemned to five years in prison: at that point, however, we know that his manuscript is safe with his mother, to whom it was dutifully delivered by Angela Vargas before her departure.

Arguably, reading *El Masacre se pasa a pie* can occasionally be a disturbing experience and not only because it describes a ruthless massacre. Its old-fashioned, frequently gauche, prose and its chaotic structure, in fact, present us with an equally frenzied and disorganized attempt to come to terms with personal and collective guilt and the simultaneous urges to comprehend the causes of the killings, denounce or justify its perpetrators, and commemorate or blame its victims. It is a book that often frustrates its readers and can even make them feel uncomfortable at times. However, this does not make it any less compelling.

NOTES

1. Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue. Avec des observations générales sur la population, sur le caractère & les moeurs de ses divers habitans; sur son climat, sa culture, ses productions, son administrations &c, &c. accompagnées des détails les plus propres à faire connaître l'état de cette colonie à l'epoque du 18 Octobre 1789; Et d'une nouvelle carte de la totalité de l'isle*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: chez l'auteur, 1797–98), vol. 1, 108 (translation mine).

2. Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique et politique de la partie espagnole de l'isle Saint-Domingue. Avec des observations générales sur le climat, la population, les productions, le caractère & les moeurs des habitans de cette colonie et un tableau raisonné des différents parties de son administration; accompagnée d'une nouvelle carte de la totalité de l'isle*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: chez l'auteur, 1796), vol. 1, i–xxii.

3. Bernardo Vega, *Trujillo y Haití*, 3 vols. (Santo Domingo: Fundación Cultural Dominicana, 1988–2009), vol. 2, 39.

4. Vega, *Trujillo y Haití*, vol. 2, 352–53; Richard Lee Turits, "A World Destroyed, a Nation Imposed: The 1937 Haitian Massacre in the Dominican Republic," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82, no. 3 (2002): 590.

5. Vega, *Trujillo y Haití*, vol. 2, 33, 39; vol. 1, 323.

6. Samuel Martínez, *Peripheral Migrants: Haitians and Dominican Republic Sugar Plantations* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 44; Lauren Derby and Richard Turits, "Temwayaj Kout Kouto, 1937 / Eyewitness to the Genocide," in *Revolutionary Freedoms: A History of Survival, Strength and Imagination in Haiti*, ed. C. Accilien, J. Adams, and E. Méléance (Coconut Creek, FL: Caribbean Studies Press, 2006), 137–43; Turits, "A World Destroyed"; Lauren Derby, "Haitians, Magic, and Money: *Raza* and Society in the Haitian-Dominican Borderlands, 1900 to 1937," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36, no. 3 (1994): 488–526.

7. Vega, *Trujillo y Haití*, vol. 2, 343–44, 23–26.

8. Turits, "A World Destroyed"; Derby, "Haitians, Magic, and Money"; Derby and Turits, "Temwayaj Kout Kouto, 1937." Derby and Turits's findings were further confirmed by Edward Paulino, who, like them, also conducted a series of interviews with eyewitnesses of the massacre. See Edward Paulino, *Dividing Hispaniola: The Dominican Republic's Border Campaign against Haiti, 1930–1961* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 56–83.

9. Turits, "A World Destroyed," 593.

10. Freddy Prestol Castillo, *El Masacre se pasa a pie* (Santo Domingo: Editora Taller, 1973). Hereafter, page references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text; translations from Spanish are mine.

11. The victims are generally identified collectively as "Haitians" even if the book makes it clear that many were Dominican citizens of Haitian descent or long-term residents who considered themselves Dominicans and had never been to Haiti.

12. For literary analysis in English of *El Masacre se pasa a pie*, see, among other books, Doris Somner, *One Master for Another: Populism as Patriarchal Rhetoric in Dominican Novels* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), chapter 5; Jean Franco, *Cruel Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), chap-

ter 1; Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *On the Edge: Writing the Border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), chapter 5; Lorgia García-Peña, *The Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation, and Archives of Contradiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), chapter 3.

13. Presto Castillo himself pointed out in an interview with Doris Somner that the circumstances of the narrator's escape and imprisonment were the only part of *El Masacre se pasa a pie* that were not autobiographical (Somner, *One Master for Another*, 190).

14. Freddy Prestol Castillo, *Paisajes y meditaciones de una frontera* (Ciudad Trujillo: Editorial Cosmopolita, 1943), 63.

15. Derby, "Haitians, Magic, and Money," 517.

16. Rafael Darío Herrera, *Montecristi entre campeches y bananos* (Santo Domingo: Editora Búho, 2006), 139.

17. Herrera, *Montecristi entre campeches y bananos*, 139–40.

18. Most likely, the narrator—and, crucially, Prestol Castillo himself—was one of these judges, even if the book does not make this absolutely clear.

STORY OF A HISTORY

I wrote alone, beneath the border sky. I was in exile without knowing it. Although I wasn't locked up, in that wasteland it was clear enough that I was just another prisoner. Late at night I heard the endless howling of stray dogs, weightless like dry leaves, hungry, elastic like the hacienda's nooses. I wrote furtively, while the village slept. And in that deep meander of silence I pondered my sad fate: condemned to loneliness, like all my generation punished into silence. Each night I left the shack and gazed at the border night. Such beautiful stars. And then that sky, dense and low, seemed to smother me. In the intimacy of that moment a single word came to me: loneliness. It was a word filled with horror.

At night, by the light of a flickering yellow beeswax tallow candle, I read. Then I told myself: "I've gained in root what I've lost in leaves!"

I said it out loud, as if in protest or as a description of my life.

I felt comforted.

The village nights were heavy with dagger wounds, with freed prisoners. The night smelled of rum.

Alone, in that sad hut, surrounded by darkness, an accusatory inner voice whispered: "Coward! Get out!" The voice continued until dawn, when sleep overtook me.

Yes, I should have fled. I should be free. I should have forsaken passivity and hidden in a fisherman's sloop. Instead, I had succumbed to capture in exchange for the piece of bitter bread I gave my mother.

The letters from my lady friend, a schoolteacher who had managed to flee the country, repeated the same plea: Leave. Go in search of freedom! Instead, I remained in town like an ox yoked to a plow. I thought of the randomness of the days to come. Time passed but seemed to have come to a stop. Gray days, one like the next, the color of the grass that surrounded the village, that savannah that seemed like a stepmother, in whose solitary extension my thoughts roamed.

THIS IS WHAT TYRANNY IS. Tyranny has a face like a statue: it never laughs. Tyranny strangles you with its dangerous yellow gaze. (Each time I sat down to write, the yellow eyes of tyranny would stare up at me from the paper.)

Tyranny is the tyrant and also everyone who is not the tyrant. Tyranny is Don Panchito, the killer—he who would agonize for fourteen nights, crowing like a rooster, croaking like a frog, snorting like a pig.

Corporal Sugilio too: pincer hands, the deep-set eyes of a caged animal, a leopard's demeanor. Don Panchito, the killer, and Corporal Sugilio would be everywhere. Didn't they try to find my book? Didn't they spy on my writing? Ah, no. Don Panchito can't read! Neither can Corporal Sugilio. It's safe for me to write at night!

FOR ALL MY SUFFERING, I'd finished my book. If it had fallen into the hands of the secret police, I would have been condemned to death.

Danger turned me and my book into two oppressed beings. One day I escaped the town. From that moment on, the book had its own biography.

In the book's biography is the story of Doctor M and Father Oscar. The latter owes his life to these pages. I owe mine to them too. Here I will briefly tell you the story of the doctor and Father Oscar.

The doctor was a man of wisdom and human sensibility. He had a profound knowledge of this magical island, its rivers, its mountains, its

history and people. He could speak for hours about the Dominican man, from the time of Columbus's landing aboard The Isabella. *He could also tell you about all the species of the island's insects, birds, and fish. He was an exquisite conversationalist: volatile, a miracle worker, a mulatto Don Quixote. At times, he seemed deranged. But always brilliant and brave. At the university, his classes in medicine drew all sorts of students, even those from other disciplines. In the late afternoon, the doctor's lectures, uttered in a voice as soft as a soliloquy, attracted students from the School of Law. Sometimes those lectures were like slow rain, and at others like savage torrents. The digressions with which he enlivened them were marvelous. In short, a genius of a man! A well-known surgeon, clinician, botanist, novelist, speaker, researcher, troublemaker. He was asphyxiated by the tyranny's toxic atmosphere. Finally, suspect in the eyes of the dictatorship, we believed that at any moment, recklessly and under the cover of night, a paid assassin would put an end to his life as he exited his classroom or simply lingered on any corner.*

I had entrusted him with the original of my manuscript. He received it like something precious, eager to devour the scribbled text. I told him I wanted to copy it first, so he could read it more easily. He said no. He wanted to read it just as it had emerged from my mind.

IN HIS PRIVATE OFFICE on the outskirts of the capital, the doctor read the manuscript enthusiastically. From time to time he stopped reading and muttered to himself, interjecting opposing ideas, as if in discussion.

"What the devil!" he shouted.

"Goddamned country! . . . No, no, goddamned politicians! Because this is a poor and ignorant country, punished by hunger!

"Horror of horrors! Must we also repay debts of blood with blood? . . . No! Despite their last century's crimes, the Haitians are our most afflicted brothers, more afflicted even than we are.

"Goddamn dictatorship, destroying character and debasing men! Goddamned dictatorship . . . !"

Then he would fall silent again, walk in circles, pushing his spectacles back up on his nose and toying with his pointed moustache. All the while,

night fell around him. Crickets began to sing. And in the distance, the nightly voices of the mule drivers, hauling their loads of coal. From time to time he went to the high window as he read, catching a whiff of wild merengue or the far-off sound of midnight drums, tremulous and adulterated. The doctor stopped reading and said:

"Yes . . . ! Yes . . . ! Woe to us . . . ! Woe to us . . . ! Poor little creatures that we are . . . ! Rum, drumbeat, merengue . . . and dictators . . . ! What use are our deep blue evenings, those brilliant stars, this scent of night as deep as the bark of a dog in the countryside? All this beauty? For what . . . ? Just so we may bear witness to barbary . . . ! Ah, yes . . . the Haitians, poor things. . . . They need sanitation, food, education. . . . Savages . . . ? Not unlike ourselves!" And he would exclaim:

"Damn . . . !

"When will we become human . . . ?"

A bell rang. The old housekeeper knocked at his door.

A violent mob—Secret Service hounds—entered the residence where there dwelt a silence like that which resides in colonial churches on days with neither rites nor faithful, those profound moments in old churches as evening approaches. The killers came with their arrogance. They were delinquents in the service of repression, bottom-feeding sons without fathers or teachers or bread. Only curse words and mud. They proliferate like yellow flowers in garbage dumps. They came with their histrionics and their hunger, like wild dogs. And they too are dogs. They went right from being children to being men. They've roamed with neither purpose nor bread. Of course, their business is crime. In local gangs (thieves persecuted by the police). Also thieves in military uniforms and with all the authority invested in them. Hounds, like wild dogs. But that is the price of their bread. Bread veined through and through with drops of blood. Without even the consent of judges.

"Where is that man? Where is he?"

The old housekeeper trembled.

Hoarse mule-driver voices, good for running cattle like those I used to hear in my childhood on the haciendas in the east. Voices good for frightening cattle and men blurred in the immensity of pastures and fields. And those mule-drivers' hands: large, worn, good for grabbing the

head of a strong and savage bull, capable of quickly roping unruly and dangerous animals. A single toss of the rope and the bull is completely subjugated. Rough hands with which to crack the cattle whip at dusk. Corporal Sugilio roped cattle well but shouted at them even better. Now he'd forgotten all that. He'd also forgotten the art of controlling the plow handle and lifting the blade when it got caught in roots. Now he was a policeman, a hound. His boss paid him a miserable wage. It was like that for many of those from the countryside who would never plant again. The others, those from the city, don't even know the plow.

I digress as I remember the attack on the doctor. And I continue to digress. The evildoers' hands remind me of Doctor M's strong and colorful words in our talks. He would say:

"There won't be any chickens left on this earth . . . ! Those who should be planting corn are slack-mouthed in the parks and plazas, hungry, waiting for a chance to enroll in the army or become members of the Secret Service so they can kill . . . !"

The old housekeeper trembled. Horrified, she saw those clawlike hands going after the doctor. (The idler has a profession now; he is a detective.)

A hall door opened violently.

"Here I am!" (The doctor spoke with dignity.)

"Come on in!"

Corporal Sugilio: "Cuff him!" (Corporal Sugilio: A leopard. A cat. A vulture. A bird of prey. Red eyes, like those lights on the nearby television tower. He smells of rum. He fastens the handcuffs with astonishing speed.)

"Come on! Hurry up!"

The doctor spoke without losing his composure, arrogantly, contemptuously, calmly. Why was he so calm? Later we learned why. When he left the house, guarded by criminals, he had already decided to commit suicide in protest of the regime. (Before leaving his office, he looked down one last time at my book. It seemed as if even then, in that final instant, he was still contemplating a word or an image.)

Suddenly, one of the group penetrated the office. He must have been the leader of that mob. He took my book's original manuscript in his hands. Did he know how to read . . . ? Eager for blood, what did that

mastiff want? His ignorance denied him another victim, me! Finally, he threw the pile of papers back on the doctor's desk. The book remained open, on the table, like a prostrated and lifeless beggar. The ruffian looked around. Only books . . . ! What a shame, he thought. He searched every corner of the room. Only books . . . ! Then he picked up the doctor's fine watch he noticed sitting beside those papers.

A few hours later the city learned of the incident. The famous Doctor M had tried to commit suicide. Using a razor blade, and with surgical precision, he'd traced a line across his throat. They found him passed out in the colonial tower that serves as the prison. They rescued him and took him to the state's best hospital. The owner of the nation "had lamented it all" (according to the press), and ordered that the doctor "be saved."

In that situation, no one dared visit the doctor's stately and silent home, where his natural history museum, his library, the unpublished books he'd written, and that good and awkward housekeeper so like an old wall clock weary of time, remained. The housekeeper trembled, mute after what she had just witnessed. And upon the table, my original book manuscript, open!

FATHER OSCAR—HIS FRIEND, his priest, a humanist and brilliant intellectual, a man of great virtue—entered the room. He wanted to restore order. He was intrigued by that pile of papers. Immediately he saw it was an unpublished book. With his insatiable reader's curiosity, he began to read. Astonishment flooded his countenance, and he bent over the papers in earnest. As he read, his face registered profound emotion. Those pages seduced him. He gathered them up and hid them in his overcoat. Then he exited quickly. Father Oscar saved my life. And he saved the book as well. When the hounds returned—others now, and better educated—the pages were no longer there. The father hid them bravely, risking his own life, much like someone carrying a time bomb. Years later he sent me the originals. Earlier he'd told me he had burned them. From then on, my mother hid those pages covered with corrections and illegible notes, like buildings in construction adorned with cobwebs of scaffolding.

After the border, I roamed the city like a stray dog. A prisoner of permanent frustration, I had decided to escape. My problem was the book in the hands of my aged mother. I wanted to take it, but she adamantly refused. She had hidden it. She wouldn't tell anyone where! She was obsessed by the hounds of the regime. In her dreams, she told me, she had seen them arrive, laden down with putrid nights, rum, and daggers. They would kill her son! And she would continue to hide those papers.

THE POLICE KNOCKED ASSERTIVELY at my door. They were looking for a man. They knocked again. My sister was filled with fear. As my mother opened the door, my sister ran to the courtyard with the pages and buried them, as if sowing seeds of fear. False alarm. "We've got the wrong house," they said curtly. From then on, the book remained buried, yellowed from days and hiding places; yellow like those prisoners who never see the sun.

Then a splendid spring arrived—the sky shattered by rains—just what the country's cattle growers had hoped for, their fields burned, just that for which everyone's hunger had prayed. The water, reminiscent of those ancient floods seen by the old-timers, turned my book into the best sort of fertilizer for the courtyard's ferns. It had been forgotten by everyone. I too had forgotten it, just as certain parents forget their children. Then one day I asked about my book. My sister grew pale. She couldn't remember where she had buried it in her effort to save me! She almost dissolved in tears. We raked through the garden. It didn't appear. At that moment, I felt as if I had lost a child! Finally, it turned up: nothing but a compost heap. Once again, I wanted to weep: torn pages, almost illegible, bits and pieces eaten by insects, shreds turned to dung. My child had shown up at last, deformed, monstrous . . . but mine.

I took its dead body in my hands. With a father's care, I have tried to give it new life. This is the story of that history.

—FREDDY PRESTOL CASTILLO