Coloniality and the Contours of Global Production in the Dominican Republic and Haiti

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(Forthcoming in Antipode: A Journal of Radical Geography. Special Issue on Surplus Populations, edited by Heidi Nast.)

ABSTRACT: To destabilize sequentialist, stage-like understandings of global production, this paper examines changing relations of accumulation taking shape in the garment export industry in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. I draw upon a framework called “the coloniality of power” to consider the reworking of the social and spatial boundaries between hyper-exploited wage work and the people and places cast out from its relations. Through a critical ethnography of a restructuring garment firm and its operations in a trade zone on the Dominican-Haitian border, I argue for attention to how places and labouring bodies are marked differentially as Other. The production of racialized and gendered hierarchies of Otherness creates the conditions for relational and relative North-South divides, constituting uneven and fragmented geographies of production.

KEYWORDS: Global production networks, industrialization, coloniality, garment industry, Dominican Republic, Haiti, border production
I. Introduction

Despite growing recognition of the shared processes of accumulation between the global South and the global North (De Angelis 2001; Glassman 2006; Harvey 2003), dominant narratives of industrialization continue to represent the global South as the temporal and spatial antecedent of “advanced” capitalism in the global North. This developmental imaginary is most evident in the new “three worlds”: the postindustrial, the newly industrializing, and the developing (i.e., “not yet” industrial). Underlying this nomenclature rest persistent assumptions about stages of industrialization traversed (or not) by discrete nation-states that are moving forward or lagging on this singular path. Yet the trajectories of what Marx described as the “dull compulsion” of expanded reproduction and those of capitalist expansion to “new” places are neither linear nor developmental. In this paper, I argue that industrial geographies should be understood as part of what Anibal Quijano calls “the coloniality of power” (2000). Quijano’s concept indexes the ways that capitalist accumulation are constituted through the reworking of hierarchies of racialized and gendered difference, thus redrawing the social and spatial boundaries between hyper-exploited wage work and the people and places cast out from its relations. Considering spatial divisions of labour in this way, I argue for critical attention to the production of these hierarchies of Otherness. The coloniality of power creates the conditions for relational and relative North-South divides, continually reproducing, with difference, uneven and fragmented geographies of production.

After elaborating upon the relationship between coloniality, accumulation and place, sections three, four and five bring this perspective to bare on relations of accumulation that have taken shape in the garment export industries of the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Section three focuses on a late twentieth century project to constitute Dominican labour as low-wage and available for exploitation in export-oriented trade zones, specifically in garment production. This project coincided with the collapse of the country’s sugar industry and its racialized and spatial divisions of labour. Export-led manufacturing depended on and reworked these social and spatial relations, but, as the trade zones faced a crisis of profit in the early 2000s, both the state and capital attempted to reposition Dominican apparel workers as superfluous to the country’s accumulation
strategy. In turn, Dominican and US capital sought new spatial arrangements of accumulation to secure the extraction of surplus value in Haiti.

As in the Dominican Republic, the coloniality of power has shaped efforts to rework the spaces and subjects of hyper-exploitation in Haiti. Section four situates contemporary accumulation strategies at the Dominican-Haitian border by tracing the border’s transformation since the fall of Haiti’s 29-year dictatorship in the mid-1980s. Layers of neocolonial and nation-state violence, disinvestment and racism created the conditions of possibility for the construction of a border trade zone that recombined transnational capital, Dominican management and Haitian labour in a gendered and racialized hierarchy of production. Section five draws on observations inside two border factories where the apparent fixity of the border trade zone is underpinned by its “revolving door” character, as high numbers of managers and workers are either fired or decide to leave, propelled by workplace conflicts and the intensification of unevenness at the border.

I draw two main conclusions from these recent trajectories of the global garment trade. First, contemporary forms of integration and exclusion in the north of Hispaniola point to the need for geographies of global production that attend to the on-going, relational construction of the global North and South animated by the reproduction – with social and spatial difference – of the coloniality of power. Second, this process is not determined by capital alone: organized resistance and everyday livelihood practices limit the possibilities to fix accumulation to fragmented and uneven geographies.

II. The globalization of production and the coloniality of power

Since the 1970s, there has been a substantial surge in foreign direct investment (FDI) in industrial production in the global South. Scholars have, for the most part, characterized this increase as a new phenomenon that indicates a structural shift in global capitalism, arguing that the global South is no longer enrolled in capital accumulation primarily via the extraction of raw materials for industrial processes in the global North. Rather, transnational capital has been able to take advantage of depressed wages in the global South through developments in finance, advanced communications technologies,
as well as multilateral and macroregional trade liberalization. Mainstream debates about these new patterns of global production – in the circum-Caribbean, for example – have largely been restricted to analyses of the efficacy of these arrangements in terms of national capitalist development. These debates, however, obscure other geographies: on the one hand, they do not recognize the historical and material continuity of new production arrangements with those of the colonial past; and, they fail to engage with the racial and gendered ideologies and practices that are reproduced in relation to colonial formations, to great material and economic effect (Hart 2002; Nagar, Lawson, McDowell, and Hanson 2002).

Feminist scholars have provided alternative perspectives on the globalization of production through their studies of the transnational labour process. Drawing upon factory sociology, ethnography and feminist theory, the literature uncovers how the changing geographies of the industrial process are constituted through the construction of new social subjects, Third World women factory workers, at the intersection of patriarchy, capitalism, and the postcolonial state. While early feminist studies focused on the “Third World woman worker” as a transparent reference for a particular gendered subject, more recent work emphasizes the production of this subject in the labour process itself. In Wright’s incisive account of _maquilas_ in Ciudad Juárez, for example, the Third World woman is produced as disposable through a double movement: the extraction of surplus value from this previously non-waged subject is simultaneously a process of expulsion that renders her an unskilled body, wasted through the precise metrics of the capitalist labour process (Ibid.).

Existing feminist work to destabilize essentialist constructions of gender in transnational industries forms part of a critical project to undo sequential and geographically essentialist trajectories of global production. Conceptual challenges remain, however, in order to think through the on-going reproduction of global divisions of labour. My work builds on feminist scholarship that elucidates where and how the violent abstractions of race, gender, and nation become commensurable with hyper-exploitation by focusing on where and how these same abstractions render labouring bodies and places of production as surplus to the accumulation of capital (see Gilmore 2002; Gilmore 2008).
The work of Peruvian scholar Anibal Quijano can be helpful in this regard. Quijano names the articulation of hierarchical forms of social difference with wage and non-wage forms of labour control, “the coloniality of power.” He argues that the racial hierarchies forged through the conquest of the Americas constitute a terrain of articulation, one that *adapts historic patterns of exploitation to the contingent necessities and attendant conflicts of contemporary capitalist accumulation* (2000). It is this terrain of articulation that draws contingently from the invention of race through conquest in order to structure hierarchical relations of domination and exploitation:

The distribution of social identities [through racial categories] would henceforth sustain all social classification of the population in America. With and through it, diverse forms of exploitation, labour control and relations of gender would be articulated in changing forms depending on the necessities of power in each period. (Quijano 1998: 30, my translation)

In terms that are not dissimilar to those in the early work of Stuart Hall (1980; cf. Althusser 1990), coloniality does not presume any essential connection between subjects marked by social difference and the relations of exploitation and domination that they experience. The invention of race established particular geographical and social roles in the global division of labour of capitalist accumulation – *and* the spatial distribution of forms of labour, i.e., waged, paid, unpaid, slave, indentured, etc. – despite the fact that neither capitalism nor racism nor sexism exist in relations of necessary dependence. And yet, these structures are not simply analogical, as Spivak reminds us (1988). Rather, there is a way in which accumulation proceeds through the iterative production of the coloniality of power: that is, the reworking of hierarchies of social difference and forms of labour in order to recuperate profits from their interminable tendency towards stagnation and decline.

If coloniality is fundamentally a relational process linking hierarchies of raced and gendered workforces – made “national” through additional practices of the state – to capitalist accumulation, it is also, fundamentally, a spatial endeavour. It is not only the articulation of race, gender, class, and nation that shape the contours of wage labour and those rendered as superfluous to its relation, but also the relational production of place.
Places are processes formed through specific histories of accumulation, disinvestment, violence, dispossession, and resistance in relation to other places. The structural position of places within hierarchies of capital accumulation is reproduced (or not) through processes shot through by the coloniality of power (see Massey 1994; Sheppard 2002).

The relational production of place is central to the contours of accumulation that I trace in the following sections. Two key localities figure in this story: the inland city of Santiago, the erstwhile capital of export garment production in the Dominican Republic, and the border towns of Ouanaminthe (Haiti) and Dajabón (DR) (see Map). These places have very different trajectories: Santiago has long served as a center of capital accumulation in the country’s northern region, called the Cibao, possessing a well-established and globally connected provincial elite. The proximate border region, on the other hand, is defined by state violence, subsistence forms of livelihood, and substantial out-migration for much of the 20th century. I trace the conditions of possibility for the new connections being forged between Santiago and the border through apparel production outsourcing as part of redrawing the relational boundary between exploitable workers and those produced as excess to accumulation. In doing so, I discuss not only proximate changes in accumulation strategies in the Dominican Republic but the layers of violence, disinvestment and dispossession in the border region that make the latter conceivable as a new low-wage frontier.

[Insert Map Here]

The research for this project is part of a larger critical ethnography of the process of garment industry restructuring in the circum-Caribbean. My concern is to understand how hierarchies of social difference and value are produced and articulated through shifting geographies of unevenness shaped by histories of dispossession (see Hart 2002; 2004). I draw on interviews and observations with the largest employer in the Dominican trade zones, a Santiago-based company I call Dominican Textile, and community leaders at the border, especially in Ouanaminthe, undertaken over a one-year period from 2006 to 2007. My activities with the firm included observations of training practices and the daily activities of human resources personnel. My analysis in what follows thus
primarily reflects upon the views of managers and the narratives of Ouanaminthe residents who identify strongly with the town and have attempted to influence its recent trajectory in their activities as teachers, school principals, human rights workers, small business owners, politicians and activists. I do not address the experiences of recent migrants to Ouanaminthe nor of trade zone workers (often also newer migrants) in the present text.

III. “Beyond Cheap Labour” in the Dominican Republic

The creation of trade zones in the Dominican Republic was celebrated during the 1980s and 1990s by proponents of neoliberal policy for diversifying exports following declines in sugar prices and shrinking US sugar import quotas, the country’s source of foreign exchange for much of the 20th century (Kuczynski and Williamson 2003). Sugar plantations promoted through the parallel US occupations of the Dominican Republic (1916-1924) and Haiti (1915-1934) incorporated Haitian workers, mostly men, in the Dominican Republic as low-wage labour, forming a long-standing “temporary” workforce confined through policing, deportations, and racial profiling to the plantation regions in the southeast until the model’s crisis in the 1980s. Dominican men worked in related agro-industrial production as well as state-promoted manufacturing, although the total wage employment in both activities barely topped 100,000 (Lozano 2001; Moya Pons 1992).

Structural adjustment, including two steep currency devaluations, and President Reagan’s Caribbean trade policy facilitated a proliferation of trade zones in the 1980s. Over the course of the decade, the number of zones grew from three, employing 16,000 workers, to twenty-five, employing 135,000 workers. Employment reached its peak in 1998 at nearly 200,000 workers (CNZFE 1999). Employment generation was just as significant as the distribution of these jobs. Trade zones were established in secondary cities and towns in part because provincial industrialists, excluded from import-substitution subsidies from the Dominican state largely reserved for state clients in the capital city, sought alternative avenues for capital accumulation (Moya Pons 1992). Thus, the zones were significant in arresting, to a degree, out-migration from provincial
areas to the capital city (Ariza 2000; Santana 1994) as the possibility of paid employment, albeit poorly remunerated and insecure in multiple ways, grew in other regions of the country.

Trade zones were initially promoted to absorb Dominican men retrenched from collapsing sugar mills; Dominican women, however, formed two-thirds of the workforce in the first two decades of export manufacturing (Portorreal 1991; Safa 1990; Safa 1995). Not surprisingly, early studies of the country’s new export strategy emphasized its gendered aspects – especially changing relations in households associated with new female entrants into relations of wage employment. In hindsight, two other aspects were key to this “feminization” of labour: regional consolidation of the garment industry and a reconfiguration of racialized spatial divisions of labour. First, while jobs were created in trade zones based in declining sugar mill towns associated with the eastern plantation economy (alleviating the local burden of restructuring to a degree while dramatically altering gender relations), employment largely consolidated in the northern Cibao region, an area associated with smallholding agriculture and secondary agricultural exports like tobacco (Schrank 2003). The center of this strategy was the city of Santiago where local industrialists took over many US-owned operations or formed joint ventures with US firms in the trade zones, a sector dominated by garment production for the US market. As we will see, this contingent outcome of northern regional dominance would prove highly significant in shaping the spatial reorganization of the industry since the 2000s, as well as gendered forms of exclusion in the Dominican garment sector.

Second, trade zones represented a spatial strategy on the part of the state and capital to produce Dominican labour as an exclusive object of low-wage exploitation by multinational capital in the Dominican Republic. The incorporation of Haitian workers in Dominican trade zones was prohibited in practice. The director of the Industrial Promotion Agency (Corporación de Fomento Industrial, CFI) explained the restrictions on foreign workers in Dominican trade zones as follows:

…[T]he effort by the government to construct and develop industrial parks is to solve the problem of unemployment. The trade zones must be for Dominican workers. For this reason, the employment of foreign machine operators, especially
Haitians, must be strictly forbidden because this would provoke a devaluing of wages since Haitians come to the country and work for anything.\textsuperscript{vii}

The notion that the mere presence of working Haitian bodies decreased wages justified state efforts to distinguish, contain and separate Haitian and Dominican workers. The context of this spatial strategy, however, was precisely the collapse of state schemes to manage the Haitian workforce through guest worker programs and the containment of Haitian workers to sugar concerns, the latter being dismantled throughout the 1980s. As Haitian workers were incorporated massively as a largely undocumented workforce in cities and towns, as well as in domestic and secondary agricultural exports (like coffee) (see Lozano 2001),\textsuperscript{viii} Dominican trade zones reinforced new geographies of segmentation, guaranteeing the relational and hierarchical reproduction of “Dominican” and “Haitian” labour, violent abstractions underpinning a gradient of hyper-exploitation (see Merrill, this issue).

By the early 2000s, Santiago, a city of just over half a million inhabitants, was home to the country’s largest trade zone, employing nearly 40,000 workers, principally dedicated to apparel production for the US market. The city also anchored three other zones on its edges while garment firms based in Santiago and the nearby town of La Vega subcontracted production to a half-dozen zones in secondary towns in the Cibao. Thirty-five percent of the occupied workforce in the province of Santiago was directly employed in trade zone production and the region as a whole concentrated two-fifths of all trade zone jobs in the country (PNUD 2008: 258-261). The consolidation of trade zone employment in the Cibao saw a decisive shift in the “feminization” of the workforce: men made up an increasing proportion of workers, reaching near parity in garment production by the middle of the decade. The slow exclusion of female workers can be attributed to a complex mix of factors: my research suggests the importance of paternalist labour relations in the Cibao, the recuperation of sewing as skilled, masculine work related to the industry’s consolidation and restructuring in the 1990s, and growing participation of women in international migration.\textsuperscript{ix} Industry consolidation underwrote the accrual of domestic returns from garment exports to a handful of Santiago-based
industrialists whose firms grew at breakneck speed in terms of employment, from a few hundred to as many as fourteen thousand workers in less than a decade.

As garment exports slowed due to heightened competition for an increasingly flat US apparel market in the 2000s, garment producers faced an emboldened state discourse highlighting a national imperative to “move beyond” goods considered to be of low technology, especially apparel. For example, the government’s National Competitiveness Council (CNC in Spanish), formed in 2004, exhorted investors and entrepreneurs to participate in transforming the country into a “knowledge-based” economy. As one of the “countries of ‘late industrialization,’” the CNC competitiveness plan states, “[the Dominican Republic] cannot commit the mistake of arriving late again to the era of knowledge” (CNC 2005). The head of the CNC drew intense criticism from the garment sector’s proponents when, on a popular television talk show program, he stated that the Dominican worker at a sewing machine today should be at a computer tomorrow. The images, materials and websites promoting the Dominican Republic’s new investment strategy with state support erased garment production altogether from the available skills and labour that the country had to offer investors.

Reacting directly to this new “high-tech” discourse, some firm owners in Santiago launched a campaign to defend their interests in the trade zone model and the garment sector, while others responded to the decline in profits by moving their capital to other locations and/or sectors. The actions of the latter group, joined by a considerable number of footloose foreign firms, led to a steep decline in garment employment. Between 2000 and 2007, employment in the main Santiago trade zone shrank by more than half to less than 18,000 workers and nearly 40,000 workers were retrenched from trade zones in the surrounding region. Trade zone producers seized upon the layoffs to demand labour law “reform” (i.e., new forms of flexibilization) and to advocate, unsuccessfully, for a currency devaluation, while retrenched workers sought livelihoods in an increasingly job-less economic context, the possibilities for which remained highly circumscribed by gender.

Those firms who continued to advocate for the trade zone model and the garment sector argued that their product was already a high-technology good that had the added benefit of employing “untrainable” workers. Their efforts were led by Dominican Textile
which had become the largest Dominican trade zone company in the country as a result of industry consolidation and the wave of closures in the mid-2000s. The company employed one-fifth of the garment sector workforce and was nominally the largest private-sector employer in the country. The owner of Dominican Textile, and the most vocal spokesperson for the sector, explained his position in the face of the state’s emboldened technology discourse:

The government hasn’t educated the people. I have 12,000 employees, sixty percent of whom are between the ages of 25 and 35. There is no way in their lifetime that they will become proficient enough in computers or in English to work in a call center.

While emphasizing the significance of his firm in job creation for a workforce rendered untrainable, in his narrative, by the state, the owner occupied the paradoxical position of creating the conditions for moving assembly work to Haiti. Pointing to his hand-held Blackberry device, he continued:

The components of this may be low tech but it is still a high tech piece of equipment… Microsoft has parts of its product that are of varying technology too. The same goes for clothes. We do all the design, weaving and dyeing right here [in Santiago]. Only sewing, like what we are doing in Haiti, has no technology.

Sewing operators continued to comprise the majority of the Dominican garment workforce; nevertheless, through his statement, the owner wished to project a future where the Santiago garment industry could reposition itself as a producer of “value added” goods and as a mediator of socially and spatially distant low-wage labour. The apparent conflict with the state, then, was premised upon the pace and process of worker disposability, factors that would shape which fractions of capital would be best positioned to accumulate returns in a reworked arrangement of accumulation.

The owner of Dominican Textile, as well as a handful of other firms I interviewed, was seeking to reposition his company in the global supply chain in reaction to the profit crisis and as part of a strategy to shape its outcome in the Dominican context. By the early 2000s, the firm had successfully convinced both the Dominican and Haitian
governments, in close cooperation with US-based jeans company Levi’s, and with the eventual support of the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation (IFC), that the future of Santiago lay in the construction of a border trade zone in Ouanaminthe, one hundred and twenty kilometers west of the city. Between restructuring and mass retrenchment, coupled with an emboldened state discourse of a new “knowledge” economy, the hierarchies of devalued labour and the spaces for this devaluation were being reworked between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. As Santiago’s garment workers were being rendered superfluous to capital accumulation, the contours of devalued labour were to be redrawn across this national boundary.

IV. Reworking coloniality: Producing (at) the Haitian-Dominican Border

What US and Dominican capital would come to see as a “greenfield” site of production at the border was in fact the effect of layers of violence, dispossession and disinvestment enacted through intermittent interventions of the state. During the early decades of the twentieth century, the border region was regarded as a fluid space of passing punctuated by military outposts and weakly institutionalized customs houses following the US occupation (Derby 1994). The Massacre River marked the northern frontier, named for an 18th century confrontation between buccaneers and Spanish colonists and powerfully resignified through the violence of modern statehood. In 1937, many of the estimated 15,000 victims of President Trujillo’s ethnic cleansing campaign, directed against Haitian and Haitian-descent peasants in the northwest of the Dominican Republic, either crossed the river to safety or died there. This history recalls the powerful metaphor of an “open wound” coined by Chicana theorist and poet Gloria Anzaldúa in describing the US-Mexico border as “una herida abierta,” she continues, “where the Third World grates against the First and bleeds” (1987: 3). Of course, the tearing and suturing of this insular border does not map onto a Third World/First World division; rather, as we will see, a reworking of coloniality through geometries of power and racism at intersecting scales is intensifying uneven geographies between the Dominican Republic and Haiti producing a relational and relative North/South divide.
The changing dynamics of Haitian-Dominican integration are powerfully illustrated through transformations shaping the island’s largest border towns – Ouanaminthe and Dajabón – in the more than two decades that have followed the unraveling of Haiti’s 29-year patrilineal dictatorship. Following the massacre, Haitian residents in Ouanaminthe lived for decades without venturing to Dajabón, a distance of one kilometer. For some, this was a political and personal decision taken in the wake of the massacre, although the Haitian state also forbade cross-border traffic, at least under Francois Duvalier. A clandestine trade existed between the two militaries, but, for the most part, cross-border activities were restricted. For five decades following 1937, then, residents of Ouanaminthe had little to do with Dajabón and producers in the surrounding Cibao region. Ouanaminthe was integrated into the social and economic fabric of Haiti’s northeast: agricultural products such as mango, yucca, rice, and avocado were brought to the town centre from the surrounding countryside and these goods were sold to markets in nearby Fort Liberté and Cap-Haïtien. The only major investment in the region was a large sisal plantation in nearby Morne Casse just east of Fort Liberté that operated for nearly forty years, generating considerable employment in Haiti’s northeast before being abandoned by its US owners when the market for sisal collapsed. Local residents’ recollections of Ouanaminthe during the period of the border’s closure are deeply nostalgic: a pastoral town of about 10,000 - 15,000 people where everyone knew each other, free from the trappings of urban vice like bars, crime and prostitution. The town was based around four streets. In the 1970s, electricity (between three and six hours a day) and a water system were established to serve those who lived in the town center. The military had a significant presence, the largest outside of Port-au-Prince – nearly six hundred soldiers at the time of its disbandment – incorporating recruits from the northeast region and from the town itself. Shortly after the fall of the Duvalier regime in 1986, restrictions on cross-border trade were eased and a bi-national market quickly emerged, fuelled by Haitian tariff liberalizations imposed by the US and International Financial Institutions (IFIs) (Saintilus 2007; Weisbrot 1997). On Mondays and Fridays, local Haitians began to cross the bridge over the Massacre to Dajabón to buy foodstuffs, and on Saturdays and Tuesdays, local Dominicans started coming to Ouanaminthe to purchase cosmetics, used clothes, electronics and US rice that had flooded the Haitian
Other forms of cooperation emerged (and continue), based on the widening inequality between the two countries. For example, one farmer and peasant leader explained the practice of hiring Dominican combines for the rice harvest, a service paid in produce to the machine’s owner.

Ouanaminthe would not be immune, however, to Haiti’s upheavals in the wake of the Lavalas movement that gathered force during the late 1980s and swept its leader, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, into power in 1990. Amongst other reforms, Aristide abolished the army, a force that had brutally served the interests of Haiti’s parasitical, albeit fractious, political elite (Dupuy 1988; Trouillot 1990). The move further isolated Ouanaminthe from the Haitian state. After only eight months in power, Aristide was ousted by a military coup and the Organization of American States (OAS) called for an embargo in condemnation of the action in 1991.

Under the embargo, Ouanaminthe quickly became the terrestrial port for a significant portion of oil-based imports from the Dominican Republic, sanctioned by Dominican President José Joaquin Balaguer, the intellectual author of modern Dominican anti-Haitianism (San Miguel 1997) and vocal opponent of President Aristide. As the gasoline, diesel, and kerosene trade across the Massacre River began to supplement more and more of Haiti’s basic energy needs, a diverse influx of migrants from all over the country, what residents described as akin to a gold rush, arrived in town to participate. The new migrants included wealthy and well-connected traders as well as the land- and capital-poor. These latter migrants lived in temporary shelters along the river and sold gallons and jugs of gasoline that they carried across the river to intermediaries. The wealthy traders, who came from the main cities, transported fuel to semi-paralyzed industries and businesses in the country’s urban centers. Long-time Ouanaminthe residents likened the effect of the embargo to an explosion of the social and economic structures of the town and deep political rifts emerged between pre-1991 residents and new migrants.

In effect, the embargo set off a series of events that transformed both Ouanaminthe and neighbouring Dajabón, and their relative positions, in the evolving and inter-related patterns of accumulation and dispossession between the two countries. The embargo’s effect on Haiti’s productive sectors was devastating and the subsequent
political instability and neocolonial interventions continued to hamper the prospects for (re)construction. After serving as a temporary site for gasoline provisions, Dajabón became a permanent depot supplying a significant portion of goods produced in the Dominican Republic, or transshipped through the country. The market between the two towns was transformed in scale, becoming a main channel of supply for the northern region of Haiti, reflecting a new trajectory of inter-dependence (Dilla and de Jesus 2005).

While the fraught integration of the two towns into regional circuits of subsistence and accumulation generated significant, albeit unevenly distributed, infrastructure and service improvements in Dajabón, Ouanaminthe’s existing infrastructure buckled under the pressures of migration and commercial growth, hampered by the repeated collapse of the Haitian state. The two diesel-powered generators that provided limited electricity stopped functioning completely in 1998 and the water service was limited to one day a week for a fraction of the population. In contrast, the town’s commercial character was unmistakable: a host of money changers were available seven days a week and three banks and five micro-credit institutions were concentrated in the town center. Many homes doubled as warehouses or hotels; the town’s population grew by thousands on market days while flatbed trucks and transport trailers grumbled across the river on a daily basis. By the time Dominican Textile was considering the border and the space between these two towns for a trade zone, Ouanaminthe’s urban population had grown approximately four-fold in a decade reaching between fifty and seventy thousand inhabitants.xviii

Dominican Textile began to explore possibilities for setting up a border trade zone in Ouanaminthe in the early 2000s. Although the border was a new site for export apparel production, the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince had been one of the earliest locations in the Caribbean of the so-called “new international division of labour” in the 1970s. More than 150 export factories operated there during that decade, producing garments and toys for the US market (Trouillot 1990). The country outpaced its circum-Caribbean neighbours; the proportion of its manufacturing exports reached fifty-eight percent of the country’s total exports by 1980, the highest in the macro-region (Bulmer-Thomas 2003: 320). Wages in export zones in the early 1980s in Haiti and the Dominican Republic were comparable, equivalent to 0.55 and 0.58 US cents per hour.
respectively (Safa 1995: 12). Export manufacturing in Port-au-Prince largely collapsed under the OAS embargo, however. In the 2000s, US, and now Dominican, firms were (again) seeking subcontracting opportunities in the Haitian capital. Three large- and five medium-sized Dominican firms, mostly Santiago-based, set up joint ventures or wholly-owned plants in the Haitian capital, together with two multinationals (US-based Hanesbrand and Canadian-based Gildan) that established knitting mills in the Dominican Republic to supply sewing operations in Haiti. These efforts re-engaged former Haitian garment and “light” manufacturing elites who had established the country’s circum-Caribbean dominance in these sectors three decades earlier, while they also created new links at the border, mediated by Dominican Textile as I discuss below. Political instability and on-going labour conflicts, including frequent transportation strikes, continued to hamper efforts to restart the export garment sector in the capital.

From the perspective of capital, the border trade zone represented a spatial “fix” (Harvey 1999 [1982]) that guaranteed conditions of control and security unavailable in Port-au-Prince. The zone was completed thanks to a loan from the World Bank’s IFC to Dominican Textile. In fact, the project received the only significant development financing in Haiti during a three-year suspension of aid imposed on the Aristide government led by the United States.xix Security was to be guaranteed by strategically positioning the project on the border. The zone was built on an oxbow of the Massacre River (see Figure 1). Four-fifths of the area was in Haitian territory while one-fifth was in Dominican territory, privatizing a piece of the border and guaranteeing access to Dominican territory. Haitian workers entered and exited via a bridge that crossed the river, and Dominican management, a handful of Haitian managers, jeans and t-shirt components and finished garments gained access from Dominican territory, crossing the border a few meters inside the zone. The strict expression of this politico-territorial divide stood in contrast to the frequent, and irregularly policed, crossings of Haitian migrants on either side of the zone to seek livelihoods in the Dominican Republic. Although the border was officially open for market days allowing traders to enter Dajabón for commerce, the river was traversed daily by petty traders, undocumented day labourers, and job seekers from Ouanaminthe. Since the building of the zone, this activity has continued although the fields around the built area of the zone remain highly
policing: a constant military presence thwarts efforts to graze cattle or forage food in the adjacent fields.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

V. Disposability at the border: Managing the trade zone

In late 2006, after several months of negotiation with Dominican Textile, I was permitted limited access to the border trade zone. My conversations were confined to Spanish speakers because of my language ability and my presence was greeted with considerable suspicion. The latter stemmed from a highly publicized international labour rights campaign two years prior to my observations after workers who were organizing a union in the trade zone faced severe repression by the Dominican military. After several weeks of conflict, Dominican Textile locked out the workers for three days and subsequently fired 254 leaders and supporters of the union in the Levi’s plant, while the other contractor, Hanesbrand (formerly Sara Lee) announced it would leave the zone. After a negotiated settlement involving, in addition to the union and the company, the World Bank’s IFC, the Levi’s company, and a US-based labour rights group, Dominican Textile and the union signed a collective agreement that raised weekly base wages to 900g (US$23.68 per week) and established basic procedures for grievances. Reflecting on the previous conflict, the owner of Dominican Textile expressed disbelief at the turn of events in 2004: “We were bringing jobs to a town with 90 percent unemployment. I believed we would be greeted with a red carpet.”

Production in the trade zone followed similar outsourcing patterns that had characterized the industry since the beginning of the export apparel boom in the 1980s with the exception that knit fabric was now partly being milled in the Dominican Republic. In the t-shirt factory, knit material arrived from a Hanesbrand mill in the US (via the Dominican Republic) and from the Dominican town of Bonao where the US manufacturer had established a 400-person facility as part of its “co-production” strategy with Haiti. Receivers weighed the material and logged the shipment into the North Carolina-based company’s tracking system, triggering a ten-day “put through” clock at the end of which some 35,000 dozen t-shirts were transported by truck to the largest port.
in the Dominican Republic and shipped to the US market. The factory was not yet at full capacity and dozens of sewing machines from Hanesbrand, marked with shipping labels from a previous journey from Texas to San Pedro, Mexico, stood crated in one corner awaiting the expansion of production. The gendered, national and racialized division of labour that pervaded the logic of the zone operated as a micropolitics at the level of the factory floor. Dominicans, mostly men except for a handful of women in quality control, worked as supervisors, auditors, dispatchers and in maintenance and inventory. All the operators were Haitian. Eighty percent of the operators making t-shirts were women while men made up forty percent of the operators producing jeans. I was told that the difference in the sex/gender ratio between the two factories had to do with the quality of material – knit material for t-shirts is lighter than the woven material of jeans. This logic (which operated in the Dominican Republic as well) normalized a gendered gap in wages: operators in the t-shirt factory on average earned about thirty percent less than their counterparts in jeans, where, in addition to higher piece rates, there were more specialized, relatively better paid operations.

One expression of the micropolitics that underpinned the hierarchical divisions of labour of the zone was that related to drinking water. Each of the areas on the factory floor where Dominicans worked had bottled water stations, sometimes covered by a cardboard box or a cloth. One of my guides, an assistant in human resources, offered me an unsolicited explanation: while there was nothing wrong with the water consumed by Haitian workers through a ground filtration system, Haitian water could harm Dominicans who were accustomed to “their” water. The efforts to hide the water stations suggested otherwise, and several weeks after my visit, a significant conflict arose when Haitian workers blockaded the bottled water delivery truck from Dajabón following several days where the water system in the Levi’s factory had been inoperable.

Perhaps it was conflicts like those over water, conflicts that were inseparable from the national difference between management, on the one hand, and the workforce, on the other, that prompted Dominican employees in the zone to emphasize the temporary nature of their work there. Most Dominican employees made a point of explaining to me that the goal of Dominican Textile was to make the plants Haitian-run as soon as possible. No managers expressed any reservations about this projected change, one that
would, given the company’s trend towards shutting down factories in the Dominican Republic, likely leave them without jobs in the sector. I soon realized that very few members of management and supervision had been working for more than a year in the trade zone; the general managers of the Levi’s and Hanes factories had been replaced two and three times (respectively) and I met no Dominican supervisors who had been at the zone more than eighteen months. The high management turnover suggested that work in the border trade zone was either not highly desired by the company’s Santiago-based employees or that one strategy to deal with conflicts was to replace managers and supervisors, or a combination of both.

One exception to the revolving door of management was Sergio, the company’s head of human resources in the zone. Sergio was the first Dominican Textile employee to arrive in Ouanaminthe before construction was completed; he was charged with hiring and training Haitian workers for garment assembly. Sergio had set up four training centres in Santiago in the previous decade during the company’s expansion there; like many of his male counterparts who I met in the company, he had started as an operator in his late teens and worked his way up the highly gendered ladder of management.

Sergio was the only Dominican manager who had spent time in Ouanaminthe (mostly during the initial phase of the project when he set up a provisional training centre at one of the town’s two night clubs) and who still visited on occasion. His views of the project and the town echoed those of the company president in Santiago: “Go to Ouanaminthe on any day of the week,” he told me, “and it looks like a Sunday afternoon. Everyone is just hanging around, not doing anything.” Sergio thus saw himself as contributing to much needed development of the town and its inhabitants by providing training and jobs to an otherwise unoccupied workforce. Escorting me between the Levi’s and Hanes plants one day, Sergio was handed a request for a new operator from a Haitian supervisor that he had trained as an operator three years earlier. “Look,” he showed me the form, “now [the supervisor] has good judgment [tiene criterio]. He wants someone who is punctual.” Sergio saw himself as contributing to a natural maturation of the workforce from a state of indiscipline and non-productivity to one of responsibility and efficiency. He expressed deep satisfaction in how the plants were coming up to
speed and how workers who once “couldn’t comprehend producing hundreds of pieces in a day” were producing just as well as their Santiago counterparts.

Standing on the bridge that crossed the Massacre at the Haitian exit of the zone just before the end of the shift one day, Sergio pointed to the women, dressed from the waist down, who were washing clothes in the river below. “When I first arrived, there were many more [washer women],” he told me. “I talked to all the different [church] denominations [in Ouanaminthe] and asked them to create awareness with the people so that they wouldn’t wash clothes like that near the zone. It creates a bad image.” He continued, “How can we be sewing fashionable clothes here next to so many naked (sic) people?… For foreigners and Dominicans, it’s very shocking.” Sergio seemed to see no contradictions between what he perceived as “idle” labour in Ouanaminthe and his own efforts to influence where and how women forged their livelihoods through daily, often paid, tasks of social reproduction. Work in Ouanaminthe, revolving around these activities and the multiple forms of livelihood that ebbed and flowed with exchange rates, prices and politics of the binational market, was conveniently reduced to a latent source of labour power in management’s view of the town.

Like Sergio, Martin, one of two Haitian human resource managers, seemed to perceive his role as facilitating worker development but expressed reservations about its prospects. Martin was originally from Port-au-Prince and lived in Santiago where he had gone to university. He had been working at the trade zone for one year. Martin lamented the low level of education of the zone’s current employees who mostly came from rural areas. One of his hopes was for a second shift to be established in the zone because, as he expressed to me, “nobody in Ouanaminthe was going to sacrifice their schooling to work in the trade zone.” Martin expressed his own desires to continue his studies, hampered by the demands of his current job. His perception that the trade zone offered limited opportunities for the upward mobility of Haitians was echoed to me in my interviews in town.xxi

Martin’s office received a steady stream of workers, mostly accompanied by supervisors, asking for permission for special leaves or severance pay due to illnesses or injuries. The tension between extracting surplus value from labour and the need for workers to be socially reproduced as able bodies played out repeatedly in these
interactions. One morning while I was in his office, a woman came to see Martin without her supervisor and showed him her swollen foot. She asked for permission to come to work a half hour late each day in order to seek treatment until the foot healed. Martin agreed. A few minutes later the injured workers’ Dominican supervisor came into the office and demanded that Martin reverse his decision: “Who knows when [the foot] will heal?” he complained. Martin replied curtly that the worker would produce better with a healthy foot and the supervisor retreated to find a more senior manager to override Martin’s decision.

Representatives from Santiago arrived at the trade zone weekly to solve problems and deal with continued conflicts between workers and management. The delegation of Santiago managers that I accompanied on one of their weekly trips to the zone was led by the company’s division head, José Antonio. When he arrived in his white SUV at the factory, José Antonio was greeted as “el ministro” by zone managers and the union. He laughed at the designation which signified the importance of his role as an arbitrator and decision-maker. He immediately faced an all male delegation of union leaders demanding an audience with him to discuss recent conflicts. Later on, he shared that the biggest problem the company was dealing with in the zone was frequent work stoppages. “[The workers] stop easily,” he commented, “but we are getting a handle on it.” Details were not made available to me but clearly the practices of negotiated accommodation and training, represented in my interactions with Sergio and Martin, were not the only forms of power exercised to extract surplus value. Several strategies were evident. First, the company had set up a TV and radio station inside the trade zone. The radio station allowed management to control the audio content on the factory floor and, together with the TV station, to extend the company’s influence in the northeast region of Haiti where the project was and continued to be controversial. Second, the company continued its practice (as in 2004) of mass firings as a strategy to deal with conflict. In a subsequent interview with the Haitian Ministry of Social Affairs, I learned that the company had officially reported firing 170 workers in the first four months of 2007, nearly fifteen percent of the workforce. The bulk of these workers were fired for carrying out a work stoppage at the beginning of the year when the company attempted to change how the daily production totals would be tallied. The revolving door of workers was evident in
the streets of Ouanaminthe where I visited on several occasions over the year and lived the following summer. Grey trade zone t-shirts, given to each worker when they began to work at the zone (and deducted from their salary if they were lost), were worn by what seemed like hundreds of people in town, markers of the pace at which the company fired workers and disgruntled workers sought out livelihoods in commerce and other activities.

VI. Conclusion: Coloniality and its limits

Garment industry restructuring between Santiago and Ouanaminthe is premised upon the construction of hierarchies of labour, and spatializing these to produce an industry ordered by the violent abstractions of race, gender, and nation. The coloniality of power constitutes the terrain of this process, linking hierarchical, colonial forms of social difference to capital accumulation, a process that not only reproduces (with difference) race, gender, and nation, but one that also renews capital accumulation. Rather than understanding the results of this process in terms of a fixed North-South geography, one that reproduces static and sequentialist representations of industrial change, I have proposed an approach that examines the relational reproduction of North-South divides. In the reworking of accumulation between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, these divides can be seized upon by capital. While the bulk of profits extracted via transnational industries like apparel continue to accumulate in the geographic global North, the reproduction of this system is premised upon the on-going construction of North-South divides in both the geographic North and South (see Mohanty 2003).

The story of the border trade zone project reveals how the recuperation of coloniality is dependent on the production of place. Layers of dispossession, violence, disinvestment and neocolonialism produced Ouanaminthe as a site for capitalist production. Historical and contemporary geographies of violence at the border, the force of the embargo, on-going foreign interventions in Haiti and the fractiousness of the Haitian state created the conditions of possibility for this “new” low-wage frontier. These factors are contingently linked to processes to renew accumulation in the Dominican Republic, including strategies that render Dominican garment workers as
superfluous to the new “knowledge economy” paradigm advanced by the state and capital.

Although the coloniality of power shapes the terrain of hierarchical social difference through which new contours of accumulation are forged and places are reproduced, the outcomes of this process are not determined by capital alone. The shifting boundary between hyper-exploited wage work and the exclusion of people and places from this relation – a change I have traced between Santiago and Ouanaminthe and in daily operations of the border trade zone – is shaped by social relations, especially diverse forms of class struggle, state violence, and neocolonial intervention, that result from particular histories and geographies. In the case of the border trade zone, the very conditions of possibility for its establishment – the embargo, the creation of Ouanaminthe as a pole of migration and as a regional market, and the divisive cross-border politics that have accompanied this process – continue to shape, and indeed to limit, the fixing of accumulation to this margin of intense uneveness. These counter-tendencies manifest themselves at the level of organized protests, like those of the union, and the everyday practices of managers and workers. The continual replacement of management, the waves of firing of workers, the barriers workers face to reproduce themselves as able, labouring bodies in the context of Ouanaminthe’s collapsed infrastructure, and the unmet expectations of Haitians for social mobility through work in the trade zone represent but a few examples of the limitations to the project of accumulation at the border. These different forms of resistance, resilience, and reworking (see Katz 2004) and the complex geographies of dispossession, accumulation and disinvestment between the Dominican Republic and Haiti will continue to shape the geographies of global production, and the intensification or the smoothing out of emerging North-South divides.

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the research assistance of Mr. Delien Blaise in Ouanaminthe, the staff at the Association of Trade Zones Industries in Santiago, and the funding I received for this project from the Macarthur Program for the Interdisciplinary Study of Global Change and the Department of Geography, University of Minnesota, as well as the
University of Minnesota Cartography lab. I am most grateful to Haroldo Dilla and Yannick Etienne for their encouragement and intellectual support of my work at the border, and to Heidi J. Nast, Josh Barkan, and the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable suggestions on the text. All errors of interpretation and analysis are my own.

References


Endnotes

i Widely read texts on this phenomenon include Piore and Sabel (1984), Harvey (1989), Sassen (1988), and Held et al. (1999). The original thesis of this so-called “new international division of labour” is credited to Fröbel et al. (1980). Peter Dicken argues that economic geographers have largely ignored these geographies (2004) and has been at the forefront of empirically tracking their complex trajectories in multiple editions of his volume *Global Shift*.

ii Key scholarship that engages this debate in relation to the Dominican Republic includes Kaplinsky (1993), Willmore (1995), Schrank (2004), Gereffi et al. (2002), Heron (2004; 2006), and Isa et al. (2003).


v I address those of retrenched Santiago garment workers elsewhere (Werner 2010). Due both to my limited language skills in Haitian Creole and the contentious politics of the border trade zone, I did not interview Haitian trade zone workers. Future scholarship at the border will hopefully address this lacuna.

vi It is worth noting that as part of the obfuscatory developmental ideology linked to exports, sugar under neoliberalism was constructed in discourse and government statistics as a “traditional” export while apparel and other light manufactures were designated as
“non-traditional.” Large-scale sugar production gained ascendancy in the early decades of the 20th century, a substantially different timeframe than sugar production in the rest of the Caribbean (which is not to say that claims about “traditional” exports should be taken for granted in those countries either). See Kaplinsky (1993) on the apparel sector as a new form of “industrial monocropping” and Pantojas-Garcia on the much feted new service industries in the Caribbean (such as call centres) (2001). Their arguments highlight the iterative reproduction – that is, reproduction with social and spatial difference – of colonial forms of labour control and accumulation.

vii “El Proceso de Dominicanización de las Zonas Francas” [The procession of Dominicanization of the trade zones], Rumbo, Mirta Rodriguez Calderon, 15-21 de Octubre, 1997. 51-3. Restrictions on foreign workers in the Dominican Republic is not specific to the trade zones: the Dominican Labour Code limits the proportion of foreign workers permitted in any firm in the country to 20 percent. In practice, this provision, while not enforced, is discursively mobilized, as it is in this example, to delineate sectors that are for “Dominican” workers. [Personal correspondence, Bridget Wooding, see also Wooding and Moseley-Williams (2004).]

viii The social and spatial practices of the state to police Haitian labour have thus also shifted, see Wooding and Moseley-Williams (2004) for initial analysis of this problem.

ix These observations draw from research I conducted with trade zone garment firms in Santiago (Werner 2010). For a detailed analysis of the multiple ways in which the social construction of skill and gender intersect producing the effect of female labor disposability, see Wright (2006); also Scott (1999 [1988]).

x A key factor was the final elimination of global garment and apparel quotas known as the Multifibre Arrangement in 2005 under the World Trade Organization. For more on what this regulatory change has meant for circum-Caribbean producers, see Werner and Bair (2009).

Before the economic crisis of 2008 which has exacerbated unemployment, the national unemployment rate was 16.2% (all figures for 2006). In Santiago, male unemployment was 8.5% versus 20.4% for women, a ratio that is slightly more favourable than the national figures that show female unemployment to be three times that of male unemployment (UNDP 2008: 262-3).

Author interview, Santiago, November 8, 2006. It is worth emphasizing that at the time, the vast proportion of sewing production was being carried out by the firm in its private trade zone and in the main public trade zone, both in Santiago.

This is a statement based on Ouanaminthe residents’ descriptions. According to Saintilus (2007: 325), the Haitian authorities did not officially close the border until 1963 and it was re-opened when Jean-Claude Duvalier took power following his father’s death in 1971. In either case, both interviewees and Saintilus describe transit across the border as greatly impeded.

There was not a consistent account of what Haitians primarily bought in the DR at the beginning of the border trade. Also, some interviewees described the market between Duvalier’s departure and the embargo (1986-1991) as largely contraband, controlled by both militaries. According to Saintilus (2007), the bi-national market days were established in 1988.

Interview with peasant leader, November 25, 2006.

These tensions were reflected in interviews with pre-1991 informants. For example, one informant described the effect of the embargo as follows: “It was a kind of social and economic explosion [eclatmen]… The population was not prepared for this development and it had many consequences. From a cultural perspective, there was a loss of culture. We started to have problems of youth delinquency, epidemics, high insecurity, and depravity of our customs.” (Author interview with community leader, June 26, 2007)

The commune of Ouanaminthe has five rural section communales plus the town. The 1982 census registered 36,495 inhabitants in the commune which would have been largely rural. The next census in 2002 (published in 2005) registered 82,549 inhabitants in the commune, with 43,774 in the town. The estimate in the text is based on interviews, including with two people who participated in the census, taking into account the
widespread claim that the census was not accurate as well as the perception of a booming town that could lead informants to overestimate the population.

\textsuperscript{xix} For more on the aid suspension and the US-led efforts to topple the Aristide government, see Farmer (2004), pp. 17-20.

\textsuperscript{xx} The union campaign followed a contentious campaign against the project that mobilized politically disparate actors including dispossessed land owners and tenants, anti-neoliberal activists, and right-wing Aristide opponents. See Traub-Werner (2008) for an analysis of these events.

\textsuperscript{xxi} The principal of the main high school, for example, explained that fewer of his students were seeking work in the trade zone. Seeing themselves as future professionals, they felt the zone would not offer the opportunity to work and study at the same time. (Author interview, July 16, 2007)