



Witch Talk: Redirected Trauma Responses to State Violence in the Dominican Republic

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Abstract

In Batey Liberty, a sugarcane settlement located in the northwest region of the Dominican Republic, community conversations about witches abound. The witch is perceived as a corporeal and ephemeral figure that transcends dimensions of time and space. Residents of Batey Libertad differently articulate their relationship to varied iterations of the witch, which in turn inform their everyday lives. This article interrogates what I call “witch talk” to draw attention to the correlation between disclosures of witch encounters and specific occurrences of state violence through the act of immigration raids. It argues that the discourse surrounding the witch is a trauma response to the ongoing and increasing persecution of people of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic. An analysis of witch talk reveals that the witch is a proxy for the unnamed state. However, a reorientated examination of the witch offers decolonial possibilities for what her presence could signify. [witch, state, gendered hierarchies, anti-Black violence, revelations]

Dixon¹ and I walked into the room while Susana described batey² culture to Maria, who was visiting from Spain. Susana is a middle-aged British woman who directs a batey-based non-profit organization. Dixon is a thirty-five-year-old Dominican of Haitian descent who resides in Batey Libertad. Upon entry, Susana readily asked Dixon, “Isn’t it true that many people here believe in witches?” Dixon replied enthusiastically, as he always did when someone included him in a conversation, and noted, “Yes, everyone talks about them and is scared of them, but not me. The witches go stomping around the batey at night. They go into the park; they fall heavily on the roofs of houses and bite hard.” Susana added, “The other day, a resident told me something bad was about to happen because she heard a witch fall on top of a house. Other times, they say that the bad things that happen are a witch’s doing.” Maria gasped and inquired, “Who are they?” Dixon explained that during the daytime, the

witches are regular people. Maria’s eyes were wide open and filled with a look of intrigue. She wanted to know whether she had met any of the witches and how to discern between witches and non-witches. Though Maria had posed the question to Dixon, Susana jumped in and said, “I don’t know—that remains unsaid; that’s not talked about.” Perhaps unsatisfied or unconvinced by Susana’s response, Maria declared that she was more scared of the Dominican police and armed forces than she was of witches. Susana again called Dixon’s attention, laughing as she asked, “Dixon, are you more scared of the guards or of the witches?” Dixon did not answer with words and instead let out a sheepish, inconclusive chuckle.

Susana’s insistence that the identity of witches was not “talked about” seemed inconsistent with the premise of the conversation. If such were true, I wondered why she brought up the topic of witches at all. It was not the first time I had

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heard about witches in the batey. However, this exchange helped me to differently contextualize previous and future conversations regarding witches. Susana's comments made clear that for some batey residents, the sight or sound of a witch serves as forewarning and fate. Still, a precise naming of the witch remains taboo or, as Susana explained, unspeakable. In contradiction, Dixon's deflective chuckle was telling, another form of speaking. The juxtaposition between the state (i.e., guards, agents, etc.) and the supernatural (i.e., witches) suggested that there was both a degree of separation and continuity between the two entities. As time went on, I began to consider what it meant for batey residents to speak about witches, specifically, what more the prevalence of witch-related concerns could reveal about community dynamics and anxieties beyond the perceived taunting of an extraordinary power.

After several comments regarding witch encounters and pre-occupations, I realized that there was a connection between local distress about witches and the "bad things" that were taking place. "Witch talk," as I have come to call conversations and concerns about witches, did not enter the local discourse haphazardly, as some members of the community would like to believe. In fact, witch talk would resurface during periods of increased immigration raids in and around the batey, at times of mourning premature deaths, and when narrating previous interactions with the state. The divide across gender, nationality, and legal status that existed between those who spoke of, believed in, or dismissed the notion of witch encounters altogether became apparent. The varied community reactions revealed how witch talk was connected to the current sociopolitical context in the Dominican Republic. Despite recounting painful and violent experiences at the hands of the state, batey residents often concluded that these occurrences were a witch's will. In turn, an analysis of these disclosures is key to understanding the relationship between witch talk and the Dominican state's ongoing anti-Haitian persecution and dispossession.

Drawing on fourteen months of ethnographic research in the Dominican Republic, I draw attention to how differing perspectives, comforts around disclosure, and heightened anxieties about witches illuminate past and present subjugations of state violence against many, and mostly, residents of Haitian descent. Specifically, I note the significance of witch talk as a form of deflection and symbolic of the inexpressible (Fine and Turner 2001; Freud 1997). However, I take inspiration from Jeffrey Kahn (2019) in toeing the line between the occult and the ontological, careful not to disavow the utility of either mode of critique to understand what is occurring in Batey Libertad. As such, I do not intend to erase belief systems where the witch is a central and active figure. Instead, I add to the complex nature of this figure by examining how the (re)surgent witch is also a manifestation of trauma in response to state violence that is most pervasive in the form of deportation, expulsion, and family separation.

Through an analysis of heightened periods of witch talk and presumed witch activity, I argue that the figure of the witch

serves as a proxy of the state and is subject to diverted responses resulting from state-inflicted trauma. In other words, I contend that careful attention to witch talk evinces that the witch is held responsible for directing the state's actions and is therefore most responsible for the community's misfortunes. To sustain my argument regarding the impetus of witch talk, I focus on conversations about the witch vis-à-vis the state and the expressed levels of speculation or fear in relation to each. This article addresses how residents of Batey Libertad are constantly experiencing life across different realms of being while simultaneously attempting to process the many acts of violence they are subjected to, at the hands of the state, through the figure of the witch. In the sections that follow, I (1) situate Batey Libertad historically and geographically to help contextualize the phenomenon of the witch, (2) examine community reactions to witch talk and witch encounters, (3) interrogate the legend of the witch in Batey Libertad, (4) situate my observations within a broader theoretical framework, and (5) propose an alternative frame of analysis for the role of the witch.

Batey Libertad, a Witch's Wandering Ground

Batey Libertad is one of more than four hundred *bateyes* throughout the Dominican Republic (International Secretariat 2007). Bateyes (plural of batey) are the formerly state-sponsored living quarters for migrant laborers at the height of the sugar production era (1930s–'80s), which in part explains why many batey communities are situated on the outskirts of major cities and in rural areas of the country. The design and placement of these settlements were also intentional geographic moves to keep migrant laborers out of sight and deter cross-group contact between Dominicans and Haitians (Jelly-Schapiro 2017; Wucker 1999). The separation from rural and urban, from Dominican and Haitian, and the types of labor associated with each group, aid the present-day anti-Haitian sentiment that permeates throughout the Dominican Republic. In reference to cane cutters, many of whom are of Haitian descent, Michele Wucker (1999, 113) explains that Dominican common wisdom views them only as animals who are "worth consideration only to make sure they do not leave the bateyes and spread their dirty diseases, their inferior culture, their black, black skin." This attitude continues to ring true throughout the Dominican Republic, though it is much more complex in ways that this article will not be able to tend to. Despite these sentiments, however, many bateyes are now home to a mixed community of recent Haitian migrants and long-term residents of both Dominican and Haitian descent.

Home to a bicultural community of Haitian-born (47 percent) and Dominican-born (53 percent) residents, Batey Libertad is in the Cibao region of the country—the imagined cultural heartland of the Dominican Republic. The area is known for its agricultural richness, high educational attainment, and economic prosperity, which inform notions of Dominican identity. In turn, the Cibao has been politically significant in

the history and economy of the nation (Brown 1999; Turits 2003). This matrix gives shape to life in Batey Libertad, which is further informed by the batey's positionality along *la línea* (Autopista Duarte), the main thoroughfare across the northwest quadrant that cuts through the middle of the community, therefore making it a highly visible space for passersby and state agents alike. Of equal significance to the batey's location is its proximity to domestic and international borders. Two hours east is the city of Dajabón, the most consequential of the four major Dominican-Haitian border towns. In the opposite direction, twenty minutes southeast of the batey, stands a military checkpoint. While Dajabón is historically significant as a primary site of the 1937 Haitian Massacre,³ the checkpoint exists as a presently active ethnoracial profiling center for all seeking to travel south toward the nation's larger cities of Santiago and Santo Domingo. In many ways, the batey is encapsulated by past, present, and future forces that inform the (im)possibilities of daily life in the community. It is enveloped by the whispers of a land that holds the brutal history of sugarcane cutting and the massacre of Haitian migrants and Black Dominicans alike (García Peña 2016). Given the historical background of this setting, the witch can be understood not as an aberration of the imagination or as ignorant superstition but rather as an object through which residents of Batey Libertad deflect and manage apprehensions in response to decades of state-inflicted violence; its geographic positioning adds to these dynamics.

The Witch through Sounds, Seasons, and Stories

The first time I heard someone publicly broach the topic of witches in the batey was on October 16, 2022. It was 2:00 a.m. and there were twelve of us seated in a circle outside a cluster of wooden homes, listening to music and chitchatting. Suddenly, Leonardo, a Dominican man in his late thirties, told everyone to quiet down and requested the radio's volume be lowered. He asked, "Did you hear that whistle? It seems there is a witch around!" I was not prepared for his declaration and found myself spooked at the thought of it being real. I had not gone to the Dominican Republic to study spirituality, magic, or witches, but one of the beauties of fieldwork is not so much in the stories we hope to hear but in the ones that are made known to us in spontaneous, off-guard moments (Hoffman 2016; Rivoal and Salazar 2013). Most everyone else seemed unrattled by the idea of a witch and noted that we were safe because there were three foreigners—*las Americanas*—in the group, me included, which would keep the witch at bay.

I called my father the next day to tell him about the previous night's incident of a supposed witch's whistling sound. To my surprise he replied, "It is not witch season yet." I asked him to elaborate—what did he mean by witch season? And was he confirming that they do in fact exist? I did not expect him to be cognizant of witches; I figured we would have talked

about it sooner. As if this were an ordinary occurrence, my father's tone of voice remained calm. Unlike me, he was unconcerned and unfazed, which further propelled my evolving curiosity and consternation.

So what is witch season? For many communities around the Dominican Republic, witch season is a known time for high witch activity. This is particularly relevant for those who believe in the existence of witches and/or follow the religious practices of Haitian vodun or Dominican vodú. Witch season, I learned, begins in November and ends in January, at the start of a new year. During this period, anyone can be subject to bewitchment or accusations of being a witch. According to this timeline, Leonardo, the man who alerted the group to the sound of a whistle in October, could not possibly have heard a witch. Still, it seemed to me that ruling out a witch exclusively based on time of year limited the possibilities of what could occur and of what witches signify. In fact, one afternoon in late October while we chatted over lunch, my friend Kina was startled by a sound outside the window. It was the middle of the day, so the chances of it being a witch were slim—so I thought. With a hand placed on her chest, Kina let out a sigh of relief. When I asked what spooked her, Kina noted that the sound reminded her of a witch's footsteps. She continued, "There was a witch that used to look inside people's houses. She wanted to kill us, so everyone kept their windows closed. The windows were removed from my house." I inquired about the timing of said witch activity, but Kina noted only that it happened long ago and that batey residents got rid of her. If a previous witch had been ousted, I wondered what explained the recent paranoia of another witch roaming through the batey. A few weeks after Kina's lunchtime scare, Nelly, another batey resident, confided that she and her family were awoken at night by the sound of a witch stomping on their roof. Then, too, I asked for more information—what made Nelly believe it was a witch? As if matter-of-factly, Nelly replied, "Because I just know; what else could it be?" I hoped to know more, but witch talk often proved to be as elusory as the witch itself.

The dubious nature of batey banter made it difficult to disentangle people's beliefs and relationship to the idea and image of the witch vis-à-vis the Dominican state. It was no secret to anyone that the general directorate of migration, with the assistance of the Armed Forces of the Dominican Republic and Dominican Republic National Police, had launched a public persecution of people of Haitian descent across the country. Weekly, I read articles detailing how many people were detained, deported, or removed from the Dominican Republic and taken to Haiti. At the time, the Cibao was the leading region in the state's active process of purification through the removal of people of Haitian descent.⁴ During my fieldwork, there were eight immigration raids in Batey Libertad and many more in surrounding bateyes. The raids consisted of capturing people to be processed for deportation or expulsion, beating people with batons, and breaking down doors of people's homes as part of property damage and theft tactics. All of the

raids occurred in the middle of the night, primarily between the hours of 2:00 and 5:00 a.m. These were also the times that coincide with many accounts of witch disturbances.

Something Scarier than a Witch

It was Monday, February 27, when I met up with Grecia, a Dominican-born woman of Haitian descent in her mid-twenties and a batey resident. We had planned to meet up since we were both off work that day. I suggested we go for a morning stroll through the rice fields since it was one of her favorite activities outside the batey. I, too, had come to enjoy the serenity and coolness of the fields. We scheduled to meet at 10:00 a.m. but quickly realized it was too late to avoid the scorching sun. We took off anyway and spent the first part of the walk sharing stories about our upbringing. During her narrative, Grecia began to tell me about the “2005 chaos.” Unfamiliar with the term, I asked her to elaborate on what she meant by this. She explained that 2005 chaos was how batey residents referred to a massive immigration raid that tore apart numerous families; to her estimations, over two hundred Batey Libertad residents were expelled from the country. Grecia noted, “Even people who were not Haitian, people who had never been to Haiti, people who did not speak Kreyol, teenagers and elderly people, all got thrown into a truck and taken away.” She recounted the fear she felt and the vivid memory of hiding under the bed while immigration agents raided her house.

I listened intently as Grecia continued with the details of the chaos when suddenly she grabbed my wrist and screamed, “Oh my God, there they come!” I panicked and wondered who or what was coming. My immediate thought was immigration agents, because of the angst in her voice and the recent topic of conversation. I was even more terrified because Grecia is one of the thousands of Dominicans of Haitian descent who remains undocumented after the 2013 mandate that called for the retroactive denaturalization of Dominican-born people whose parents were in transit or held irregular status at the time of the child’s birth. If it had been immigration, Grecia’s chances of being detained and expelled were incredibly high. Still, I did not dare say what was on my mind. Instead, I asked, “Who is coming?” already showing that I imagined it to be a person. She said, “The cows! Oh my God, I am so afraid of them. I imagined that we could find ourselves with them because around this time is when they take them out to eat.” I replied, “Oh my, I got scared. I thought that you were referring to immigration. I was about to tell you, ‘Grecia, let’s start running.’” She must have found my reaction amusing because she could not contain her laughter. Finally, she could speak without giggling and said, “Oh no, forgive me for scaring you that way!” I was relieved when she said it was cows and not immigration agents, though I could not see the cows that terrified her. Once Grecia helped me locate them, I realized that they were straight ahead but were still so far out from us that they would not have reached us any-

time soon even if they continued to walk in our direction—cows, luckily, are not known for charging at people.

From sheer panic to uncontrollable laughter, Grecia and I were both finally able to regather ourselves after the cow incident. We scanned our surroundings and spotted a rock that looked big enough for both of us to sit on. Upon sitting down, Grecia placed her hands on her knees, still recovering from the scare. She explained,

Look, you can tell the Haitian that the devil is coming, and they will not run. But if you tell them the guards are coming, they will take off so fast that they seem to disappear in thin air. I do not believe that even a witch is as frightening.

Grecia’s comment stayed with me. If the state creates more fear than a witch, it would not be unfathomable to think that the witch becomes a stand-in for the state as a figure whose cause of distress is lesser in comparison to the pain inflicted by statecraft (Clarke 2013; De Genova and Peutz 2010). Still, I wondered how an amorphous figure could be scarier than the Dominican state, whose work they saw in action and heard about daily. Rhetorically, I asked, “So a witch is not the scariest thing?” Grecia shook her head no and said, “It’s better to be afraid of a witch because there will always be a more powerful witch. No one or nothing can stop the immigration agents.”

A Strange Feeling: Midnight Awakenings, Witch Whispers, and Raids

On a Saturday afternoon, about a month after my conversation with Grecia in the rice fields, I sat outside the community preschool. I had spent the morning conducting interviews with batey residents when Drefan, a young man of Haitian descent born in the Dominican Republic, saw me and asked whether he could tell me something. Certainly, I agreed to listen. Drefan began,

Look, I am going to tell you what happened to me. . . . It is strange. I woke up at two in the morning because I heard the door open, like a creak, and the door does not have to do that. And then I felt something grabbing me, and I saw a centipede. I got up right away to try to kill it, and I gave it a whack, but then I did not see it; it disappeared—it is a strange thing. It could have been something bad that they sent against me.

The experience that Drefan narrated was devoid of another component of what happened on the evening that he was awoken by a “strange thing.” According to Drefan, his eerie encounter was at around two in the morning, which coincides with the same time frame that he, along with other residents, said that an immigration raid occurred in the batey. The strange thing and the state were, based on Drefan’s narration, two separate matters. Rumors swirled, with people stating that two men from the batey had been “*ficha’o*.” To be *ficha’o*

meant that the men had been set up or somehow under the state's watch. Several people commented that the setup, however, must have been the doing of a witch. No one knew for sure, another friend told me, or perhaps no one wanted to say. That Drefan did not identify the commotion of the yelling and running that usually ensues during an immigration raid as the reason for his disrupted sleep is telling. In that instance, confronting the reality of state violence as it occurs is paralytic. Instead, Drefan recounted the sensorial reactions to hearing the creaking of the door and seeing a centipede because those were objects to contend with in his immediate environment. Unlike other murmurings in which a witch was named as the culprit, Drefan used a more capacious designation that did not readily identify a specified subject. Still, the sounds and sights within his home were transformed into the threat that he could confront, while the actual violence happening outside of his living quarters took up another kind of space as an unspeakable topic (Lévi-Strauss 1963).

Since we touched on the topic of witches, I told Drefan of my fascination with the witch talk circulating in the batey. He smirked and said, "Here, when they talk about witches, that is normal. A few weeks before Christmas a lot of people were complaining that a witch would not let them sleep." While Drefan was sharing other people's stories, commonly classified in the batey as gossip, I could not help but wonder why these insomniac episodes were framed in relation not to the raids but instead to an elusive witch. Based on the timing he laid out, the complaints in early to mid-December were preceded by the November 30 and December 1 immigration raids that left the community in a state of shock. Still, the sleepless nights were attributed to a witch and never spoken of in conjunction with the midnight raids. To better understand how exactly people in the batey conceived of the witch and what they did to protect themselves, I asked Drefan how people kept safe. He noted that a strong faith in God was a necessity and concluded that it was best not to tell me any more because "if you know too much, the devil will come for you."

The Allure: Witches as Gendered Legends

Residents of Batey Libertad who believe in witches hardly spoke about it publicly. The circumstances under which someone would confide in me to share in a moment of witch talk would often be in private when no one else was around or within earshot. Although the witch is a batey legend and an expected annual visitor, talking about her was still a secret matter except for those who claimed not to believe in witches at all. Nonbelievers openly mocked those whose fears and anxieties manifested in moments of distress. They claimed that people in the batey were losing their minds and believing in *tonterias* (nonsense). Spectral or fictional, I turn my attention to how the witch was always described as *una bruja* (a female witch) or *la bruja* (the female witch). The feminized gendered language is at odds with other iterations of a witch.

The gendering of the witch speaks to undercurrents of power and visibility embedded in hierarchies of sex and gender in the Dominican Republic. The feminine-gendered language to describe the witch makes evident the invisibility of women but also ascriptions of evil and wrongdoing toward the female subject. While the figure of the witch as a feared and vexatious subject wandering through the batey is imagined as feminine, another witch roams (roamed) the batey in plain sight. Here I am talking about Caco Pelao, the man known as *el brujo* (the male witch) and vodun priest of the batey, who passed away in late 2021. Unlike the unseen bruja, the brujo was a public and central figure in the batey. He was sought after by many of the residents as a healer and protector. In fact, the place that was his home is centrally located within the batey, and on one of the outside walls is a painted sign that reads *curandero, suerte, salud* (healer, luck, and health), along with a cross wrapped by a snake and the word *guedè*. In Haitian vodun, the *gede* are the family of *lwa* (spirits) that represent the powers of life/fertility and death. Since Caco Pelao's death, or zombification as some rumored, the batey was suddenly imagined by many as being exposed to evil and therefore in a higher state of precarity. The fact that many believed his death to have been caused by *una brujeria* (a bewitchment) placed into question his protection, and by extension the batey's, from the *gede lwa*. His absence from the batey concerned even those who dismissed la bruja as nonsense. The reverence for *el brujo* and contempt for la bruja expose gendered hierarchies of power even within the supernatural context. Returning to the role of the male witch, Brendan Thornton (2016, 65) explains that people like *el brujo* occupy an ambiguous place in the Dominican Republic and are "simultaneously feared and respected for their esoteric knowledge and revered access to divine power."

While *el brujo* provided batey residents with a sense of protection and security—few within the batey feared him—he also represented resistance to the state. Across the Dominican Republic, people who self-identify as witches, sorcerers, and voodoo priests remain marginalized subjects repressed by both the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church, as well as national law. In 1943, the Trujillo regime put into effect Law 391, which outlawed participation in vodun ceremonies (Deive 1975). The law also extended its application onto any "performance[s] of African derived spiritual expressions" (Thompson 2002, 39). To that end, Silvio Torres-Saillant (1998) explains that the legislation was in part due to the Dominican Republic's obsession (my word) with the Hispanic heritage that consequently results in rejecting any "pagan" forms of worship. He goes on to argue that "unable to deny that Dominicans do engage in African-descended spirituality, they [the state] have ascribed that predilection to unwelcome foreign influence—a logic that often has justified the persecution of folk religious practices as a threat to morality and Christian values" (Torres-Saillant 1998, 132). Although state guardians and members of the Dominican elite publicly call for an eradication of any forms of paganism or non-Hispanic cultural productions, the reality is much more complex and even contradictory (see Cardena and Schaffler 2018).

Despite legal and social implications, many Dominicans, regardless of their class status and religious affiliation, can still be found to rely on the work of spirit mediums. More than any other group in society, members of the poorer classes turn to mediums such as healers, witches, and voodoo priests when conventional medicine, religious fervor, or Western standards of logic are insufficient forces against capitalism's encroachment (Davis 2007; Kingsbury 2021; Thornton 2016). While national legislation has not dissuaded the practice and use of spirit mediums, it does inform people's disclosures about them. In the case of Batey Libertad, then, the most perplexing matter is not so much the belief in the witch but instead who is openly acknowledged as a witch vis-à-vis who or what remains hidden.

The witch as a proxy for state violence positions the state as an ungraspable entity. When the state is perceived as something unnamable and unseen, its reach goes beyond the physical and witnessable violence and extends to a psychological and physiological hold. Here I draw on Christina Sharpe's (2016) metaphor of the hold as an apparatus that produces an environment of containment, regulation, and punishment. Black people of Haitian descent living in the batey remain in the hold of past captivity and violence, from the Middle Passage to the 1937 Massacre, and in the hold of present-day detainment and regulation of the physical body and the mind. The witch stands in place as the one responsible for mental and emotional consternation that many residents dare not associate with the state. Here it is useful to think with Freud's concept of the uncanny to understand how and why the figure of the witch is illustrative of a repressed fear of the state. Reverting to the uncanny is "that class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud 1997, 195). For batey residents, then, the witch is the notion of returning to that which is familiar but has been forgotten or misrecognized. M. Jacqui Alexander (2005, 276) asserts that "forgetting . . . [is] the difference between staying in tune with the source of our own wisdom and relying on borrowed substitutes." Similarly, Mauss (1972) contends that believing in magic and its associated mediums is a psychic need to deny reality, therefore providing a figment of control. To clarify, it is not the case that residents of the batey are not cognizant of ongoing and increasing violence against people of Haitian descent but rather that their anxieties around already lived and expectant acts of violence are manifested through and ascribed to the wandering, whistling witch.

Tonterias: Dismissal as Denial

I want to return to the notion of tonterias to interrogate dismissive comments as reactions to state violence. To refer to witch talk and distress as nonsense brushes away any validity it may hold in revealing underlying conditions that lead community members to heightened moments of panic. How could state violence be reduced to nonsense? And who felt empowered enough to say so? To dismiss the witch is akin to dismissing the trauma and other ensuing effects of the violent act of an im-

migration raid. Dismissal here produces outcomes like those of denial. In her analysis of literary texts produced by Haitians and Dominicans, Lucía Suárez (2006) points to the shared histories of violence that bring together both nations of Hispaniola. She explains that this history is differently disclosed and writes, "in contrast to Haitian tradition of disclosure of misery and violence, the politics of silence—or rather denial—have been dominant in Dominican memory" (Suárez 2006, 7). Similarly, Jeffrey Mantz (2007) highlights the aspect of denial as a form of protection in his study about witchcraft in Dominica. He explains that for his interlocutors the practice of rejecting the existence of occult powers was a technique to keep them from being "enchanted or bewitched and thus stupidly fall under their control" (Mantz 2007, 24). Those in Batey Libertad who referred to witch talk and panic as nonsense were in a way protecting themselves from falling prey to the fear and anxiety produced by instances of witch encounters.

The self-identified nonbelievers in the batey were all young men who held national identification cards, more commonly known as *cedulas*. The connection between belief, documentation, and vulnerability highlights how anxieties are connected to one's legal status within the Dominican Republic while also situating madness or nonsense as symptoms that affect only those without power, in other words, without documents. However, as I came to learn during my fieldwork period, legal status does not supersede social status. Regardless of documentation, all residents of Haitian descent were on equal footing of being subjected to state violence—removal, assault, extortion—during immigration raids. So while nonbelievers have a heightened sense of security, their dismissive attitudes are a form of defiance against the state. Calvin, a Dominican-born man of Haitian descent in his late twenties who holds a national identification card, explained that convincing himself that witches could not cause harm outside of witch season gave him a sense of peace and power. Specifically, he said, "I don't get caught up in all the talk anyway because otherwise it'll drive me mad. If you let it, all that stuff will swallow you up. The witch can only have as much power as you give it." The attitude of dismissal that many of the young men displayed served as a feigned portrayal of bravery expressed through the negation of the witch. While I remained skeptical of the bravery and dismissal displayed by the young men, they, in turn, were skeptical of the witch talk. We were all enveloped in the uncertainty of "truth" that forms part of Dominican social exchanges.

The young men would often use storytelling and joking to counter the witch talk panic, therefore enacting a common Dominican oratory practice. On one occasion, I witnessed a group of men laughing at a man whom we had seen successfully escape the hold of an immigration agent while running across the freeway. One of the men joked, "Look—he's running off like a chicken without his head throughout the batey. Next thing you know, there will be rumors that a witch got ahold of him." Already, the young man was setting up the story that would be comedic relief for some and consternation for others.

In the Dominican Republic, storytelling, referred to as *ha-ciendo cuentos* (making stories), is a performance act of turning into comedy or parody what is painful or traumatic, therefore blurring reality and fiction. At the same time, nonbelievers described witch talk not only as nonsense but also as a *cuento* (tale). To refer to something as a *cuento* is to liken it to a lie. Anthropologist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston (2008), in her ethnographic account of Eatonville, Florida, discusses the local and vernacular forms of communication of the African American community. Hurston, along with her interlocutors, describes the comedic and seemingly nonchalant nature of preserving history through storytelling as telling lies. She explains that storytelling is a medium through which people can avoid or transform painful histories. Telling stories and jokes highlights the conditions that “they are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by” (Hurston 2008, 2). Similar interactions and forms of communication are found across the Dominican Republic.

The transformation and manipulation of language complicate the ability to determine whether an episode of storytelling is fact or fabrication. Even more challenging in the Dominican context is the acceptability of lying as a social custom, particularly when the lie is not upheld as a determinate truth (Brown 1999). Historian Lauren Derby (2019) comments on the nature of storytelling in the Dominican Republic, noting that “Dominicans have a wonderfully creative culture of oratory, jokes and banter and storytelling is a big part of the arts of everyday life there among men.” These oratory practices, like the redirected trauma unto witches, also function as modes of survival (Mauss 1972; Rivers 1979). To subsist, people in the batey rely on *cuentos* (stories and lies) as outlets for their repressed anxieties regarding repeated experiences of state violence.

“We Don’t Talk about Witches”: The Figure of the Witch in the Dominican Republic

In this article, I explore what it means to believe in witches as a response—as numerous scholars have theorized—to the excessive, mythic, and phantasmic state (e.g., Aretxaga 2000; De León 2015; Kivland 2012; Mauss 1972; Taneja 2018). I use the concept of witch talk to understand how residents of Batey Libertad cope with and reorient the trauma of state-inflicted violence. Although they are cognizant of ongoing abuses directed toward people of Haitian descent, many residents transfix their anxieties onto an imagined witch. Witches have surfaced in many scholarly discourses and have been theorized as an expression of the struggles against the demands and exploitative nature of capitalism, racism, sexism, and other forms of ongoing oppression (Cisneros 2015; Kingsbury 2021; Pandolfo 2018). In his ethnographic account *Naming the Witch*, anthropologist James Siegel (2006) describes the witch as emblematic of the breakdown of order and deviation from routine, which in turn provokes a rise in the occult. Other anthropologists have also described witches as people who cause harm through mys-

tical means and whose identities are often questioned and feared (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1937; Hutton 2017; Taussig 1986). The varied theorizations and descriptions attached to the witch change across social contexts and throughout time. As such, Zwissler and Evergreen (2023) explain that “witch can become accusation, empirical description, or praise as it reflects perceptions of practices and people, rather than anything inherent in a particular object, action, or identity.” The witch is a malleable figure whose presence adapts and transforms based on circumstance. The different iterations of the witch could explain why in many societies witches are addressed with skepticism and trepidation. Yet Dominican historian Carlos Esteban Deive (1975) argues that a society creates its own witches by attributing to specific individuals the properties that classify them as agents of the supernatural.

Witches are believed to have the ability to show, say, and conjure that which society would rather be left unknown. This avoidance is explained by the belief that conjuring up any language regarding witches (and like-form individuals) can be inadvertently construed as an assertion of their existence and therefore their power (Jacobson 2003). While this may be true in many cases, Federico M. Charle, a past resident of Batey Libertad, tries to embrace witches through storytelling. Charle’s 2022 children’s book titled *Gato, La Pesadilla de las Brujas* is premised on the legend of the witch in Batey Libertad, a commonly known character in children’s imaginations across the community. The book points to a group of women as the community witches who could transform at any moment. As the story develops, Charle describes how the witches’ identities were revealed in plain sight by a child known to be the resident jokester. The book attempts to change the narrative of fear associated with witches while also somewhat normalizing their existence. Charle ends the story with some vacillation. He warns,

No one knows who is witch and who is not. The person you least expect can be one. . . . It could even be the neighbor [she] next door. They continue to take the children who do not go to school, and the disobedient, to their country. (Charle 2022, 24)

Charle’s cautionary conclusion portrays the witch as an omnipresent being that pervades the community’s consciousness and beyond. At the same time, the witch remains an elusive being, which can in part help explain why specific people were never named or signaled as the witch during batey witch talk.

Though many Dominicans believe in the existence of witches, it remains an ineffable topic. The reticence surrounding any talk of witches is a symptom of ingrained, intergenerational trauma that permeates Dominican society decades after the Trujillo regime (1930–61). Under the Trujillato⁵ secrecy and mystery were principal methods of producing uncertainty and fear as a means of controlling the population. Part of the aftermath of over three decades of repression (some argue it extended into the 1990s under the Balaguer era) is a present-day social and

cultural mode of relationality and communication that is clouded with ambiguity (Wucker 1999). Witch talk is approached with hesitancy at best, and completely avoided or forbidden at worse, because of ensuing public accusations, hostility, and humiliation. Appropriately, Fine and Turner (2001, 16) explain that people dare not speak about their views because “no one wishes to admit to holding unacceptable beliefs that may undermine one’s public identity.” Ana-Maurine Lara (2020) points to the stigmatization of people labeled or known as practicing witches. Lara (2020, 118) explains that terms like *bruja/o* (witch) have “negative connotations that have material consequences, like the loss of homes and jobs.” At the same time, however, the degree of marginalization is dependent upon how a person is perceived by their local community, thereby signifying a certain level of subjectivity in the relationship to perceived supernatural powers. Gretchen Schumacher (2006) emphasizes the concept of public identity in her study on the culture of care. She details how Dominican village healers who performed rites like those done by witches, if not the same, would make clear that they “claim Catholicism and renounce *brujas*” (Schumacher 2006, 133). The healers wanted no association with witches and feared that a misnaming would result in rampant rumors. Indeed, rumors can lead to social chaos and ostracization of individuals, especially concerning a contested figure such as the witch. Stewart and Strathern (2004) make the case that gossip and rumor are vital to creating public suspicion and social shaming but also serve to expose danger.

The Dominican Republic, with its history of secrecy as central to social control, which is premised on rumors that could never be fully proven, is an apt place for understanding the complex relationship to the figure of the witch. Moreover, the historical and linguistic landscape of the country complicates the notion of social processes as indicative of how people might be perceived, given, for example, that Haitians are always already believed to be witches or in a pact with supernatural beings. The varying terms used to describe people who can perform rites and rituals to defy or help remedy a range of maladies make it difficult to understand the distinction between the actor and the act. This differentiation points to a governing set of social processes that informs people’s behaviors and attitudes based on their surroundings and the world as they understand it (Rivers 1979). Lauren Derby (1994) notes that Dominican society has prescribed different designated terms to Dominicans and Haitians whose religious cosmologies approximate them to the sacred. She writes, “A Dominican could be a *curandero*, a popular healer; but generally, only a Haitian could be a *brujo*, or witch” (Derby 1994, 518). While these distinctions largely hold true across the Dominican Republic, as Derby points out, variations in terminology still exist. To that end, Raquel Romberg (2016, 213) explains that “in Latin America, ‘*brujos*’ (witches) is a generic term for all sorts of shamans, mediums, and healers.” That the term “witch” serves as a catch-all phrase in Latin America both expands and complicates interpretations and interrogations of witch practices and beliefs. In

the context of Batey Libertad, the (re)surgence of the witch is further confounded by the history and imaginary of the batey along with its present-day creolization of Dominican and Haitian cultures.

Building on previous work on the role of witches, real and imagined, witch talk frames how individuals rearticulate state violence. I argue that by avoiding any mention of the state or state actors, batey residents absolve this entity of their culpability in fomenting moments of panic and distress throughout the community. In doing so, residents of Batey Libertad also unintentionally reinforce and reposition the state as an ungraspable mystical entity. The complicated nature of witch talk positions the witch as a specter to be feared, dismissed, and gendered as female. Conversations and concerns about the witch, coupled with preexisting notions of witches, can cloud approaches to unpacking the significance of her presence in the context of Batey Libertad. Moreover, the repulsion of the female-gendered witch serves as an impetus to think about the space of the woman in the broader Dominican context, which while not explored here is an avenue of inquiry worth pursuing for what it might reveal about Dominican society writ large. Still, I propose a reorientation to the figure of the witch that can serve as a tool of resistance against state violence.

Conclusion and Revelation: The Witch’s Wandering as Warning

The witch’s whistle, whispers, and wanderings were cause for commotion across the batey. Whether it was witch talk regarding distress or dismissal, her figure provided multiple revelations yet none that were publicly or privately disclosed to me in a positive light. The nature of the disclosures was informed by historical and contemporary associations of witches that situate this figure in a space of undesirability and unrecognition and that shape discourses anchored in conspiracy and denouncement. In the context of the Dominican Republic and Batey Libertad, feeding into the trope that Haitians are always believing in witches or practicing *vodun* obscures the role of witch talk as a traumatic response to the state violence of immigration raids and other methods of intimidation and terror. Although there appears to be a movement toward collectively reclaiming the witch as a way of connecting to a forgotten or disregarded past (e.g., de la Peña 2023; Natera 2023; Romberg 2016), the connotations and consequences of being or believing in a witch remain unevenly distributed.

To conclude, I wish to revisit the witch not as a specter that is feared by some and dismissed by others but as a symbol of intuitive, ancestral knowledge that is misrecognized and misunderstood precisely because of historically classist, racist, and sexist classifications that have outcasted witches, especially female witches, as unworthy, malevolent, and dangerous. To re-imagine the witch not as a frightening and pestering subject but rather as an intervening force reorients our thinking. The witch’s role then could be understood as one of protection,

thereby transforming the evil female narrative into one of the ever-present nurturing female figure. It would then make sense why she is never equated to the state, despite not being embraced. That residents of Batey Libertad do not directly liken the witch (or the devil) to the state does not negate the utility of witch talk to understand how they interpret the workings of the state. There is utility in an elusive, unknowable object to assess the reach of the state but also its limitations (Crosson 2020). Perhaps the state is *el brujo mayor*,⁶ whose tricks cease to be undone but whose magic is threatened by la bruja if only residents remember who she is.

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Notes

1. Pseudonyms have been provided for all residents of Batey Libertad with the exception of published author Federico Charle, who no longer resides in the Dominican Republic and whose mention is directly connected to his book.
2. Settlements designed to house sugarcane migrant laborers in the Dominican Republic.
3. The 1937 massacre was an act of ethnic cleansing mandated by Rafael Trujillo. From October 2 to October 8, 1937, the Dominican armed forces killed over ten thousand Haitians; the death toll at times was estimated as closer to forty thousand people (Turits 2003).
4. Purification is how some newspaper op-eds describe the process of removal of people of Haitian descent.
5. Dominicans reference the era of Trujillo's dictatorial regime as *el Trujillato*.
6. El brujo mayor is colloquially understood to have upmost power, which most closely approximates to godly abilities. He (note the gender) reigns supreme. For a Eurocentric comparison, the brujo mayor can be likened to a wizard.

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