

The performative potential of ethnographic photography:

a weapon against social injustices?

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract: This photographic essay illustrates the performative potential of ethnographic photography as an instrument of awareness and transformation of reality. The images denounce the living and working exploitation suffered by Haitian sugar cane cutters and their families in the *bateyes* of the Dominican Republic. These are images that the United States Department of Labor (USDOL) has considered as documentary evidence for an investigation regarding labor rights that the CAFTA-RD Free Trade Agreement in force between the two countries is required to guarantee. Thanks also to these shots, the Dominican government and local sugar companies have begun an improvement process in the plantations.

Keywords: Ethnographic photography; Performativity; Dominican Republic; USDOL; Sugarcane cutters.

Biography: Raúl Zecca Castel (1985) is a research fellow in Cultural and Social Anthropology at the University of Milan-Bicocca. His research is focused on the Haitian diaspora in the Dominican Republic, paying particular attention to the population living in the *bateyes*. Alongside his research activity, he combines audiovisual and photographic production works.

Introduction

On January 13, 2022, fifteen members of the *Committee on Ways and Means* of the *United States House of Representatives* made an official request to the *United States Trade Representative (USTR)*, the *United States Department of Labor (USDOL)*, and the *United States Customs and Border Protection (USCBP)* to “review the allegations of labor exploitation and forced labor in the Dominican Republic’s sugar industry” (p.1).

These allegations had been advanced over ten years earlier, in December 2011, by Father Christopher Hartley, a Catholic priest who had served in the Caribbean country as a missionary since 1997. During his long tenure at the parish of San José de los Llanos, in the Province of San Pedro de Macorís, Father Hartley became aware of the reality of the *bateyes*, rural communities related to sugar production with historical origins that date back to the plantation system of the colonial slave regime.

The situation encountered by Father Hartley in the Dominican *bateyes*, where thousands of workers from Haiti still live today employed as sugarcane cutters, referred to dynamics that can be clearly defined as modern-day slavery:

1 My ethnographic work was published in 2015 as a monograph by the Italian publishing house Arcoiris with the title “Come schiavi in libertà. Vita e lavoro dei tagliatori di canna da zucchero haitiani in Repubblica Dominicana” [As Slaves In Freedom. Life and Work of Haitian Sugarcane Cutters in the Dominican Republic].

2 Officially, Hartley was removed from his pastoral duties by Monsignor Francisco Ozoria Acosta, bishop of the Diocese of San Pedro de Macoris, who declared that Hartley’s departure was not the result of “any pressure”, but of an unspecified conduct that produced “serious detriment or disturbance to the ecclesiastical community” (Declaration by bishop Francisco Ozoria Acosta. US District Court, District of Massachusetts. 01/04/2009).

Human trafficking and/or forced labor
Child labor
Deplorable and unsanitary living conditions
Denial of medical, pension and other benefits
Refusal to inform and publish the current rate and terms of pay
Hazardous working conditions
Refusal to issue written contracts
Manipulation in the weighting of the product (sugarcane harvested)
Retaliatory firing of workers for affiliation with or attempts to organize labor groups or unions, and/or for their participation in legal proceedings

This long and heart wrenching list of abuses appeared in the formal document that Father Hartley submitted to the U.S. Department of Labor’s *Office of Trade and Labor Affairs* (OTLA), on the grounds that each of these represented an explicit violation of the rights guaranteed by the *U.S.-Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement* (CAFTA-DR), which regulates, among other things, the imports of Dominican sugar.

As a result, USDOL was required to send a delegation to the Dominican Republic to carry out a targeted inspection and to gather information regarding the issues raised in this complaint. Among the extensive documentation provided by both the Dominican Republic’s government and Father Hartley, numerous photographs that I had personally taken were also examined; a selection of these photographs is reproduced here.

Ethnographic fieldwork and strategic alliances

Between April and September 2013, in fact, I was in the Dominican Republic to carry out my first ethnographic research fieldwork as part of my thesis degree in Cultural Anthropology¹. During that period, I spent my whole-time visiting dozens of *bateyes*, interviewing workers, and taking many photographs of their daily life and work. My goal was to document the appalling living and working conditions of Haitian migrants who were employed as sugarcane cutters at the Dominican plantations (Zecca Castel 2015, 2021).

The decision to investigate this reality was very personal. In 2006, I was shocked after watching the documentary “Inferno di Zucchero” [Sugar Hell], produced by the Italian film director Adriano Zecca, my father. In this work, he followed Hartley during his daily work in the *bateyes* just a year before he was expelled from the country due to the increasing pressure from sugar companies².

I was therefore in contact with him, and I felt a great responsibility when he personally asked me if I would be willing to share my updated research material with him, so that he could send it to the U.S. *Department of Labor* for evaluation.

Finally, on the basis of all the documentation examined, the public report published by the USDOL on September 27, 2013, stated that the investigation found “evidence of apparent and potential violations of labor law in that sector with respect to: (1) acceptable conditions of work with respect to minimum wages, hours of work, and occupational safety and health; (2) a minimum age for the employment of children and the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor; and (3) a prohibition of the use of any form of forced or compulsory labor. The OTLA also noted concerns in the sugar sector with respect to Dominican labor law on freedom of association, the right to organize, and collective bargaining” (p.3).

The report concluded with a series of recommendations to the Dominican Republic's government regarding the enforcement of labor laws in the sugar sector, as well as with the agreement that further inspections would verify their implementation.

A few days after the release of the report, a Spanish newspaper published an article dedicated to Father Hartley entitled "The missionary who won the battle against slavery"³. And everything suggested that this was the case: a great success to celebrate.

Back to reality...and hope

However, conditions for workers employed at different Dominican sugar cane plantations do not appear to have changed much since the publication of the USDOL investigation.

Actually, the first report was followed by six additional reports, (April 2014, October 2014, April 2015, December 2015, October 2016, and May 2018) and other field inspections in the Dominican Republic by the USDOL delegation, the last of which was in December 2017. Coincidentally, at that time I was in the Dominican Republic, where I was carrying out new ethnographic research in the *bateyes* for my doctoral thesis, also in Cultural Anthropology (Zecca Castel 2023).

This time, I was able to personally accompany the USDOL delegation in their visit of two *bateyes* and, above all, to organize a meeting with some workers, who denounced the living and working conditions they were suffering, despite knowing – as they explicitly declared – that they feared for possible retaliation by the sugar companies. Furthermore, I provided the members of the delegation with transcripts of multiple interviews that I had previously conducted with other workers, where evident violations of labor rights were described.

Nevertheless, the report that came out from that last inspection concluded that "while concerns remain, the GODR [Government of the Dominican Republic] continues to take positive steps towards addressing some of the labor issues identified in the public report" (p.1)

Given the inconsistencies between the conclusions of the USDOL investigation and my personal experience in the *bateyes*, I was extremely disappointed and angry; mostly, because I felt that I had betrayed the trust and expectations of the workers who courageously attended this meeting. For what it's worth, I personally expressed my disappointment to my USDOL contact, and reminded them of the abuses described by the interviewees.

This time the cause seemed lost once and for all. At least until the recent formal request was made by the members of the *Committee on Ways and Means* this past January, in which the right value was finally given to the countless documentation produced on the issue over the years: "Stakeholders have raised serious inquiries regarding inhumane labor conditions in the Dominican Republic's sugar sector for many years [...]. All the while, workers in the sugar sector are reportedly forced to work in slave-like conditions. We are simply not doing enough. The United States must reexamine and redouble government efforts to meaningfully address this situation" (p.2).

Conclusion

Although it is unknown what will happen now, even if I sincerely hope that serious and effective measures will finally be taken⁴, what I really wanted to convey with this brief article is the great potential that anthropological

³ "El misionero toledano que ha ganado la batalla contra la esclavitud", en www.encastillalamanca.es, 01/10/2013.

⁴ On November 23, 2022, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (USCBP) announced that, effective immediately, sugar and sugar-based products made by *Central Romana Corporation Limited* (Dominican Republic's largest producer) will be detained at all national ports of entry. A *Withhold Release Order* (WRO) has been issued based on recent investigations made by the agency, which identified five of the *International Labour Organization's* 11 indicators of forced labor: abuse of vulnerability, isolation, withholding of wages, abusive working and living conditions, and excessive overtime.

knowledge and ethnographic practice can assume even outside the proverbial ivory tower of academia and the restricted scientific community.

The awareness of the possible and desirable social consequences that an applied anthropology can have, calls into question the public responsibility and civic duty of the anthropologist, with all the implications this entails, both on a personal -of emotional involvement- level, political level, and ethical level.

Finally, this case in question demonstrates the specific “performative” power held by ethnographic photography, here understood in its purely documentary dimension, as proof of reliability.

The concept of performativity is due to the English linguist John Langshaw Austin (1911 - 1960). In a 1955 series of lectures given at Harvard University and then printed under the evocative title *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), he developed a theory known as “speech acts”. According to this theory, utterances that have the power to affect and transform reality are defined as performative.

In my small way, I want to think that the photographs reproduced here, and the many others examined by the USDOL, together with all the audio-visual material that has been produced over the years to document the conditions of life and work suffered by sugar cane cutters on plantations in the Dominican Republic contributed to the construction of a critical conscience favorable to the change of this sad reality.

I believe that the ability to transform reality is somehow the ultimate goal and the noble purpose, as well as the professional challenge, to which we are called as anthropologists.

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Photo 1 *Fields and sky*, Dominican Republic, 2013. Photo by the Author. [A worker walks among the sugar canes of a plantation]



Photo 2 *Going to work*, Dominican Republic, 2013. Photo by the Author. [A brigade of young sugarcane cutters heads towards the plantations in a wagon pulled by a tractor]



Photo 3 *Workers brigade*, Dominican Republic, 2013. Photo by the Author. [Four young sugar cane cutters standing in front of their shack ready to go to the plantation]



Photo 4 *Sugarcane cutter*, Dominican Republic, 2013. Photo by the Author. [A young sugar cane cutter photographed standing bare-chested with no safety protections save for a pair of rubber boots]



Photo 5 *Working hard*, Dominican Republic, 2013. Photo by the Author. [A young worker holds a sharp machete in his right hand, while in his left hand, he picks up some heavy, freshly cut sugar cane. He looks very fatigued and exhausted]



Photo 6 *Worker hands*, Dominican Republic, 2013. Photo by the Author. [A sugar cane cutter shows his hands ruined by hard work in the fields]



Photo 7 *Accident at work*, Dominican Republic, 2013. Photo by the Author. [A worker shows his injured hand with a deep cut that he has roughly stitched up himself]



Photo 8 *Blind man*, Dominican Republic, 2013. Photo by the Author. [Close-up of the suffering face of a worker who has been blinded by sugar cane dust]



Photo 9 Home "bitter" home, Dominican Republic, 2013. Photo by the Author.
[Dilapidated shack where workers live in dormitories or with their families]



Photo 10 *Workers barrack*, Dominican Republic, 2013. Photo by the Author.
[Interior of a room of about 9 square meters where 5 workers sleep on dilapidated bunk-beds with worn out foam mattresses]



Photo 11 *No beds*, Dominican Republic, 2013. Photo by the Author. [A young worker shows the interior of his shack, where he sleeps with other colleagues on dirty foam mattresses thrown on the floor. There aren't even beds here]



Photo 12 *What future?* Dominican Republic, 2013. Photo by the Author. [An apparently malnourished baby girl staring into empty-space, lying on a worn mattress among dirty clothes in a company barrack]