The Devil Wears Dockers: Devil Pacts, Trade Zones, and Rural-Urban Ties in the Dominican Republic

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Abstract
This essay examines popular narratives that a spirit demon or bacá lurked in an export garment plant in the Santiago trade zone of the Dominican Republic in the early 2000s. By interpreting the bacá story, and the transformation of the bacá itself from a rural context to an urban factory, we unpack the changing nature and meaning of employment under neoliberal capitalism, and tease apart complex geographies of status, exploitation, technology and debt.

Keywords
Dominican Republic, Haiti, sorcery, trade zone

Introduction
This essay examines popular narratives that an evil bacá\textsuperscript{1} lurked in an export garment plant in the Santiago trade zone in the Dominican Republic in the early 2000s. Bacás are spirit demons created via sorcery which are

\textsuperscript{1} Bacá is the Spanish spelling, while in Haitian Kreyol it is baka.

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popular expressions of a range of social concerns. In this case, however, the bacá represented a devil pact which explained the wealth accumulated by the plant owner whose business expanded from a few hundred workers to several thousand in a few short years, until the company’s demise in 2006 as capital flows shifted to Asia. The story of the bacá surfaced when several workers died at home and at the plant. Rumors of blood in the toilets, in stacks of clothes in production, and sightings of a little black figure smoking a cigar circulated widely in the plant and the trade zone, sparking popular panic, leading some workers to abandon their jobs and forcing the plant to suspend its night shift. Our account of the bacá story emerged in separate fieldwork interviews with former workers in Santiago and the rural frontier town, Bánica. We examine the meanings of this story as it shifted from a rural to an urban context, where the story underwent several transformations as narrated by Abercio Alcántara, a rural denizen of a small town in the Dominican frontier zone who worked as a sewer and then supervisor in this assembly plant until its close when he returned to the border. By interpreting the bacá story, and the transformation of the bacá itself from a rural context to an urban factory, we unpack the changing nature and meaning of employment under neoliberal capitalism, and tease apart complex geographies of status, exploitation, technology, and debt. We relate the appearance of the bacá to economic change during a moment of transition.

We also seek to contribute to broader debates about the relationship between witchcraft and modernity, with the caveat that, as Sidney Mintz

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3 On Latin American devil-pact narratives, see Crain 1991, Edelman 1994, and Taussig 2010 [orig. 1980].
Lauren Derby and Marion Werner (1974:46) reminds us, the Caribbean has been modern since its inception.4 A “colonial amalgam of European design,” one born in the shadow of the plantation, the Caribbean was peopled to serve the needs of industrial capital. Thus it confounds antimonies such as tradition versus modernity, and even rural versus urban, since colonial labor regimes were characterized by high levels of mechanization and an industrial timeclock. As a colonial backwater, however, the Dominican Republic maintained an autonomous subsistence peasantry in the interior far longer than most Caribbean nations, and there was considerable autonomy from the market in the frontier given its longstanding dependence upon contraband with Haiti, which makes the distinction between rural and urban more salient in this context than elsewhere. And perhaps as a result in the Dominican Republic, notwithstanding the fact that individual lives have long traversed the bounds of the rural/urban divide, the wily bacá consistently appears as a beast in rural contexts, while in urban areas it presents as a muchachito or little man.

We argue that excavating the moral of this story for workers is a means of uncovering the emotional toll of the rise and fall of assembly labor, thus what might be termed the “structure of feeling” of neoliberalism for the working poor (Williams 1977:132). As Luise White (2000:41) has said, “vampire stories are matters not so much of belief as of details: the stories are false, but the names and places and tools in them are true, and the stories are about the real fears those places and tools aroused.” In this case, the bacá may enable us a glimpse of some of the unspoken rage and dread evoked by the experience of factory labor under neoliberalism, in response to its mysteriously abrupt arrival and departure, its use of machinery, its gendered transformations, and the industrial rhythm of labor on the shopfloor. As such, the bacá gave voice to the inexpressible, producing a “contagion of feeling” around an ill-defined sense of collective apprehension, unpredictability, and latent danger (Fine & Turner 2001:17; Seigworth & Gregg 2010:8).

An interpretation of the mystery of the bacá in the assembly plant, however, must commence with a definition of the bacá itself. Bacás are quintessentially rural shapeshifter demons that usually appear as animals—as

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4 For a sampling of this now extensive literature, see Comaroff & Comaroff 1993, Geschiere 1997, Sanders 2003, and Shaw 2002.
boars, cattle or dogs and only occasionally as little black men; this is apparent in the classic folkloric and anthropological treatments of the bacá/baka, as well as in our own interviewing.\(^5\) They are frequently hybrid creatures—goats with pig's tails, cows that speak, dogs seen swinging in hammocks—a reminder that they are people who have been changed into animals, and their natural theater is the countryside. But that is only half the story since they are patently not a product of the natural world. They are spirit demons created by sorcerers, which at times are said to enable individuals to amass extraordinary wealth. They can also be sent to steal others' livestock, wages, or the bloom from ones' crops and thus can represent a form of supernatural class warfare.\(^6\) While their shapeshifting might lend one to define them as creole werewolves, the prevalence of blood imagery in these accounts, as we elaborate upon below, renders them closer to vampires.\(^7\) These beliefs invite comparison to the troublesome duppy spirits found in the British West Indies which can cause illness or make money multiply; they can also be used to sway court cases, or be affixed to trees for protection (Paton & Forde 2012:208, 257). While bacá beliefs and practices are ubiquitous on both sides of the island, Haitians are seen as uniquely skilled in the magical arts due to the colonial “race-marking project” that defined their African-derived heterodox practices as illegitimate.\(^8\) In Haiti, the baka does not suck blood per se but it requires human sacrifice, and thus “eats people” in exchange for wealth (\textit{manje moun} being a Haitian

\(^5\) The baka appears in classic Haitian ethnographic accounts such as Deren 1953, Hurbon 1988:260-261 and Hurbon 1995, McCarthy Brown 1991:143, Métraux 1959:288. For more Dominican bacá stories, see De Pree 1989 and Labourt 1982:183. This statement is based upon Derby's ten weeks of research from 2008-13 in the rural central frontier region of Bánica, over one month of research in the urban context of Port-au-Prince on diabolical animal narratives, and over three years of previous research in Santo Domingo and the Haitian-Dominican frontier. The stories Derby has collected on both sides of the border over the past five years are virtually identical in form and content. Urban bacá narratives are also treated in Chapter 6 of Derby's \textit{The Dictator's Seduction} (2009).

\(^6\) They also never appear as wolves, which are not indigenous to Hispaniola. This version is presented in the documentary by Martha Ellen Davis, \textit{The Dominican Southwest: Crossroads of Quisqueya and Center of the World}. Gainesville FL: Ethnica Productions, 2004.

\(^7\) While in Slovenia the werewolf and the vampire were distinct creatures, they are clearly conjoined in their associations with blood and death since upon its demise, the werewolf became a vampire; see Dundes 1998 and Summers 2001.

\(^8\) Putnam (2012:263). makes this point about Obeah. For a history of the antisuperstition campaigns in Haiti, see Ramsey 2011.
term for sorcery). The bacá can thus be located within the domain of Latin American devil pact lore, as part of a larger diabolical bestiary that might include the Andean pishtaco, the Puerto Rican chupacabras, the Bolivian mining spirit, el tio, or the West Indian duppy. As many have noted, and we expand upon below in the case of the bacá, these diabolical figures are often associated with foreign powers.⁹

If the bacá legend was a devil-pact tale, then according to Michael Taussig we might interpret this narrative as a moral commentary on the emergence of capitalist wage labor relations from the perspective of a subsistence peasant. In Taussig’s classic formulation, the transition to capitalism in Latin America has been incomplete, and combined and uneven development has forged a peasantry that is only partially proletarianized. As a result, wage labor relations are read through a peasant optic which vilifies profit as unnatural, preternatural, and even satanic, since the wealth generated in these accounts is illusory, not real, and slips from one’s grasp; and even worse, it causes the death of both people and livestock (Taussig 2010). Given this formulation, it should be no surprise that many believed that the catastrophic loss of life in the 2010 Haitian earthquake was the result of a bacá or its similarly depraved sibling, the lougawou (see McAlister 2012:187-215; Derby 2012). Yet these stories—presented as they were as “brief accounts with few supporting details”—were more rumor than tale, even if they were based upon Gary Alan a traditional genre of oral narrative (Fine & Turner 2001:89). We draw upon Fine’s “folklore diamond” as we seek to account for personal motives, social structure, narrative content, and performance dynamics as we interpret the social drama of the bacá in the trade zone (Fine 1992; Fine & Turner 2001:78-79).¹⁰

While stories of the bacá in the assembly plant can be seen as a form of popular commentary on changes in relations of production (following Taussig), we also tease out several other layers of meaning rendered invisible within such a structuralist characterization. In what follows, we explore meanings of wealth and markets peculiar to the commingled histories of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, on the one hand; and interpretations

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⁹ Wachtel 1994, Derby 2008:290-312, Nash 1979, Beck 1979, and Savage 2012. For examples of some of the extensive work on modern witchcraft outside the Latin American context, see Comaroff & Comaroff 1993 and Sanders 2003.

¹⁰ Although since we did not witness the unfolding of the rumor itself, we have to surmise what the performance dynamics may have been.
of phantom wealth through the lens of late neoliberalism and debt flows from Latin America to creditors in the North, on the other. Processes of commodification remap relations between regions, nations, and ethnicities, but they do so via earlier historical processes and meanings. Excavating these meanings requires bringing local knowledge to bear upon certain key “clues” in this narrative. As Marshall Sahlins (2000:416-421) has complained of structural analyses of processes of capitalist development, “one searches here in vain for a sustained analysis of how local peoples attempt to organize what is afflicting them in their own cultural terms... A history of the world system, therefore, must discover the culture mystified in the capitalism.” The bacá, then, is a sign through which we might uncover the vernacular meanings within which shifts in local accumulation, as well as the country's position in global flows of capital, were understood.

Trade Zones, Labor, and Phantom Accumulation

Despite one of the highest growth rates in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Dominican Republic has been suffering a sustained labor crisis for three decades. Structural adjustment, Ronald Reagan's late cold-war trade policy, and drastic cuts to U.S. sugar import quotas hurled the Dominican economy toward light manufacturing and tourism to generate new sources of foreign exchange in the 1980s. North American buyers and local and foreign investors were attracted by trade preferences that offered duty-free access to the lucrative U.S. market for goods assembled from U.S.-made parts (Heron 2004). Together with a peso devaluation and a wage freeze, these incentives for foreign capital were implemented at a great human cost, as Dominican wage levels sunk to among the lowest in the Caribbean (Martin, Migley & Teitelbaum 2006:570-592, Morrison & Sinkin 1982:819-836, Safa 1995). Trade zone employment soared as a result: the number of workers increased from 16,000 in three zones at the start of the decade to 135,000 workers in twenty-five zones by 1990. Garment assembly was the main activity in trade zones, initially employing mostly migrant women from rural areas. Despite the trade zone boom, unemployment never dipped below 15 percent and underemployment remained stubbornly high (Sánchez-Fung 2000:163-175). While offering jobs to women, poverty wages made trade zone work unsustainable for the vast majority of those with
children, responsible in part for women’s significantly higher unemployment rates (PNUD 2008:262; see also Itzigsohn 2000).

Facing increasing competition from Mexico in the 1990s, garment production in trade zones consolidated geographically and shifted in the make-up of owners and workers alike over the following decade. A handful of Dominican managers in the country’s Northern Cibao region took over U.S. firms or started their own, becoming a new, small, and regionally powerful class of owners. As a result, Santiago, the capital city of the Cibao valley, became the country’s new garment capital. The city’s large trade zone served as a kind of incubator for new Dominican companies cashing in on the still considerable returns to be made on garment exports. As the industry restructured and consolidated in the Cibao in the 1990s, more and more migrant men made their way to work in the trade zones as firms added industrial laundries and other capabilities whose activities were gendered as male, and as more men were incorporated into the labor of sewing itself. Women were increasingly excluded from trade zone jobs where wages were converging with the national average, thus attracting more male workers who faced a deteriorating labor market (PNUD 2005). Moreover, men’s sewing labor was being constructed as ideal as the industry shifted from pure assembly to more “value-added” production involving multi-skilled operators and more mechanized pre- and post-assembly capabilities (Safa 2002, Werner 2012).

The importance of the sector to the city and the region’s economy was undeniable: in Santiago and the surrounding province, nearly one in six wage workers worked in a trade zone in 2004 despite an already accelerated trend of factory suspensions and closures. From the perspective of owners, the model continued to flourish until the mid-2000s when the multilateral system of quotas that regulated the garment and textile trade was finally phased out under the World Trade Organization. Dominican garment producers, and their regional competitors, now faced the full force of competition from Asian manufacturers for a piece of the already saturated U.S. market (Werner 2012).

In the twilight of Santiago’s garment boom in late 2002, the local press reported the presence of an evil bacá in the city’s main trade zone. The bacá was rumored to be lurking in one of the zone’s largest firms called Interamericana, owned by a local industrialist, Angel Rosario. Rosario started the business in 1986 when he set up a small leather factory in the
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trade zone. He soon switched to garment production and became a steady supplier for Levi’s in the late 1980s, producing the latter’s popular Dockers brand of casual pants. Other buyers followed Levi’s lead, as Santiago and the Cibao trade zones became a main location for casual pants production for the U.S. market, leading industry insiders to nickname the country “la isla de los Dockers” (Docker’s Island). With large, stable orders, Rosario expanded his operations. By 1994, Interamericana employed 5,000 workers and the company continued to grow at breakneck speed. By the end of the decade, an entire new area of the city’s trade zone was built to accommodate its operations, and employment soon reached nearly 10,000. Given the high turnover, it would not be an exaggeration to say that tens of thousands of workers from Santiago and the surrounding countryside worked at one time or another at Interamericana.

Urban Rumors . . .

The story of the bacá circulated amongst these thousands of workers at the plant and beyond as recruitment chains, turnover and rural return linked the factory to rural campos in the region. Several common threads run through the narrative of the bacá as told by former Interamericana workers in Santiago. First, many workers linked the bacá to the sudden deaths of their co-workers at the end of the year. Tomás, an 11-year veteran of Interamericana, worked in finishing, fixing labels to the back pockets and waistbands of pants. He witnessed an industrial accident: a co-worker climbed a ladder to mount something above at the factory the sewing module. The worker fell and broke his neck, a tragedy that some workers attributed to the bacá. Within the same time period, an apparently healthy, young mechanic simply dropped dead one day at the plant. In the same month of December, a cousin of Tomás’, a young man who worked at Interamericana, died mysteriously in his sleep at home. Tomás admitted to being afraid but stayed

11 The accounts of the bacá in Interamericana as told by former workers in Santiago formed part of Werner’s one year of fieldwork on the decline of the Santiago export garment sector in 2006-2007, and a follow up visit in 2009. Werner conducted interviews and ethnographic work with nearly forty former Interamericana workers over the course of six months following the closure of the factory in December 2006. Additional company history is drawn from three upper management interviews: a company director, the head of finance, and the head of human resources.
on at the company until its closure in 2007.\textsuperscript{12} While denying any belief in the bacá, Juan Luis, a shoemaker from Santiago and a ten-year sewing machine operator at the plant, said his co-workers linked the suicide of a young Interamericana worker, whose brother played on his baseball team, to the bacá. The young evangelical, a rural migrant, had all the appearances of success in the city, Juan Luis explained. He had saved 14,000 pesos, had his own pasola and a girlfriend in New York. One day, around the same time as the other deaths just described, he apparently withdrew his savings and gave them, along with his pasola, to his mother, before hanging himself from a tree. Juan Luis also mentioned the death of another employee, struck as he fixed his car on the side of the highway while working his second job picking up returning migrants from Spain from the airport.\textsuperscript{13}

Jairo, who worked in the prep department on back pockets, discussed how the rumors gave meaning to what people felt were high numbers of fatalities either within, or linked to, the company:

> People always said that many people died; that the owner of the company was linked to the devil because so many people died. Everyday, there’d be an accident or someone else who dropped dead… So the problems of everyone who worked there got linked to the bacá… If you worked in the company and you had a brother who died, someone looked for a way to connect it to the bacá.\textsuperscript{14}

These deaths—both those inside the plant and those fatalities that workers linked to the company—created a climate of fear. While only a handful of workers Werner interviewed admitted to being afraid themselves, all agreed that the rumor eventually sparked widespread panic amongst other zoneros (trade zone workers), leading many workers to abandon their jobs. Jairo recalls friends in his department who told him they had decided to leave rather than risk death or injury; they said that Jairo was not as worried because he did not have a family to think about.

Several workers recalled security guards abandoning the factory suddenly—leaving their long-barreled guns propped up against the wall—after a rumor that one of them had seen the bacá punch the time clock. The bacá often made its presence known to the security guard on a Sunday

\textsuperscript{12} Interview, February 17, 2007.
\textsuperscript{13} Interview, April 20, 2007.
\textsuperscript{14} Interview, February 12, 2007.
when no one was working by turning all the plant lights on, revealing a little black man. The trepidation sparked by the rumor spread throughout the trade zone: Carlos, a veteran utiliti (a sub on the assembly line), recalled telling a couple of female friends of openings at the plant. They told him that they were too afraid to work there. Management apparently tried to quell these fears, calling workers, including Carlos and Tomás, into meetings and exhorting them not to spread the rumor. By this time, the local media had gotten wind of the story and reporters were showing up at the factory gates to interview workers about the sightings of the bacá. In fact, Juan Luis and his co-worker José, a 16-year veteran of Interamericana, developed a conspiratorial spin on the events, arguing that the media story had been generated by Santiago’s well-known investigative reporter Esteban Rosario, famous for exposing corruption, especially amongst the region’s elites, on his weekly news program “Detrás de la Noticia.” “The bacá died with 50,” José explained: i.e., with the payment of 50,000 pesos by the company to Esteban Rosario.

Interestingly, the bacá was associated with specific spaces in the plant, particularly the industrial laundry facility and finishing area where primarily men worked. In particular, the laundry was said to be an area where the bacá lurked in the shadows. When a large number of pants were damaged there, the rumor circulated that the bacá was responsible. At one point, Jairo recalls a rumor that a body had been found in the “bigpac” where pants were stacked for washing. Workers apparently avoided the area.

The fact that this particular area of the plant was a magnet for a malevolent spirit may offer an important clue to its significance. Firstly, the bacá narrative appears to have been foremost a men’s story, one which reveals male attitudes toward labor in the trade zones. Secondly, these were the portions of the plant which deployed the most advanced machinery run by workers whose rural backgrounds involved for the most part little technology since plowing was done by oxen, and harvesting and seeding were done by hand with machetes and sticks. Aptly described as “factories in

15 Interview, February 17, 2007.
16 Interview, April 21, 2007. In this version, then, the rumor might have been intended to leverage political fear in the sense used by Robin (2004:16).
17 This contrasts with both Crain’s and Taussig’s findings in which women stood outside of the production process looking in and were the source of the diabolical rumors about the firms; see Crain 1991 and Taussig 2006:71.
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the field," sugar had brought heavy machinery to the Dominican campo in the early twentieth century when large U.S. agribusiness firms built sugar plantations with industrial sugar mills to process cane. However, sugar plantations employed primarily Haitian and West Indian contract labor since Dominicans largely refused incorporation into this back-breaking and underpaid work, so it did not impact local labor culture in a significant way (Moreno Fraginals, Moya Pons & Engerman 1985). As such, the bacá could be seen as a form of popular commentary on a labor process in which men worked with heavy machinery, and suffered potential dangers associated with the toxic chemicals applied to finish pants and jeans. It also might be a comment on the veiling of the labor process in export free trade zones, and the peculiar way in which many components of trade zone work are hidden, since the product inputs as well as the market, are overseas; a fact which contrasts sharply with rural labor in say animal husbandry, or tobacco production, in which the product is linked organically to the market (see White 1993:27-50). It could also speak to the gendered politics of value at work, as men were promoted at the expense of women in sewing, while also accessing jobs in these new areas of “value added” production like finishing, where this work, gendered as male, yielded particularly high profits for the firm.

Indeed, in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, foreign technology has long attracted rumors of clandestine diabolatry. For example, zombies were said to haunt the Haitian-American Sugar Company (HASCO), which was described during the U.S. occupation of Haiti (1915-34) as “an immense factory plant, dominated by a huge chimney, with clanging machinery, steam whistles, freight cars. It is like a chunk of Hoboken [New Jersey]… in the eastern suburbs of Port-au-Prince… It is modern big business, and it sounds it, looks it, smells it” (Seabrook 1929:95). These rumors emerged during a period of rapid modernization, when U.S. corporate investment brought railroads, electricity, infrastructure, and vehicles into the interior for the first time, in order to extract resources via plantation production. These novelties, which were ill understood by the population at large, became grist for the rumor mill. Just as the HASCO plant was said to have an army of zombie workers employed there, there was a bridge near

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18 This term seems to have originated as a description of agribusiness (McWilliams 1969), but it is often used to describe the enclave character of industrial sugar plantations in the Caribbean amidst primarily subsistence agriculture.
San Cristóbal—probably built by U.S. Marines—which was said to be haunted by bacás in the form of white dogs or men with extremely large feet; at times even automobiles were said to be bacás (Ubiñas Renville 2000:27). Other rumors concerned La Manicera, a peanut oil processing plant which eventually merged with the Anglo-Dutch consumer goods giant Unilever, where workers were said to be engaging in invisible thievery via bacás, just as an Austrian sausage maker in Port-au-Prince was claimed to be making sausages from the flesh of shoeshine boys. A large sisal plant in La Vega became notorious for its zombie workers, as has the Oloffson Hotel in Port-au-Prince which is owned by a man with an American father, Richard Morse Jr. Another common motif in these narratives is that the wealthy employer is frequently foreign, a variation on the occult wealth creation genre, but one which seeks to explain the preponderant role that foreign capital has played in forging industrial development on the island. In presuming that profit was generated through zombie labor, these stories are a clever adaptation of Marx’s labor theory of value—that so much surplus value must have been created through exploiting labor power via spectral labor; they also, of course, render foreign-generated and accumulated surplus value redolent of death. The fact that they link capital accumulation with sorcery speaks to the fact that massive U.S. corporate firms at the turn of the twentieth century brought Haitian and West Indian labor to the Dominican Republic in a way which hierarchically conjoined whiteness and blackness yet also marked them apart for mestizo Dominicans who see themselves as mixed-race criollos.

Stories of fear, work-related deaths, and inordinate levels of stress punctuated workers’ descriptions of the bacá and speak to the experience of neoliberalism, particularly for male workers who appeared especially vulnerable in these accounts. Eusebio, a highly skilled sewer and a 20-year veteran of the industry, was an astute observer of social relations in the

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19 Derby heard about a demonic car during a research trip to Gran Bassin, Haiti, in 1988 with Richard Turits and Édouard Jean-Baptiste.
20 La Manicera was the local nickname for Sociedad Industrial Dominicana (SID) (Bourguignon 1959:38). Derby collected the story about La Manicera from Colón in October, 2008, in Bánica.
21 Raymundo González, interview, 2010; and interview with guide translating for tourists at the Oloffson Hotel, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, November 3, 2008.
22 Similar to, but distinct from, "creoles." For more on race in the Dominican Republic, see Candelario 2007, Derby 2003, and Torres-Saillant 1998.
trade zone. For Eusebio, the bacá was a strategy of the factory owner himself to scare workers into abandoning their jobs, leaving behind their severance pay. Rumors circulated that the owners had gone to Haiti to seek witchcraft. He continued, “and one person tells another and another and a bacá, a bacá and the whole world believes it. But for me, the bacá, the bacá is Interamericana, you see, the company, the owner.” Workers were being pushed to produce more than what they could physically handle, he went on to explain. For Eusebio, the observation that the bacá was the company itself was not one of a bad practice or bad management, but an indictment of the whole sector. The rumor served as a kind of false consciousness. “The people have this way, you see, that if you climb quickly you have a deal with something evil but there isn’t anything more evil than stealing money from all the people.” Eusebio argued that ultimately wage exploitation was the source of the rumor and its ultimate explanation. The bacá served to mask this condition in general, and to increase the capital of the factory owner directly through worker attrition stoked by fear.

While Eusebio’s interpretation certainly offers a compelling explanation of the effects of the rumor and its benefit for the company owner, we cannot comprehend the rumor’s ability to circulate, and its effects on workers, through capitalist exploitation on its own. As we make clear in the following section, the specificities of rural Dominican migrants, their experiences in urbanized trade zones, and the inter-linked histories of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, as well as the fiduciary crisis caused by certain structural transformations at that time, all played a role (Shipton 2007).

... and Rural Denizens

Set on the banks of the Artibonite River, which forms the border with Haiti, Bánica is located in the province of Elias Piña in a portion of the central

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23 Interview, February 3, 2007. In the Dominican Republic, in the absence of unemployment insurance, employers pay a lump sum to fired workers equal to one month’s salary per year of service (plus other monetized benefits). If a worker voluntarily leaves her job, she forfeits this payment. In the trade zones, evading accrued severance pay commitments often motivates illegal factory closures.

24 Around this time, Interamericana was setting up a joint venture operation in Port-au-Prince (that did not succeed), for which the owner was making frequent trips to Haiti.
borderlands resettled by extensive cattle ranchers in the nineteenth century. It has since devolved into a mixed economy of small-scale subsistence agriculture and livestock husbandry traded by itinerant merchants to Haiti; locals also assist large-scale Dominican rice farmers from the valley of San Juan de la Maguana who sell *arroz partido* (broken rice) to Haiti. La Manicera, the large peanut oil plant, had provided a ready market for peanut farmers, as well as steady work in processing and rare access to credit for workers, until its closure in the 1970s. A second major blow to the area was the swine flu epidemic of 1979, when USAID forced the extermination of all pigs on the island in an effort to avert the spread of the disease to the United States (Farmer 1994, Paravisini-Gebert 2009). The pig slaughter was a catastrophe for the poor of both Haiti and the Dominican Republic since the creole pigs were uniquely adapted to the environment and served as a crucial safety net for rural households: they cost nothing since they subsisted on garbage, their excrement served as fertilizer, and their offspring paid for school fees and medicines. The fact that the poor of the central frontier were primarily small livestock herders made the pig eradication program disastrous for the area, as it dealt a devastating blow to small pig farmers. It must have contributed to out-migration from the region since a large number of Baniqueros started to make their way to Santiago in the 1980s seeking jobs in the trade zone, and rooming together upon their arrival, forming a migration stream linked through webs of kinship. Entire clans sold their houses and left in a regional chain migration from the border to Santiago.

Born in Bánica, Abercio was four years out of high school when he decided to follow his brother, cousin, and a fellow Baniquero friend to Santiago to seek work in the trade zone in the early 1990s. He had tried working in Bánica for his father who descends from a large ranching clan which had expanded into agriculture. But Abercio’s father failed to pay him, providing instead meals and a house since his father had moved into the home of his new wife after the death of Abercio’s mother, and thus had an unoccupied house with a patio full of fruit trees. Abercio’s father’s allegiance may also have shifted to his newly acquired kin, the children of his new wife, as his first children became second-tier family members. Abercio’s experience is characteristic of Dominican agricultural labor arrangements which have historically been dominated by patron-client relations governed by an exchange of goods and services rather than cash payment,
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especially among kin. Abercio’s father thus conformed to the expectations of the paternalist *patrón* who swapped labor for room and board, which Abercio saw as a violation. As Michael Lambek (2011:2-16) has noted, kinship relations may be seen as a kind of theft, hoarding or betrayal, when the exchange obligations are not reciprocated to both parties’ satisfaction. Moreover, the presence of ample Haitian day labor in the central frontier and the regions’ isolation have possibly reinforced the sharecropping logic of exchanges of goods and services rather than wage labor; while lowering wages far below national standards (Baud 1995). Thus, Abercio’s departure for Santiago was an effort at escaping the exploitation veiled by rural informality. Factory work offered a radical rupture with the style of rural labor in which wage labor was concealed by “misrecognition” wherein labor was selectively read as a gift exchanged among kin, rather than salaried work (Bourdieu 1977:195). Formal wage labor in a factory setting may have been appealing due to the clear temporal bounds of a working day, which promised a formal accounting of labor time, and a set cash wage in a non-agricultural context.

*Figure 1.* Abercio Alcántara today in Bánica where he continues to be a tailor. Photo by Lauren Derby July 2013.
Abercio's memories of life in the free trade zone are cast with nostalgia. He started in 1994 on the shop floor as a sewer at a factory called DP, only to leave to try another seeking better wages, eventually landing at Interamericana where he rose to become a shop floor inspector (Encargado de Calidad). His rapid rise was most unusual and resulted from his rather remarkable acquisition of skills, since he managed to master all the operations in the factory, becoming a skilled tailor. In contrast to the subsistence wages back home, work in Santiago seemed well paid, and he clearly enjoyed the boarding-school feel of being away from home but living with his cousin, enjoying his autonomy and having money in his pockets, while having the comfort and support of family close by. While this was monotonous work under the pressure of quota requirements, he and his mates injected an atmosphere of male conviviality to the shop floor. This is apparent in his tales of shop floor romance which included piropos (flirtation) and other provocative verbal play with female workers, as well as rounds of beers after work. At Interamericana with a steady salary, Abercio could play the part of a tíguere (stud), with money to spend; he was an hombre hombre (real man) being cast in a position of authority in a uniform which also accorded him middle-class status, which had a whitening effect. His new status may have also helped undo the blackening he must have felt upon arrival in Santiago where he was seen as a rayano, or virtual Haitian, since he hailed from the border. He ended up pairing up with another female manager, and having a son.

Abercio was working the night shift when the rumors of the bacá began. He describes the phenomenon in the following way:

They made these packets of clothes with rubber baskets in which they placed six or seven pairs of pants, and they always appeared bloody—sprinkled with blood, and blood was always appearing in the bathrooms. Also, every year a person died from a fall, and once there were some night watchmen who worked at the plant at night who saw that all the plant lights would go on together at the same time, but the building was very very large... and they would see all the lights go on and off together and once

25 For more on Caribbean shop-floor flirtation, see Yelvington 1995, Chapter 5.
26 For more on the tíguere, see Collado 1981; Derby 2009, Chapter 5, Krohn-Hansen 1996:108-133, and de Moya 2002:68-102.
27 The central Cibao zone around Santiago is considered the whitest region of the country. On how regions can become “raced” in Latin America, see Wade 1993. For a discussion of racialization and the border “rayano,” see Victoriano-Martínez 2013.
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one saw the lights go on and off and there was a tiny little man who could not speak and he fell dead. I myself saw the blood on the clothes many times, and people would say well maybe it was a rat but I said how could a rat produce all that sprinkled blood over all those packets? Because the people were terrified. And some people got sick there and were taken outside where they died. I worked there for four years and every year one person would die but it was almost all men—only one woman died. People started fleeing the plant—nobody wanted to work there anymore. In the end they had to eliminate the night shift because they could not staff it. People said that someone in the plant had a bacá, a devil pact; that Chicho Rivas had a pact. He was from San Juan. He was very poor and came to have a lot of wealth (mucho mucho mucho dinero) from the plant. Some people said he was involved in selling drugs, but I don’t believe that because there were always guards around.28

Abercio’s story in many ways reflects those of other former Interamericana workers interviewed: a climate of fear surrounded the factory stoked especially by the unexplained deaths of co-workers. We might interpret the sacrifice of male workers to the bacá as a comment on their labor as “disposable” or value-less, characteristics associated with “feminized labor,” perhaps reflecting the erosion of job quality for men to standards associated with the historical characteristics of women’s work (i.e., untenured, insecure, informal, poorly paid, etcetera).

However, Abercio’s narrative also differs in important ways from that of workers interviewed in Santiago, discrepancies that shed light on the transformation of the rumor as it traveled along specific rural-urban trajectories. First, Abercio placed great emphasis on the carnage of the bloodstained clothes in the factory. In a follow-up interview, he also reported that blood was seen in the toilet bowls and choked up the bathroom drains. The stories of blood created terror in the plant, but the prevalence of blood imagery must also have reflected collective fears such as the dangers of working with industrial machinery since in these narratives the workers are literally consumed by the plant; their life force spattered and even flushed down the toilets. This may also reflect the perceived risks of men engaging in women’s work, since blood is a symbol of femaleness.

28 Interview, May 17, 2011. Interestingly, bacá allegations have been recently linked to illicit drug trafficking, providing an explanation for how fugitives miraculously escaped from jail; see Luis Pérez Casanova, “Magia de los fugados,” El Nacional, October 12, 2009. Rumors that Dominican garment firm owners amassed their wealth through contraband trade, including drug trafficking, were common in Santiago amongst not only workers, but also lower level managers.
Second, for Abercio and perhaps his fellow Baniqueros, the bacá was attributed not to the company owner but in fact to Abercio’s plant manager, Chicho Rivas. From San Juan de la Maguana, the largest border township, Rivas was patently not linked to Santiago elite networks. His presence as a border-region insider located him within a network of reciprocal debts and obligations which drew dozens of frontier denizens to the plant, a migration chain that stretched to Bánica, and eventually drew Abercio to the plant. Rivas’s provenance here is likely significant since San Juan de la Maguana is considered to be the national sorcery mecca due to the history and national importance of *curanderismo* (faith healing) there.29 Thus for Baniqueros, the bacá explained how Rivas, who started just like Abercio as a sewer, ascended to *gerente* (shop floor manager) so rapidly. By drawing regional mates to the plant, Rivas created mutual networks of figurative and literal debt and obligation. While Rivas rose quickly, in part, no doubt, as a result of his recruitment abilities, his co-regionals faced incorporation into disposable circuits of labor. This speaks to a violation of what Parker Ship ton (2007:xi; 2010) calls fiduciary culture—the shared codes of obligation. Rivas was supposed to take care of his mates but instead he allowed them to be sacrificed. If urbanized workers read the moral of the bacá as a tale of class exploitation, here it seems to reflect anxieties about social mobility and the risks of the violation of entrustment that can occur outside the locus of community where social sanctions can be mobilized against those who break social rules.

**Reading the Narratives and Silences of the Bacá**

The experience of migration and workers’ incomplete incorporation into a “modern” wage structure that is also fleeting and precarious is paralleled by a transformation in the figure of the bacá. The bacá on its home terrain is very much an animal, appearing most frequently as common domestic livestock in the form of a pig, cow, or black dog. In the countryside, these tales are told by men, frequently butchers, day laborers and farmers as they stand around on market days chatting, or swapping stories over a beer after a long working day. The figure of the bacá as a little black man is consistent

29 This is due to the fact that the most important faith healer Dios Olivorio Mateo lived and died there, as well as its proximity to Haiti; see Lundius & Lundahl 2000.
with urban bacá lore where the bacá thus adopts a guise more prototypical of European diabolical apparitions in the early modern period before the singular figure of Satan emerged supreme, a figure within which the “beast” hid by operating through his minions (Keyworth 2007). The translation from rural to urban context changes it in another way too; it seems to have morphed the bacá from a werewolf into a far more deadly vampire. The story of the worker suicide in particular seeks to explain an inexplicable form of violent death since suicide is highly unusual in Caribbean rural contexts. The graphic blood imagery in Abercio’s account also indicates malevolent agency in a way not always present among rural tales in which the bacá could harm and steal but it could also be protective of one’s crops and property; it was thus morally neutral, whereas this bacá was categorically not. As Vincent Brown (2008:143) has explained, in parts of West and Central Africa, those who have died violent deaths can become wicked demons, their force harnessed to charge spells and talismans.

The bacá’s emergence as part of workers’ experience of capitalist wage labor, and its shapeshifting peregrinations from the campo to the city, is only part of the story, however. There is another local subtext of the bacá in the assembly plant, suggested by the frequent mentions of the bacá’s provenance in Haiti. The complex articulations between Haiti and the Dominican Republic are lost in a framework such as Taussig’s which privileges profit and markets spreading from the European West to the rest as an explanation of devil tales in capitalist enterprises located in “pre-capitalist” societies. As Timothy Mitchell (2000:3) writes, “to see modernity as a product not of the West but of its interaction with the non-West still leaves a problem. It assumes the existence of the West and its exterior long before the world’s identities had been divided into this neat, European centered dualism.” The bacá is a poignant example of the limits of this West/non-West dualism, for its power derives from the commingled histories of Haiti and the Dominican Republic that defy such dualist understandings. The French colony of Saint Domingue grew from an enclave of plebian castaways from Normandy, France, into the jewel in the crown of the French empire, creating more wealth for France than the rest of her possessions combined. Yet the Spanish colony remained a colonial backwater which provided wood and meat products for Saint Domingue, some of which were exported from

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30 For more on a bacá imaged as a little man, see Derby 2009, Chapter 6.
there to Europe. Indeed, by 1750 the entire national economy to the eastern-most tip of Higüey was dedicated to raising livestock for Haiti on extensive ranches (Hernández González 2008). After the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), boasting one of the most powerful standing armies in Latin America, Haiti occupied its weak Spanish neighbor from 1822-44. The Dominican economy thus formed as a byproduct of its far more powerful and cosmopolitan neighbor, whose wealth enabled the purchase of far more African slaves, comprising a slave majority on the eve of the revolution. Haitian currency became dominant since Haiti had far more international trade than its poor neighbor, and since it was the primary island market for Dominican products, some of which were re-exported to France. If Dominicans have long been associated with subsistence agriculture or use value, as opposed to Haitians who represent the market, this split continues into the present since today Haitian proletarian labor comprises over 90 percent of rural and urban Dominican day labor, at a time when formal employment for Dominicans has been shrinking, forcing more and more Dominicans into the informal sector, and, as we have discussed, more Dominican men into lower paid and more precarious trade zone jobs.31

As is the case among all speech acts, there are also silences within these tales which indicate embedded assumptions that must be extracted. We need thus to consider issues of genre and formulaic elements through an analysis of the structural features of the narratives, in addition to their unspoken implicit meanings (White 2000). For one, blood in the toilets offers a ghastly inversion of the role of blood sacrifice within Dominican folk Catholic practice and vodú. One should gift the gods with the beasts of their preference through sacrificial offerings on their saint days, which is blood expended properly. Yet in these stories we have blood expended not of animals but rather of people—especially young, otherwise healthy men—being washed away as waste in the toilets. This takes us one step closer to Haitian stories of the bakas from the urban context of Port-au-Prince, which are called in popular parlance manje moun or people eaters because acquiring the desired wealth via a baka is invariably accompanied by a sacrifice of someone near and dear. Like the Andean pishtaco, this conveys a message of alterity in extremis; as Mary Weismantel has said, the

31 For an estimate of the Haitian presence in rural labor see Liriano 2011; see Shipton’s notion of bitter money (2010).
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pishtaco connotes “violence and fear and racial whiteness” and “profit taking is often understood to be synonymous with whiteness.”32 The fact that the new, heavy machinery of the plant itself was a magnet for these spirit demons indicates that they seemed to have flocked to the “ whitest” part of the plant. Like the lansetkòd, a Haitian carnival figure which transforms people into cattle with a stroke of his whip, these stories seem to indicate that working in the assembly plants made people into beasts, and while sacrificing animals for divine ends is fine, human sacrifice, of course, is a major violation (see Smith 2010:71-106). Colin Dayan (1995:196) has argued that in Haiti, bakas might be seen as spectral memories of slavery, which turned people into beasts.

Another layer of meaning to these tales concerns the image of Docker pants as it relates to upward mobility in the Dominican Republic, which as Luis Guarnizo has persuasively argued now requires time logged in the United States (Guarnizo 1994; see also Pessar 1995). Docker advertisements mirror the image of the “Dominican York”—the Dominican migrants who began arriving in the United States in droves at the same time that the apparel industry made its home on Dominican soil. Dockers, whose target audience is the lower-middle class, frequently sports models of color in its ads, with tag lines such as “brighten up for big meetings.”33 They thus project a promise of upwardly mobile respectability accessible to all; one seized upon by those who left middle-sector occupations in the Dominican Republic in the hopes of garnering white-collar jobs in the United States, but who instead found themselves marginalized in the deteriorating U.S. labor market, racialized as black and penalized for accents or poor English. Dockers, like the Dominican migrant, is “attractively illegitimate”; desirable, yet deceiving and threatening: such images make those who stayed behind feel deficient, since, as U.S. migrants, Dominican Yorks have been “whitened,” even if their actual occupations belie such status (Fine & Turner 2001:94).

32 Weismantel describes manufactured goods as signifying whiteness in Weismantel 2001:xxv, 149, and 181.
33 Usdockers.com.
Conclusions: Neoliberalism and the Bacá

Desire knows nothing of exchange, it knows only theft and gift.
—Deleuze & Guattari

Could the bacá be a popular allegory for local understandings of structural adjustment and the experience of deregulated, speculative capitalism? Jean and John Comaroff have argued that similar rumors in South Africa speak to the duplicitous experience of neoliberalism for the country’s vast majority, as they witness the amassing of wealth through the “mysterious mechanisms of the market,” and yet are simultaneously left out of these circuits of material gain and the promise of prosperity in the postcolonial period (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999:279-303). In the case of Dominican trade zones, this experience of deception has the added dimension of ephemeral incorporation. Changing trade and production regimes in the neoliberal period certainly created jobs that offered some rural denizens, like Abercio Alcántara, incorporation into “modernity.” Yet, low wages and management-by-stress fueled high turnover even during the industry’s boom, and to make matters worse, wages were gouged by a major devaluation of the Dominican peso in the 1980s. Moreover, shortly after the bacá episode, tens of thousands of garment jobs disappeared as many factories moved on to lower cost centers in Asia and the circum-Caribbean. Retrenched workers sought alternative livelihood strategies that would contain the erosion of their hard-won status as urban workers whitened by formal employment. Some like Abercio, incorporated into assembly labor and rising to a semi-skilled position, eventually returned to their campos to navigate their social worth within the web of kin relations to which they were again subject (see also Werner 2010).

Just as the bacá is a master of subterfuge capable of morphing from rural pig to urban dwarf, however, the story of the bacá offers one final insight into this period. The prevalence of blood imagery and sacrifice can be read through another optic: that of phantom wealth masking a process of “bleeding” the nation. The trade zone exports of the 1980s and 1990s assured the ability of Caribbean countries to service their debts as interest rates soared

34 Their model, however, does not speak to links between neoliberalism and anthropophagy.
and sugar quotas to the United States contracted. In the ensuing decades, debt servicing created a huge net outflow of capital from the poorest countries of the Americas to U.S. banks. Moreover, IMF and World Bank-enforced privatization via structural adjustment created opportunities for enormous state graft, as politicians such as Jorge Blanco of the Dominican Republic, and Carlos Menem and Carlos Salinas of Argentina and Mexico respectively, extracted enormous profits for themselves and their parties, bleeding the national coffers into overseas bank accounts and state patronage machines. This pattern eventually culminated in the withering bank crash of 2003 in the Dominican Republic, which wiped out middle-class savings overnight. The net effect was, in the words of Kathy McAfee, a “hemorrhage of dollars” (McAfee 1991:13). Additionally, blood was an issue of much concern in Haiti and the Dominican Republic in the early 1980s as the AIDS epidemic exploded driven by sex tourism, and Haitians were unfairly accused of being the source of the global epidemic (Farmer 1992:141-150; Padilla 2008).

In sum, the bacá thus reflected the feeling of vulnerability of migrants seeking their fortunes in Santiago as the vital life force was being sucked out of the Dominican economy, reducing workers to spectral bodies in ephemeral jobs that ultimately drained the nation. The bacá emerged as a metaphor of supernatural extraction, one that exceeded the normal channels of labor exploitation, and that crystallized the sensation of capital being drained through widespread “uncivil” fiscal practice at a transitional moment as the polity shifted from authoritarianism to neopatrimonialism (Roitman 2005:5, Hartlyn 1998, Chapter 5). These rumors were a “weapon of the weak,” which made popular sentiment a social fact (Scott 1985). This case, then, confirms Clifford Geertz’s claim that “not only ideas, but

35 From 1986-88, just three countries, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Trinidad, paid out a combined total of $1.3 billion more in interest and debt repayments than they received in loans and grants during the same period; see McAfee 1991:13-14.

36 Gregory (2007) treats the 2003 crash in Chapter 6.

37 The pervasive anxieties in the United States engendered by the AIDS epidemic are discussed in Bourke 2005:306-308; see Farmer (1992) on AIDS in Haiti. See Padilla (2008) on Dominican sex tourism.

38 Parallels can be made to popular culture in the United States: vampires had a spike in popularity during the depression, as well as the current recession as seen in the vogue of Twilight, The Walking Dead, and True Blood.
emotions too are cultural artifacts”; a suggestion which challenges social scientists to read demons such as the Interamericana bacá as propositions for belief which are plausible because they express the ambient fear of the historical moment (Geertz 1973:81, 12). It is also a reminder that rumor might offer a lens into nascent popular sentiments otherwise occluded from the researchers’ gaze.

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