

For opposing Haitians' deportation, novelist Junot Díaz stripped of award by Dominican Republic government

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At the end of October, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Junot Díaz was stripped of the Dominican Republic's Order of Merit award and called "anti-Dominican" by the country's consul in New York, Eduardo Selman.

For many years, Díaz has been an outspoken opponent of the Dominican government's deportation policies. The immediate cause of Selman's revocation of the Order of Merit was Díaz's appearance with Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat before the US Congress, to ask for a resolution condemning the Dominican Republic's deportation of Haitians and denial of citizenship to Dominicans of Haitian descent.

Díaz was born in Santo Domingo and moved to New Jersey with his parents at the age of six. Danticat, also an award-winning novelist, was born in Port-au-Prince and grew up in Haiti until the age of 12, when her family brought her to Brooklyn.

Since June 17, as many as 500,000 Haitian Dominicans have faced the threat of deportation, even though many of them have lived most of their lives in the Dominican Republic, speak Spanish and not Haitian Kreyòl and, indeed, have never even set foot on Haitian soil. Many who have left the Dominican Republic—either because of deportation or fear—are surviving in severe poverty on the Haitian side of the border (see: "First round of Haitian legislative elections held amidst immigration and political crises").

Selman represents a government that has snatched people off the street, forced tens of thousands to wait in intolerable conditions just to register for "normalization," and been compared to the Nazi regime even by conservative political figures like author Mario Vargas Llosa.

Nonetheless, Selman coldly and cynically told *Al*

Momento that his government is acting in accordance with the country's Constitution. This argument is based on the Dominican Constitutional Tribunal's infamous September 2013 decision, known as *la sentencia*, which denied citizenship to people born in the Dominican Republic if their forebears had immigrated illegally from Haiti after 1929 (see: "Hundreds of thousands of Haitians face deportation from the Dominican Republic").

Aligning himself with US imperialism, Selman also put forward the preposterous claim that there has not been a single case of the violation of inalienable human rights, and that the US Embassy in Santo Domingo "has recognized the humanitarian work of the Dominican authorities," according to *Al Momento*.

In truth, Selman's government has been depriving people of the right to work, send their children to school, retire, and even walk down the street. Haitian workers in the Dominican Republic are super-exploited. This exploitation, and the accompanying scapegoating of Haitian Dominicans, has a long history. According to a *New York Times* op-ed piece written by Díaz and Danticat in November 1999, an Organization of American States report that year "denouncing the low pay and living conditions of Haitian agricultural workers in the Dominican Republic" triggered deportations by the government.

The constitutional court's decision represented a drastic worsening of anti-immigrant measures taken for years by the Dominican ruling elite. In their 1999 *Times* piece, Díaz and Danticat pointed out that privatization of the formerly government-run sugar industry was leading to job losses for agricultural workers. They wrote, "imagine you are at work, or

simply walking down the street. Suddenly a group of soldiers arrives. You are ordered at gunpoint to board a truck, already crowded with dozens of others. You are driven for hours to an isolated spot on a border.... You are ordered off the truck. If you hesitate or resist, the soldiers shoot into the air, and you must run into the savannas, into a land you no longer know.”

In a November 2013 *Los Angeles Times* opinion piece written by Díaz, Danticat, Mark Kurlansky, and Julia Alvarez, the four authors again pointed out that Dominican sugar companies had ignored the law in the first half of the twentieth century and imported laborers who “were kept in barracks lacking basic amenities and...deprived of all civil rights.” They also stressed that “one of the important lessons of the Nazi Holocaust is that the first step toward genocide is to strip a people of their right to citizenship.”

More recently, Díaz told Univision in July of this year that “not all Dominicans support this insanity, but many of those voices are being silenced by the repression of the elites. The supposed nationalist consensus is false, very false. Many people in the street know that this is abuse, that they don’t want the expulsion of...Dominicans of Haitian origin.”

While his short stories in *This is How You Lose Her* (2012) focused on love, infidelity, divorce and growing up as an immigrant in the United States, Díaz has also tackled political questions in his fiction. In his introduction to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, for which he won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize, the 2008 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award and other honors, Díaz described former dictator Rafael Trujillo (1891-1961) as “controlling nearly every aspect of the DR’s political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent...mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror.”

Opinion pieces in the *New York Times* and appeals to the US Congress are not going to change the conditions or alter the fate of the Haitian Dominicans. The Dominican Liberation Party (PLD) government of Danilo Medina has the full-throated support of the US government. According to *Foreign Affairs*, the US Drug Enforcement Agency maintains a unit of 175 agents in the Dominican Republic, has provided extensive training to the Dominican National Police and for years armed and trained CESFRONT (Cuerpo Especializado en Seguridad Fronteriza Terrestre), the

border patrol agency that is enforcing the deportation policy. These forces have committed murder, torture, arbitrary arrests and raids of peoples’ homes, all with the knowledge of the US State Department.



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