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Certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:**

**¡Súbete al Progreso! Narratives of Progress and Social Mobility  
Surrounding the Santo Domingo Metro**

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

**Supervisor:**

---

Bjørn Sletto

---

Ming Zhang

**¡Súbete al Progreso! Narratives of Progress and Social Mobility  
Surrounding the Santo Domingo Metro**

**by**

**Regina Suzanne Casey, B.A.**

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to the community of Los Platanitos, for their hard work, open attitudes, smiles, and friendships that I will never forget.

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## **Abstract**

# **¡Súbete al Progreso! Narratives of Progress and Social Mobility Surrounding the Santo Domingo Metro**

Regina Suzanne Casey, M.S.C.R.P/M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

Supervisor: Bjørn Sletto

Transportation planning initiatives are assumed to further the development of growing cities across the globe. Latin American cities, especially, suffer from a deficit of infrastructure that presents greater challenges to the efficient movement of people and goods, which makes transportation one of the biggest hindrances to development in Latin America. Throughout the twentieth century, development projects in the Dominican Republic were carried out in the contexts of foreign military occupation and state repression, whereby processes of technical modernization arrived alongside state-led violence. Meanwhile, grandiose infrastructure projects were paired with narratives of national greatness. Decisions regarding land use and distribution of public services remained inattentive of the poorest residents, causing enormous inequalities in increasingly urbanized cities.

President Leonel Fernández campaigned for his third term promising to break from old forms of corruption, and has symbolically delivered this promise of progress through the construction of a new subway system. The Santo Domingo Metro revolutionizes transportation options in key areas of a chaotic and congested road system, where many public transportation vehicles are old and dilapidated. Metro can save hours in commute times, provide safe, reliable transit at low cost, and promote sustainability. However, critics note that billions of dollars invested on Metro expansion preempt the funding of health and education. Construction processes displace neighborhoods, while many communities situated near the stations still face daily hardships associated with inadequate housing and lack of sanitation. My paper blends the perspectives of technical transportation planning and critical development theory to understand whether the Metro will serve these communities by improving their access to services, schools, and job sites, or simply drain scarce funds from these very areas. This paper also critically evaluates the way that the current administration's symbol of progress at times mirrors the top-down political culture of the past. The Metro thus elucidates larger theoretical and

practical questions regarding the interactions of transportation planning and political culture, and their impacts on spatial hierarchies and growth within urban spaces.

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## **Introduction**

Transportation planning initiatives are assumed to further the development of growing cities across the globe. Latin American cities, especially, suffer from a deficit of infrastructure that presents greater challenges to the efficient movement of people and goods, which makes transportation one of the biggest hindrances to development in Latin America (Keeling: 2002). Investments in innovative mass transit systems can be especially useful in maximizing the number of people who can be transported on a given road space. Public transportation that is safe, reliable, and convenient thus also eases congestion and deters high use of personal automobiles. Transportation investments have also been shown to stimulate overall economic growth through the provision of increased access to goods and services.

In particular, efficient, low-fare systems can aid residents of fewer resources by increasing their ease of access to opportunities in the city. Thus, according to some transportation research, urban poverty may be attenuated by facilitating the movement of people and goods, which in turn will result in increased access to city amenities and an overall growth of incomes (Gwilliam: 2002). The development of Metro rail systems is thus becoming increasingly popular in Latin American countries as a means to modernize public transportation, alleviate stress on existing infrastructure, and give more transit options to city residents.

However, Metro rail transportation development has been controversial in many Latin American cities. First of all, Metro technology is extremely expensive to build, and

public spending on Metro often appears irresponsible in nations where public funds are scarce. In cities where public schools and solid waste management systems are inadequate, many people do not believe that rapid transit should be a priority. Secondly, construction processes require disruption of the physical landscape through extensive tunneling and station building. These processes can result in the destruction of neighborhoods and forced relocation of families. Furthermore, transportation planners do not advise Metro development in cities with fewer than 5 million people, as ridership will likely not be high enough to make the costs worthwhile (Pacione: 2009). Transportation planners also recommend seeking innovative low-tech solutions before implementing costly rail systems. Planners advise a stronger focus on non-motorized transit, like improving sidewalks and other pedestrian amenities, in order to benefit the urban poor who are more likely to rely on walking trips (Gwilliam: 2002). Improvements in infrastructure for non-motorized transit also increase the overall walkability of the city, and can contribute to lively communities for all residents at a relatively low cost.

Another critique of Metro stems from critical development theory. At times, the development of Metro rail systems seems more like an attempt on the part of governments to shed their status as a “third-world” nation and project an image of sophistication and modernity, at home and abroad. The danger with this type of development initiative is that its sweeping discourse of development as progress portrays modern technological development as uncontestedly desirable (Escobar: 1992). Development theorists are thus critical of the ways that discourse surrounding

development projects can efface the complexity of places and discredit the validity of protest (Escobar: 1992).

### **CASE STUDY: SANTO DOMINGO**

During the last century, the majority of development projects in the Dominican Republic were carried out in the contexts of foreign military occupation and state repression. Starting with the U.S. military intervention from 1916 to 1924, processes of technical modernization arrived alongside violence and censorship of opposition. While the U.S. backed government of the Dominican Republic built new highways and hospitals, it also carried out arbitrary arrests and torture tactics to subdue and disarm the Dominican population, and prevented the circulation of unfavorable opinions in the press. The dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo from 1930 to 1961, in many ways supported by the U.S. military, sponsored horrific police violence and exploited the working classes to enrich the state. New industrialization under Trujillo also brought about the construction of roads, schools, and health clinics, but not in keeping with the demands of the population.

Subsequent authoritarian presidencies of Joaquin Balaguer from 1966 to 1978 as well as 1986 to 1996 precluded a genuine return to democracy and only exacerbated social inequality. Following the political tradition of Trujillo, he favored infrastructure projects that most benefitted the wealthy, and was unafraid to displace neighborhoods or clear out unsightly settlements in order to accomplish his goals. He did not take into

account the impact such practices might have on communities, nor how they might relocate when removed from their social networks and economic means.

Throughout both the Trujillo and Balaguer regimes, grandiose infrastructure projects were paired with narratives of national greatness, and often celebrated with public display. Meanwhile, decisions regarding land use and distribution of public services remained inattentive of the poorest residents, causing enormous inequalities in increasingly urbanized cities. President Leonel Fernández, who first rose to power directly after Balaguer in 1996, campaigned for his third but non-consecutive term in 2008 promising to break from old forms of corruption and move the country forward. He has both tangibly and symbolically delivered this promise of progress through the construction of a new subway system, the Santo Domingo Metro.

Santo Domingo, now a metropolis of nearly 4 million people, still bears the marks of social inequality stemming from a history of tyranny, exploitation, and top-down strategies of development. Population growth and urbanization, especially since the 1950s; alongside political instability, inadequate services, and high unemployment, have caused the city to suffer from increasing urban poverty, congestion, pollution, and public health problems. Vast disparities in housing and infrastructure throughout the city are evident even to the casual observer. Residential streets in the south of the Distrito Nacional are clean and well-manicured, while streets and sidewalks in Santo Domingo Norte are often crumbling and chaotic. Dense pockets of urban poverty and informal settlements are also common on the outskirts of the Distrito Nacional and the surrounding municipalities.

The current Dominican government has sought to ease the strain on the built environment and alleviate the stress of its citizens through the development of a modern public transportation system. The Santo Domingo Metro rail line began its operation in 2008 with a single north-south line bringing passengers between the northern and southern perimeters of the city. Its first line runs on about 15 kilometers of track and contains 16 sleek, air-conditioned stations, and represents a stark contrast to the previous transportation options. According to OPRET, Oficina Para la Reorganizacion de Transporte, the route was designed to relieve road congestion and pressure on the current public transport system, which now struggles to cope with the number of people traveling in and out of the city. OPRET plans to oversee a total of 6 lines, and a system of bus feeder routes. OPRET envisions a modern system of transportation that will span the Distrito Nacional as well as the bordering municipalities, as shown below (Fig. 1):



Figure 1: Map of current and planned expansion of Santo Domingo Metro. Source: OPRET

The first line of the new Metro stations contains several stations alongside low-income neighborhoods, and plans are in place to expand the system and integrate a new system of bus routes. The Metro system, therefore, may provide improved access to health and employment sites and schools for the poor. Yet it is unclear if the Metro's opportunity for increased access to the city, even if successful in stimulating economic growth, will significantly open up job opportunities for the poor. However, this may be an investment that, in the long-term, will help alleviate the heavy congestion on Santo Domingo streets and facilitate public transportation. Besides Metro, the current public

transportation system consists of a combination of *guaguas* (minivans for informal transit routes), *motoconchos* (motorcycle taxis), mini-buses, public cars, and taxis, most of which are old or dilapidated and prone to getting stuck in traffic.

However, the Metro has also sparked great controversy, as it drains funds from a nation that is marked with poverty and inequality. Like other development projects in the last century, this project has had a large-scale, top-down approach. The project has been an unusually high priority by the Government and especially the President, Leonel Fernández, while direct investments in areas such as education and health continually seem to be put on the backburner. While the Dominican Republic has made major headway in strengthening civil society and increasing public participation in planning policies, the transportation authorities still seem to operate unhindered by dissenting voices and without consultation of public opinion. While the metro construction is underway, many of these needs remain relatively unaddressed. Furthermore, ridership on the first line remains lower than expected, with the trains operating with only about a fourth of their carrying capacity (Dominican Today: 2009).

I became interested in the Santo Domingo Metro during a trip to the Dominican Republic in January of 2010, during which time I was involved in a participatory planning workshop in the community of Los Platanitos in Santo Domingo Norte, for collaborative research on the feasibility of community-based solid waste management there. Each day that I was there, I rode the Metro from my hotel in the south of the Distrito Nacional up to Los Platanitos. The community of Los Platanitos is situated near a Metro station, and the ride lasted only about 15 minutes. Community members met us



at the station and then led us to their community for our work. The contrast of spaces from the spacious Metro station to the narrow alleys and makeshift structures and houses was striking to me. In Los Platanitos, nobody seemed to talk that much about the Metro, even though it was close by. I became interested to learn whether the community of Los Platanitos saw the Metro as beneficial to their neighborhood, and whether or not they were inclined to ride it. From the standpoint of an outsider, it did not seem like the people in Los Platanitos viewed the Metro as specifically useful to them. I worried that the Metro project was not really serving the urban poor, and could therefore further exclude them from opportunities in the city.

This encounter with the Metro and its apparent contradictions led me to develop the following research questions were essentially: (1) What is the typical profile of a Metro rider?, (2) How do people in Los Platanitos perceive Metro?, (3) Who does the Metro truly serve?, and (4) What impacts does Metro development have on the urban poor? In my study, I integrate the rationalist perspectives of the transportation planning literature with critical development theory to understand whether the Metro will serve poor communities by improving their access to services, schools, and job sites, or simply drain scarce funds from these very areas. My research addresses differing community and institutional perspectives of the project, and critically evaluates the way that the Metro, serving as the current administration's symbol of progress, at times mirrors the top-down political culture of the past. The Metro thus elucidates larger theoretical and practical questions regarding the interactions of transportation planning and political culture, and their impacts on spatial hierarchies and growth within urban spaces.

My research methods included a combination of institutional interviews, Metro ridership surveys, conversations with residents of an informal settlement near a Metro station, and a review of national and international media regarding the Metro in Santo Domingo. Through formal interviews with OPRET, I sought to identify the major goals of the Metro development project, and how the stations are planned to increase accessibility. From OPRET, I also obtained data on ridership for each metro service area. Through interviews with NGOs such as Comité Para los Derechos Barriales (COPADEBA) and Ciudad Alternativa, I inquired how the Metro has impacted informal settlements throughout Santo Domingo. Through ridership surveys on Metro platforms, I aimed to discover characteristics of frequent Metro riders. I compared these surveys with informal conversations and interviews conducted in Los Platanitos, an informal settlement in Santo Domingo Norte that sits about 200 meters away from a Metro station. Lastly, I reviewed newspapers, online media, and television clips that spotlighted the Metro project in Santo Domingo.

In the following chapter, I delve more thoroughly into the theoretical lens that I employ to understand the significance of Metro development in Santo Domingo. Chapter 2 contains a more in-depth explanation of my methodology and my approach to conducting surveys and interviews in Santo Domingo. In Chapter 3, I present the history of development in the Dominican Republic and situate the Metro development within that history. Chapter 4 is an analysis of the implications of the state narratives of progress surrounding Metro, and their ability to overshadow the outspoken criticism of Metro, through their effective dispersion through the media. In Chapter 5, I present my findings

from conversations in the community of Los Platanitos, which was used as a case study to assess whether residents of poor informal settlements situated near Metro stations will benefit from Metro development.

## Chapter 1: Theoretical Background

The theoretical framework of this study draws on two principal bodies of literature. The first theoretical framework aids in conceptualizing the role of investment in transportation and infrastructure, and examines the potentials of public transportation to increase mobility for those with few resources, giving these individuals increased access to city services and thus acting as a means of social inclusion. Based on the prognosis of writers for development organization such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, whose overarching goal is to alleviate poverty in underdeveloped nations, urban transport policy has the capacity to attenuate poverty by stimulating economic growth and by consciously targeting the poor within the context of policy and infrastructure investment. (Gwilliam: 2002, 25) I look at “pro-poor” and “pro-growth” strategies put forth by scholars of transportation planning as complex mechanisms of social inclusion. These authors explore the feasibility of transportation policy and infrastructure to aid in poverty reduction through increased access to urban spaces. They describe some of the best practices for equitable transportation planning and explain the physical and demographic characteristics of places that are well suited to their implementation.

However, transportation theorists also note the limitations of these proposed strategies. In understanding why sound planning procedures cannot always be successfully applied, I draw from critical development theory. Critical development theory deconstructs the discourse and strategies of development so ardently pursued in

the post-war period into their accompanying processes of homogenization and subjugation of the so-called “third world” as it became singly characterized as “underdeveloped.” (Esteva: 1992, 6) Critical development theorists elucidate the false assumption of “development” as a natural modernizing progression, in which underdeveloped countries can overcome all social ills associated with poverty by utilizing science and technology provided by the developed ones. (Escobar: 1992) Further implications of each of these theoretical frameworks are discussed in more detail below, and will subsequently be applied to the case of the Metro rail development project in Santo Domingo.

#### **TRANSPORTATION DEVELOPMENT AS A TOOL OF POVERTY ALLEVIATION**

The question of mobility, the means to move about, is an issue of basic and vital importance. Transportation enables avenues of social mobility, because its entire purpose is to overcome the obstacles that preclude participation in any human activity or event outside the home. Although often laden with frustrations and inconveniences, to be in transit is to conquer spatial barriers in order to enjoy a higher quality of life or satisfy a basic need. The ability to access jobs, friends, markets, and recreation, may thus enable a successful life. Logically, then, transportation availability directly impacts the welfare of all social classes (Gannon and Lu: 1997, 11). The need for more equitable mobility can be seen worldwide. The first major component of social equity, as defined by the American Planning Association, is “...to ensure that all individuals and groups have

access to a wide variety of experiences, resources, goods, and services” (American Planning Association). As this access is not possible without providing transportation, it is crucial that planners understand the mobility needs of all groups and individuals. As Susan Hanson points out, “...the spatial organization of contemporary society demands – indeed assumes- mobility; yet not all urban residents enjoy the ease of personal motorized that many city requires for the conduct of daily life” (Hanson: 2004, 8). A focus on personal mobility rather than overall accessibility has negatively affected low-income groups. In the United States, the planning of cities has mostly catered to the wide availability of the automobile, making services, employment centers, and residential locations increasingly far apart, and making public transportation less convenient and more expensive to maintain.

In Latin American cities, as compared with the United States, there is an enormous deficit of infrastructure, which impairs the free flow of goods and capital and greatly increases congestion (Keeling: 2002, 82). As car ownership increases in Latin America’s large cities, commute times become increasingly long and unpredictable (Gilbert: 1996). While road space in poorer cities is scarce, it is still usually provided freely, and thus increasingly appropriated by private automobiles. The pricing of road space in both the United States and Latin America in most cases does not demand those who benefit most to bear any greater cost. Spatial patterns that prioritize car ownership are most burdensome to the poorest populations, who must either sit in crowded buses which are even more adversely affected by congestion due to fixed routes and frequent stops, or who must walk long distances and frequently endure hazardous conditions. To

serve cities more equitably, greater priority must be given to non-motorized transit and space-efficient public transport vehicles (Gwilliam: 2002). As wealthy car owners almost never pay the full price of their increased mobility, poor populations become increasingly marginalized and continue to suffer from the negative externalities caused by automobile use (Litman: 2007). For these reasons, many transportation planners believe that investments in public transportation will provide direct benefits to poor populations in cities.

The poor, however, are not a homogenous social group. In every city, poverty has social and spatial variations that complicate policymaking. Furthermore, households in poverty have distinct approaches to managing their resources. Strategies of the poor to increase their earning potential entail complex tradeoffs among residential location and quality, travel distance, and travel mode. Poverty thus becomes a multi-dimensional issue, with many factors playing into the reality of social exclusion (Gwilliam: 2002). Yet while poverty is experienced in different forms, depending on the social and spatial conditions of households, limited access remains central to social exclusion (Kalthier: 2002, 5). Marginalization and social exclusion stem from limited access to secure income, to health facilities, to educational institutions, to safe accommodations, and to socio-cultural institutions that enable them to actively participate in public affairs (Kalthier: 2002, 5). Generally, low-income populations tend to make fewer trips and are restricted in modal choices. They often resort to walking, which gives them limited access to city services. For some, their journeys tend to be slow and time-consuming, robbing them of the ability to participate in other activities, such as household chores,

recreation, or family events. For others, trip-making may be discouraged due to exposure of dangerous traffic or potential violence during their journeys. Studies also show that walking long distances induces extreme tiredness and boredom that reduces productivity in the workplace (Gwilliam: 2002, 27).

Thus, while reliable public transportation is valuable to society as a whole, it can be of extreme value to the poor. It can give access to health services and schools, thus directly contributing to the human capital that is necessary for substantial poverty alleviation. Furthermore, poor people are likely to take multiple low-paying part-time jobs to maintain a meager income, and children of poor households are more likely beholden to household duties after school in order to help out their parents and raise overall family income. Their ability to maintain satisfactory jobs and education levels is often dependent on availability and affordability of public transportation (Gannon & Lu: 1997, 12). Improvements in transportation not only provide people with more convenient access to a wider range of social and economic opportunities, but can also lower the cost of transportation services, and thus lower the consumer costs of goods. Understanding how these benefits are most readily transmitted to poor populations is essential to creating effective transportation policies for poverty reduction (Gannon & Lu: 1997, 11). While a lack of basic infrastructure and reliable public transportation is undeniably a key characteristic of urban poverty, the relationship between transportation infrastructure and urban poverty remains complex (Gwilliam: 2002).



## **TRANSPORTATION PLANNING IN DEVELOPING NATIONS**

For the most part, transportation planning in developing nations been oriented towards stimulating economic growth, operating under the assumption that the benefits of improved transportation infrastructure will trickle down to all members of society, allowing the poor to find jobs and increase their incomes (Kalthier: 2002). Higher incomes almost universally result in more trips taken using faster, more comfortable modes. As incomes rise, people can afford access to more employment opportunities and more social interactions (Gannon & Lu: 1997, 11). However, the benefits of overall economic growth have proven to not benefit the lowest income strata and the impoverished urban poor. Results of research conducted over the last 20 years suggest that the “trickle-down” effect has hardly occurred, and that improved infrastructure is a necessary, but not in any way sufficient, condition for increased overall economic productivity. Overall economic growth appears to have little impact on the reduction of urban poverty (Kalthier: 2002, 7), which suggests that strategies of poverty reduction must go beyond the simple aim of economic growth. Gannon and Lu recommend a two-pronged approach of generating broad economic growth to create job opportunities, alongside interventions actively targeted to the poor (Gannon and Lu: 1997).

Transportation strategies for poverty reduction may include road investments, bus service improvements, targeted fare subsidies, or rail investment. As noted earlier, a deficit of infrastructure in developing countries can greatly impair urban movements.

Thus, additions and improvements to roads are sometimes necessary to enable freer, safer travel. However, in the absence of a strategic vision for equity and planning for future growth, simple additions of roads to combat gridlock traffic will almost always benefit the wealthy at the expense of the poor, widening the mobility gap and creating more roads congested with private cars. (Gwilliam: 2002, 29) In order for road investment to contribute to poverty reduction, investment and rehabilitation should be focused on roads that are major corridors for public transportation, so that public transport vehicles will also benefit. Investments should also be made in the provision of walking routes, in order to make them quicker and safer, and separate from automobile traffic. There is a significant policy mismatch of the significance of non-motorized modes, such as walking and biking, to poor people, and the attention given to them by their local governments. (Gwilliam: 2002, 30) One of the most useful techniques to ease the transportation vulnerability of the poor is to make walking safer in key neighborhoods. Road expenditures and improvements could also directly help the poor if they are geared to improve accessibility to informal settlements (Gwilliam: 2002, 30). Overall, the equity of a transportation system or policy requires consideration of who gains accessibility and who loses it as a result of how that system or policy is designed; it requires the consideration of travel patterns and behaviors as the outcomes of both choices and constraints (Hanson: 2004, 8).

## **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES OF TRANSPORTATION PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT**

In the end, localities must be aware of their own social and spatial challenges before they can implement transport solutions. There is no clear definition of poverty, and transportation strategies can only be found in a local context (Kaltheier: 2002). For this reason, uncritically utilizing long lists of pro-poor strategies as sweeping recommendations for transport solutions that will specifically and wholly benefit the poor has proven to be inadequate. A more critical perspective looks past this broad discourse of development and contributes to a more effective understanding of the complex interactions between poverty and the development initiatives that confront it. Transportation planning theory often assumes that transit technology, infrastructure development, and innovative legislation can reduce poverty strictly through the solution of transportation ills such as the lack of connectivity to the city for poor neighborhoods. Ideas of development theorists like Arturo Escobar, Gustavo Esteva, and James Holston reveal the importance of understanding how the culture of top-down capitalist development, when not critically questioned and accounted for, will reproduce the inequality it seeks to confront.

Development theorists look critically at assumptions of planners that inform ideas of modernism and rationality to impose ordered solutions, often believing, either arrogantly or naively, that their plans will be perfectly realized once adopted. (Holston: 1989) In reality, development projects introduced in the Third World bear the marks of

history and culture that produce them, and they may therefore contribute to the socio-economic patterns of so-called underdevelopment through processes of domination and social control (Escobar: 1996). Solutions and innovations for any transport problem should emphasize the needs of the locality over the aspirations of its modernity. As

Richard Keeling stresses:

In advocating a renewed focus on the crucial role of transportation in shaping the future development of Latin America, I do not suggest an uncritical adoption of so-called modernization theories, whereby the region “learns” from the more developed countries and “takes” the capital, skills, and technologies needed to promote self-sustaining growth. Rather Latin American transport planners and policy makers must adapt rather than adopt available theories and technologies to their own social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances. (Keeling: 2002, 98)

As development theorists note, a blind and “uncritical adoption” of Western modernization strategies will likely sabotage its own intentions.

Critical development theory) traces the invention of underdevelopment to the early post-war political culture of the United States. On January 20, 1949, President Harry Truman gave his inaugural address to the nation touting the merits of science and rationality to bring development to the underdeveloped. In Truman’s words:

More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate; they are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas. For the first time in history humanity possesses the knowledge and the skill to relieve the suffering of these people... I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life... We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. The old imperialism – exploitation for foreign profit – has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing... Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace, and the key to greater production as a wider and more vigorous application of modern scientific and technical knowledge. (Truman [1949])

The Truman doctrine thus redefined the management of world affairs through rhetoric of “us” and “them,” “developed” and “underdeveloped.” Our science could ease their

suffering, and our technology could save them from their misery. Although Truman did not coin the term “underdevelopment,” he brought it into political and cultural consciousness in a way that, directly even if discreetly, propped up U.S. hegemony. (Esteva: 1992, 6) “On January 20, 1949, in the eyes of the world and at the hegemonic design of the United States, 2 billion people became underdeveloped. They ceased being what they were, in all their diversity, and were transmogrified into an inverted mirror of others’ reality: a mirror that belittles them and sends them off to the end of the queue” (Esteva: 1992, 7). The discourse of development continued under the Alliance for Progress, as U.S. President John F. Kennedy offered “a special pledge” to “those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery... to assist free men and free governments in casting of the chains of poverty.” (Kennedy [quoted in Escobar 1992, 136]) As Truman did before him, Kennedy framed the concept of development as one where diversity of tradition and lifestyle are overlooked, and people are reduced to the miserable huts characteristic of their unacceptable poverty (Escobar: 1992, 137).

Seen from the perspective of critical development theory, the invention of underdevelopment fits squarely into a scheme of American hegemony by naively embracing the achievements of modern planning, yet ignoring and neglecting its merciless tendency toward social control (Escobar: 1992, 133). The Third World is perceived as a sea of misery, but one that can be objectively transformed by planning, while the modernization introduced from that planning technology is in turn seen as unequivocally desirable and universally applicable (Escobar: 1992, 136-137). This

interpretation can easily be tied back to European colonialism, in which Europeans sought to dominate indigenous groups, yet did so in the name of their collective salvation. Upon encountering indigenous people, Europeans could easily think of their cultures as backward and unenlightened. Subsequent colonial rule, in which Europeans had a socio-psychological advantage exercised through a military-industrial apparatus, was mistakenly interpreted as European cultural superiority (McMichael: 2000, 4). Colonialism instead should be seen as “the subjugation by physical and psychological force of one culture by another - a colonizing power - through military conquest of territory” (McMichael: 2000, 5). In the twentieth century discourse of development, the history and brutality of colonialism is effaced, while, once again, narratives of implicit Western superiority emphasize their own benevolence and selfless humanity (Escobar: 1992, 136).

It is precisely its ability to package and widely disperse a set of norms and standards as true and correct that make the discourse of development so dangerous. As Edward Said says of European discourse of the Orient:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient...My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse we cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period (Said: 1979, 3).

The discourse of development likewise swallows the complexities of place and casts a single image with which the world can identify and speak of development and underdevelopment. Like the narratives of Orientalism, the narratives of development and

progress take hold of popular imagination, and as they continue to be produced and reproduced, they only become harder to combat. The challenge, therein, remains to confront the authenticity of known wisdom, and see what lies beyond the face of development. Programs and strategies for development, when simply taken at surface value, are likely to fall into dangerous and recurring patterns of subjugation and social control.

In public transportation investment and planning, it is quite easy to point to and understand the myriad social benefits of increased access, more travel mode choices, job creation, economic growth, reduced traffic congestion, and lower carbon emissions. However, to look only at these points is to neglect to address the inherent disparities of service and spatial hierarchies within the cities. Once transportation systems are in place, we often forget our right to question them. As Miriam Konrad states, “the human hand becomes invisible as creator and director of transportation options, in such a way as to allow us to believe, often, that we are merely following the road as it stretches before us, rather than shaping its twists and turns as we go” (Konrad: 2009, 2). As decisions regarding public transportation investment are made, it is important to critically consider whether transit service may exclude certain sectors of the population

The built environment both describes and proscribes the way we navigate space, and the packaging of discourse and narratives surrounding transportation and mobility not only reflect but also create that environment. Those narratives cannot go unexamined (Konrad: 2009, 1-2). In Konrad’s assessment of the rail system in Metropolitan Atlanta, for example, she notes that while its stated goals were to increase transit use, reduce

private vehicle use, revitalize the downtown, and promote growth in key areas; it was also largely developed to serve the interests of the business elites. Many of its critics felt its purpose was geared more toward projecting Atlanta's image as a cutting-edge city than truly addressing its dire transportation problems (Keating, cited in Konrad: 2009, 52). However, these dissenters were framed as anti-progress, and the discourse of modernization became essential to the development of the rail system (Konrad: 2009, 53).

Thus, in assessing the major benefits, consequences, and controversies surrounding the Metro development project in Santo Domingo, I find it essential to look beyond physical landscape and infrastructure capacity, and explore also the political culture and state narratives that led to its existence and continue to define its path. In the following chapters I attempt to situate the Santo Domingo Metro project within the historical context and culture of development in the Dominican Republic.



## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

I designed my research methods to ascertain whether the Metro in Santo Domingo serves its large population of urban poor. My main goal was to document the demographic distribution of Metro riders to see which socio-economic sectors the Metro most serves, and thus infer whether the urban poor is benefitting from Metro. I documented ridership characteristics through surveys with Metro riders at the stations. I also documented ridership in the community of Los Platanitos, an informal settlement in Santo Domingo Norte situated near a Metro station. In the community of Los Platanitos, I conducted semi-structured interviews to understand some of the leading perspectives of Metro from a group of urban poor, regardless of whether they use the Metro. I also conducted formal interviews with a representative of OPRET, the transit agency that runs the Metro development, to discover the primary goals of Metro service for the citizens of Santo Domingo. In addition, I interviewed representatives of NGOs working toward neighborhood development, who I knew to have a more critical perspective of Metro development, to understand the primary debates and criticisms surrounding Metro development. Throughout my research, I aimed to analyze and unpack the way that Metro is debated among people and promoted by the state and the Metro planning authority.

This chapter describes in further detail the methods I employed to research ridership levels among various groups of the population, to understand the differing institutional perspectives of Metro, and to review the background goals and plans of

Metro development. In the following chapters, I present the findings of this research, using the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter, and I relate these findings to the historical and political culture of the Dominican Republic.

I originally became interested in the Santo Domingo Metro system during a participatory planning workshop held in the community of Los Platanitos during spring semester, 2010. As part of a team of students, I arrived to Los Platanitos every morning on the Metro train to carry out a research project on community-based solid waste management in informal settlements. We would travel from our hotel in the Distrito Nacional near the station of Joaquin Balaguer, riding the Metro to Peña Gómez in Santo Domingo Norte, where we were greeted by community members and led the remaining quarter of a mile into their neighborhood for our collaborative research.

During this participatory fieldwork, I did not hear many people talk about riding Metro. It seemed like most patrons of Metro were members of the middle and upper classes using the Metro for work trips. I was struck by the contrast of spaces - moving from the sleek, clean, air-conditioned Metro station down chaotic streets to the crumbling stairways, narrow alleys, and polluted channels of the asymmetrically settled and unevenly urbanized spaces within the informal settlement of Los Platanitos. I became curious of the perceptions of Metro from informal settlements near Metro stations, and wondered whether it brought benefits to those neighborhoods, or if they used it at all.

Prior to conducting research in Santo Domingo, I researched the historical development of the Metro through online media sources. I looked at several major local newspapers, such as *Expreso Santo Domingo*, *Dominicanos Hoy*, and *Listín Diario*, and

used their search capabilities to locate pertinent articles about the Metro, about the institution of OPRET, and about the presidency of Leonel Fernández. I also searched for the same information in some U.S. news sources, such as the *New York Times*. My goal at this time was simply to gain a deeper understanding of the purposes and development goals of the Santo Domingo Metro. These sources gave me the background with which to ask questions about the function and service of the Metro. In finding that one of the major controversies surrounding Metro was that ridership in the first year of Metro was much lower than expected, a main goal of my research was to find out who these riders were, and investigate which sectors of the population were most benefitting from the Metro.

## **METRO SURVEYS**

As I aimed to see if there is a “typical” profile of a Metro rider in Santo Domingo, surveys of ridership on Metro platforms in Santo Domingo became a fundamental component of my field research. While some public information on ridership data is available from OPRET, this information contains only figures and statistics on the number of riders at each station. My research aimed to uncover some of the faces behind the ridership numbers. I wanted to know if there were certain groups of people, for example, in terms of age, gender, or occupation; who most benefit from Metro. I also wanted to see which stations people tended to travel to, and whether they relied solely on Metro or took other forms of transportation. I also wanted to know if they preferred

Metro over other forms of transportation, and if so, what they liked about it. I modeled the style of my survey questions after a public transportation survey used for bus passengers in Austin, Texas, developed by Capital Metro to assess the demographic of bus ridership. However, I had to shorten my survey, because I only had three minutes to ask questions to each passenger as he or she waited for the next train to arrive. My survey contained the following questions:

- 1) ¿Con que frecuencia viaja en Metro?  
*How often do you ride Metro?*
  - 2) ¿Cómo llegó Ud. a la estación del Metro?  
*How did you arrive to the Metro station?*
  - 3) ¿Cuál es su destino más frecuente?  
*What is your most frequent destination?*
  - 4) ¿Qué tipo de viaje realiza Ud.? (trabajo, diligencias, recreo)?  
*What kind of trip do you make on Metro? (work, errands, leisure)?*
  - 5) ¿Además del metro, que otro modo de transporte más utiliza Ud.?  
*Besides Metro, what other modes of transportation do you use the most?*
  - 6) ¿Cuál es su modo de transporte preferido?  
*What is your favorite mode of travel?*
  - 7) ¿A qué se dedica Ud.?  
*What do you do for a living?*
  - 8) ¿Qué edad tiene Ud.? 0-25 26-50 50 o mas  
*How old are you? 0-25 26-50 50 or older*
  - 9) ¿Cuales factores le gustan más del metro?  
*What do you like most about the Metro?*
- |                |                 |               |              |                    |              |
|----------------|-----------------|---------------|--------------|--------------------|--------------|
| Es cómodo.     | Iluminación     | Seguridad     | Rapidez      | Limpieza           | Otro         |
| <i>Comfort</i> | <i>Lighting</i> | <i>Safety</i> | <i>Speed</i> | <i>Cleanliness</i> | <i>Other</i> |

At the time of my research, there was one Metro line in operation with sixteen stations. I did not have time to conduct surveys at every station, but instead I chose five key stations and took sample ridership data from each. The most important station for my research was the Peña Gómez stop, because it is located near Los Platanitos, the neighborhood I chose as a case study to assess the impacts of Metro development on poor communities. I conducted surveys at this station on two separate days, to increase the total riders surveyed at this location. I chose the other four stations in collaboration with

OPRET Vice-President, Leonel Carrasco. I met with Mr. Carrasco prior to conducting surveys in order to receive permission from OPRET to stand on the platforms and ask questions to a random selection of Metro riders. Mr. Carrasco signed a letter of approval that I displayed for the Metro personnel and security guards. He also gave me advice and guidance on which of the remaining stations to survey passengers and what time of day to conduct them. We agreed on which days he would give me permission to conduct surveys at each station.

The five stations where I surveyed passengers, from north to south, were: Mamá Tingó, Peña Gómez, Los Tainos, Juan Bosch, and Centro de los Héroe. Mamá Tingó and Centro de los Heroes are both very busy stations and they are at the ends of the line. Juan Bosch and Los Tainos are also popular stations; and Peña Gómez, as stated earlier, is near the site of my case study. I surveyed passengers who had already paid entrance fee and were waiting to board a train. I chose not to survey riders in public spaces outside the stations to avoid unwanted attention from other passersby. Also, Metro riders may be less likely to stop and answer questions before they have entered the stations. Once they are on the platform, they may feel more at ease as they know they can cease answering surveying questions and board a train when it comes, in the event that time did not allow for completion of the survey. I had also considered boarding the trains to administer surveys. This could also be problematic, as patrons may need to disembark from the trains at different points, and it would be difficult to maneuver through the moving train cars.

At each station, I had to choose on which side of the platform to enter the station. I could only survey people in one direction, either those waiting for northbound trains or those waiting for southbound trains. Since peak flow during morning hours runs from north to south, I surveyed people heading south. The exception was at Centro de los Heroes, the southernmost station, where people can only head north. I only surveyed passengers on weekdays during peak morning hours, from 7:30 to 9:30 a.m. In order for my data to be uniform and systematic, I wanted to survey people at roughly the same time each day. However, I also saw this as a limitation to my data, because it may have skewed the ridership statistics to contain superficially high levels of people with regular employment. I tried to select passengers randomly while standing on the platform. Because I was conducting surveys during peak hours, I only had three minutes between each train arrivals. Therefore, I usually approached one of the first people to walk on the platform after a train departure in order to ensure adequate time to finish a survey. However, I often did not approach riders in larger groups or those who seemed busy with papers, cell phones, or other devices. Although I did not try to target any gender or age set, I invariably approached people who intuitively seemed friendly and open to talking to me. I briefly explained that I was researching Metro, and asked them if they would like to participate, and then recorded their answers to my questions on my pre-printed survey forms.

## **INTERVIEWS IN LOS PLATANITOS**

Following the platform surveys, I conducted interviews in the community of Los Platanitos. I hoped these interviews would help me to understand the impacts of the Metro development on communities who are likely underrepresented in its ridership. I chose the community of Los Platanitos for many reasons. First of all, it is a poor neighborhood with very high levels of unemployment. If the residents of Los Platanitos perceive the Metro as a mechanism for opening up jobs to them, then that would speak highly of the project. Furthermore, it is an informally settled area, characterized by self-help housing, and a lack of infrastructure, running water, and sanitation. Again, if they see transportation as key to improving their community, it would in many ways legitimize the public spending on Metro. The community of Los Platanitos is located only about 200 meters from the entrance to the Peña Gómez station, so theoretically residents should be in a very good position to benefit from the Metro service. And finally, Los Platanitos is located in Santo Domingo Norte, somewhat isolated from the administrative center of the city. The Metro could greatly reduce their travel time to downtown Santo Domingo, where many public sector offices and health clinics are located. A more detailed description of the community of Los Platanitos will be depicted in Chapter 6, but these are some of the basic characteristics that led me to choose Los Platanitos as a case study.

Beyond these characteristics, I chose Los Platanitos because of my personal connections there and familiarity with the community. Due to my involvement in an

ongoing participatory research project for solid waste management in the community, I had pre-existing contacts, acquaintances, and friends in the community. This level of mutual confidence between me and several members of the community helped assure me that, even as an outsider, I could carry out earnest interviews with the residents there. I also relied on my previous contacts, leaders of the community, to walk through the community with me and ensure my safety.

I tried to ensure a broad distribution of households by selecting roughly every fourth house for my interviews. Each day that I was able to conduct interviews, I focused on a different area of the community. My interviews were usually conducted in the mornings on weekdays, over a period of about two weeks, from July 16, 2010 to July 30, 2010. I chose not to audio record the interviews, as I wanted to keep them as informal and least invasive as possible. Instead, I took copious notes by hand. Every afternoon, I typed the interviews so as not to lose my notes or forget what I meant to convey through my own shorthand. I also chose not to write down anybody's name, but instead record their gender and ask only for their age.

In some ways, I aimed to make my community interviews parallel to my Metro ridership surveys. For community members who had ridden the Metro, I asked whether they liked it, whether it was their preferred mode, and what other modes they used, as I had in the Metro platform surveys. In this way, I hoped to more easily judge the differences in responses between the Metro riders at the stations, and the potential Metro riders in the community. However, because I had relatively unlimited time to talk with residents in Los Platanitos, the community interviews were much more in-depth. Still, I



asked a series of basic questions and recorded their answers on pre-printed questionnaires, but I then had the luxury to ask for further opinions, clarifications, perceptions, or explanations to their answers. The basic questions I asked in the community were as follows:

- 1) ¿Usted ha viajado en Metro antes?  
*Have you ridden the Metro before?*
- 2) ¿Con que frecuencia ha viajado en Metro? ¿Adónde viaja? O  
*How often do you ride the Metro? Where do you ride it? Or*
- 3) ¿Por qué no ha viajado en Metro?  
*Why don't you ever ride Metro?*
- 4) ¿Cómo le parece usted las estaciones de Metro?  
*What do you think of the Metro stations?*
- 5) ¿A Ud. le gusta tener cerca el Metro? ¿Por qué?  
*Do you like to have the Metro stations nearby? Why?*
- 6) ¿Ud. cree que el metro ha traído beneficios al barrio?  
*Do you think the Metro brings benefits to the neighborhood?*
- 7) ¿Qué tipo de viajes realiza Ud. fuera de su barrio?  
*What kind of trips do you most take outside of your neighborhood?*
- 8) ¿Además del metro, qué otro modo de transporte más utiliza Ud.?  
*Besides Metro, what other mode of transportation do you most use?*  
A pie/Bus o mini-bus/Automovil personal/Taxi colectivo /Taxi/Bicicleta/Moto/Otro  
*Walking/Buses/Personal Car/Public Car/Taxi/Bicycle/Motorcycle/Other*
- 9) ¿Cuál es tu modo de transporte preferido? ¿Por qué?  
*What is your preferred mode of travel? Why?*
- 10) ¿Ud. trabaja? ¿A qué se dedica Ud.?  
*Do you work? What do you do for a living?*
- 11) ¿Qué edad tiene Ud.?  
*How old are you?*

My main goals with these structured interview questions were to find out the dominant perceptions of the Metro, whether residents of Los Platanitos are likely to ride it, and if they see it as beneficial to the neighborhood. Before starting the interviews, I had a preconceived notion that many residents of the community probably did not use the Metro. For those in the community that do not ride the Metro, I wanted to know specifically what factors deterred them from using it, and if there were something that could be changed that would make them more likely to ride it, such as lower costs or more extensive service.

## INTERVIEWS WITH NGOs AND OPRET

Aside from gathering data from Metro riders and the perspectives of community members, I sought to gather opinions and information from local organizations that work with neighborhood rights and public health improvements of informal settlements. The two organizations that I contacted were non-governmental organizations, COPADEBA (Comite Para los Derechos Barriales) and Ciudad Alternativa. Both of these organizations have extensive experience with poor and vulnerable communities in Santo Domingo, and each has a clear mission to alleviate poverty in the country by giving capacity to vulnerable communities. Ciudad Alternativa aims to increase quality of life and public participation in poor communities. COPADEBA focuses on empowering communities through asserting neighborhood rights and vying for improved housing conditions. During a meeting with COPADEBA director, Patricia Gómez, in January of 2010, I originally learned of the potential that Metro expansion had to displace neighborhoods, and saw the site of construction of a Metro side project which was disrupting the housing conditions in the community of La Zurza. I wished to speak with these organizations to see what insight they might have on how the Metro has impacted the communities with which they most closely work. I spoke with the executive director of each organization, Patricia Gómez of COPADEBA and Román Batista of Ciudad Alternativa. The basic questions I asked representatives of these organizations were the following:

- 1) ¿Cómo es percibido el Metro por su organización?  
*How is the Metro perceived by your organization?*
- 2) ¿Qué impacto tiene el Metro en las comunidades con que usted trabaja?  
*What impact does Metro have in the communities where you work?*
- 3) ¿Ud. piensa que la mejora del transporte es un área importante para la ciudad de Santo Domingo?  
*Do you think the improvement of transportation is important for Santo Domingo?*
- 4) ¿Qué beneficios trae el sistema de Metro a los ciudadanos de Santo Domingo?  
*What benefits does the Metro bring to the citizens of Santo Domingo?*

For each question, I allowed for extensive elaboration on the topic of Metro development and its impact on local communities in Santo Domingo.

After talking to the local NGOs, I was fortunate enough to obtain an interview with OPRET Vice-President, Mr. Leonel Carrasco. I first spoke with Mr. Carrasco prior to the process of surveying passengers on the Metro platforms and speaking with community members and NGOs. I discussed my research plan with him, and it was he who allowed me to administer surveys on the platforms of some select stations during morning peak periods. However, I wanted to speak with Mr. Carrasco at the conclusion of this on-site research, so that I could ask him about questions that arose during my other interviews. The purpose of the interview with Leonel Carrasco was to have a record of the main goals of the Metro development project. During the interview, I also voiced some of the concerns regarding Metro expressed by community residents and by representatives of COPADEBA and Ciudad Alternativa, and gave him a chance to respond to those criticisms. I asked Leonel Carrasco the following questions, in order to hear the official position of OPRET from within the institution:

- 1) ¿Cuáles son las metas más importantes del Metro?  
*What are the most important goals of Metro?*
- 2) ¿Que considera el gerente del Metro en planear las paradas y estaciones nuevas? ¿Asi que, como se decide donde ubicar las estaciones?  
*What considerations do Metro personell take when planning stops and new stations? How do they decide upon the locations of the stations?*
- 3) ¿Hay unas poblaciones especificas (por ejemplo basadas en los barrios o en estatus profesionales) que el Metro más pretende servir?  
*Are there specific sectors of the population (for example based on neighborhood location or professional status) that the Metro aims to serve?*
- 4) ¿El Metro se esfuerza proteger o alcanzar los barrios pobres situados cerca de las estaciones?  
*Does Metro make special efforts to protect poor neighborhoods or give service to poor areas located near the Metro stations?*
- 5) Hay una preocupación de otras organizaciones que la segunda línea va a provocar muchos desalojos de familias que tienen casas cerca de la ruta de construcción. ¿Si este es el caso, como

va a remediar la situación de estas familias? ¿Hay un plan de recompensa o de reubicar estas familias?

*Some organizations are worried that the second line of Metro is going to provoke the displacement of families who have houses near the construction routes. If this is the case, how is OPRET going to remedy the situation of these families? Is there a compensation plan or a relocation plan for these families?*

From Mr. Carrasco, I also obtained official ridership data and other statistics about Metro ridership during the first year of operation of the Metro.

After speaking with OPRET and other organizations, as well as conducting surveys and interviews on Metro platforms and in the community of Los Platanitos, I gained a fuller perspective of the controversies around the Santo Domingo Metro as they play out on the ground. While in Santo Domingo, I also became interested in the political narratives that accompany Metro development, and how they influence people's perceptions of Metro. Upon returning to The University of Texas at Austin, I revisited the news and other media sources regarding Metro. This time, I read the news and other media to see how the dominant narratives about Metro progress are passed down to residents of Santo Domingo, and whether the critical voices were fully heard. I began to see the Metro as a political project, rather than just a technical tool to optimize transit options among different areas of the city. I looked at newspaper coverage of the Metro through the online journalism in both English and Spanish in *Dominican Today*, *The Dominican Sun*, *New York Times*, *Expreso Santo Domingo*, *Listín Diario* and others. I searched for coverage of the Metro, coverage of OPRET, and coverage of Leonel Fernández's 2008 political campaign, in which he promised to bring Metro to the Dominican Republic. In this review of the media, I looked closely at the discourse of national progress, pride, and modernity tied to Metro development. Aside from these

news sources, I examined the official propaganda campaign of the Metro through television commercials. I also began to study more thoroughly the history of the political culture of development in the Dominican Republic, and how the Metro fits into that history.

Beyond this documentation and analysis of narratives surrounding the Metro, I also carried out spatial analysis using Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Although the bulk of my research involves qualitative analysis of ridership data and interview data, and discourse analysis of narratives surrounding the Metro development, preparing and analyzing maps of the Metro and surrounding areas helped me understand the spatial context and also made it possible to visualize some of my survey data. Creating maps in GIS allowed me to overlay locations of current and proposed stations onto maps that symbolize levels of poverty and population density surrounding those stations. On different maps, I plotted out the locations of universities and health clinics, to see whether the Metro stations might give easier access to these kinds of services. However, my GIS analysis is somewhat limited because I did not have access to enough spatial data.

After compiling my research data and examining key findings, I relate my analyses of the Santo Domingo Metro with dominant bodies of literature regarding transportation planning and critical development theory. In the following chapters I present the findings from these methods both off-site and in the field, and I draw on the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter to suggest that the Metro development project in Santo Domingo is more readily equipped to symbolize progress than to confront inequality of access to the city.

### **Chapter 3: Development, Transportation, and Urban Poverty in the Dominican Republic**

In order to fully understand both the goals and controversies of the Metro project, it is necessary to see the development of the Metro in light of the modernization projects and the accompanying narratives of progress that preceded it. Historically, the economic development models of the state have pursued growth by means that have systematically produced, reinforced, and exacerbated inequality; and it is largely the persistence of this extreme inequality that renders Metro so controversial today. In the realm of urban planning, the ability of any transit system to address inequality by providing affordable access to city services for low-income members of society remains uncertain. Large-scale transportation projects, when they do not thoroughly serve those populations, may only further exclude them. Authorities at OPRET note that Metro aims to serve all society, with several existing and proposed stations in poor neighborhoods and a planned network of feeder buses to the stations to extend the capacity of and service catchment of those stations. However, while these plans seem promising, it is also evident that practices of both the transit authority and the current government often mirror the top-down, non-inclusionary processes of their political predecessors, which have continuously prevented the poor from enhancing their economic well-being by depriving them of a means for social mobility.

In the following pages, I discuss the dominant economic practices and development projects that have shaped the last century of urban growth in the Dominican Republic, with the aim of exploring how Metro falls into or breaks away from their

legacy. More specifically, I look at the culture of governance begun by the United States military occupation, and the subsequent nationalistic rules of Rafael Trujillo and Joaquín Balaguer, whose collective political reign spanned the majority of the twentieth century and sought to modernize the Dominican Republic. Their efforts, although often paired with narratives of extreme national pride, were executed through a corrupt political culture of state-led violence and repression. The scars of these past political forces remain visible in the extreme inequality and urban poverty in the country's numerous crowded urban spaces. Thus, the Dominican people now look to President Leonel Fernández for a new style of leadership. His boldest promise of progress, the Santo Domingo Metro, has drastically altered the landscape of the capital city, and has become central to the debate on future development throughout the country.

One of the first major initiatives of modernization in the Dominican Republic came under foreign military by the United States. The U.S. military occupation of 1916 to 1924 took an enormous toll on the country, the impacts of which have far outlasted its eight years of formal control. The United States' dominant presence and interventions led to the restructuring of the economy, brought new habits of consumption, modernized housing and infrastructure, and forcefully subjected Dominicans to a new style of governance. On November 26, 1916, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson gave orders to Captain Harry S. Knapp to formalize the existing military presence in the Dominican Republic. Immediately following the official proclamation of the United States occupation, Captain Knapp announced the termination and dismissal of Dominican President Francisco Henriquez y Carvajal's cabinet and instated U.S. marine officers in

their ministerial positions. The U.S. established its dominance and eliminated the possibility of opposition, protest, or revolt by Dominicans by outlawing the possession of firearms, ammunition, or any type of explosives by any Dominican citizens. The disarmament, brutally carried out through systematic arrests, torture, and imprisonment of the population, aided the coercive practices by the U.S. military and stripped the Dominican masses of the ability to organize any significant uprising or organized insurrection. A strict censorship of the press upheld these tactics, ensured favorable portrayal of the U.S. military, and avoided exposure of any hypocritical actions performed by the occupational government. Prior to publication and distribution, all newspapers were examined by a U.S. censor, and any expression or phrase that might “incite hostility or resistance to the military government” was explicitly prohibited from print. The publication or circulation of any other proclamation of “unfavorable opinions of the United States of American or of the military government in Santo Domingo” was also banned (Moya Pons: 1995, 321).

Providing political stability and developing the country were major goals of the military occupation. These goals, geared toward economic development, were facilitated at first by the release of customs revenue for government use. In an effort to mollify some of the rising hostility toward the new government, some of this revenue was used to guarantee regular salaries for Dominican public employees; yet this salary regulation was coupled with the exercise of complete control of and the use of fear tactics against those same employees. After establishing complete control of the country, the U.S. military pursued strategies of economic growth that would ultimately serve their own interests.



The military government modernized and bureaucratized the systems of accounting and land ownership, and devised an internal system of taxes on Dominican goods to provide revenue to the state. These taxes imposed on Dominican goods, especially alcoholic beverages, centralized their production and made their consumption less favorable to U.S. goods. While the new taxation system brought revenue to the state, it ruined hundreds of family-owned Dominican rum production businesses that previously thrived on local consumption and export to Haiti.

From the hundreds of stills that had been in the country before the occupation and of which constituted an important sector of the national economic life, only a few dozen survived the occupation. This initiated a rapid process of consolidation of rum production into a small number of firms that would be reduced to less than a dozen in the following decades. Likewise, many small workshops and native industries were ruined by the avalanche of U.S. goods that poured in after the promulgation of the Tariff Act of 1919. Any incipient Dominican industrial development that could have been stimulated by the high prices during the occupation was retarded by at least 20 years since the competition was impossible against U.S. products that arrived in the country duty-free. (Moya Pons: 1995, 338)

Also facilitating the financial gains under the U.S. occupation came a fortuitous rise in the world price of sugar, from \$5.50 in 1914 to \$12.50 in 1918 to \$22.50 in 1920, bringing unprecedented economic growth. The rise in sugar prices was definitely favorable for sugar cane workers who saw a raise in their wages, but most of the benefits stayed in the hands of foreign owners of sugar companies. Foreign investors were attracted by an abundance of cheap land, and ended up dominating all of the sugar industry. The U.S. openly favored the foreign-dominated sugar industry, which thus remained largely outside the influence of the Dominican population, and native Dominican industries were discouraged (Deive: 2009, 272).

The U.S. military occupation also had tremendous impacts on transportation development in the Dominican Republic, especially through the construction of

highways. According to some historians, the highway construction was the most influential change brought by the U.S. occupation (Moya Pons: 1995, 337). It was a long-term project, entirely completed shortly after the withdrawal of troops in 1924. The new road system linked the capital city with three other important regions, aided the political unification of the country, and revolutionized the mail service. Trips between the northern and southern coasts that had previously lasted two to three days in small ships could now be made in under twelve hours on land. Cars and trucks became popular among the wealthy, replacing the horse and donkey and eventually also causing the end of the need for the railroads, which were becoming too expensive to maintain. The highway system also facilitated internal migration growth, resulting in major population growth and urbanization of Santo Domingo, whose population had grown only very slowly in the past. Furthermore, with its highway improvements and other public works projects, the U.S. military established a precedent in which to govern became synonymous with construction, and success of that government could be measured in the tangible infrastructure that it created. A good government was thus measured in terms of the construction of public works that it accomplished, more than by the welfare of its people (Moya Pons: 1995, 337). A map of major road construction from 1906 to the end of the era of Trujillo is shown below (Fig. 2). This trend in governance and construction is later seen in the industrialization projects of Trujillo and the grandiose public works projects of Balaguer. The Santo Domingo Metro should also be considered in this light.

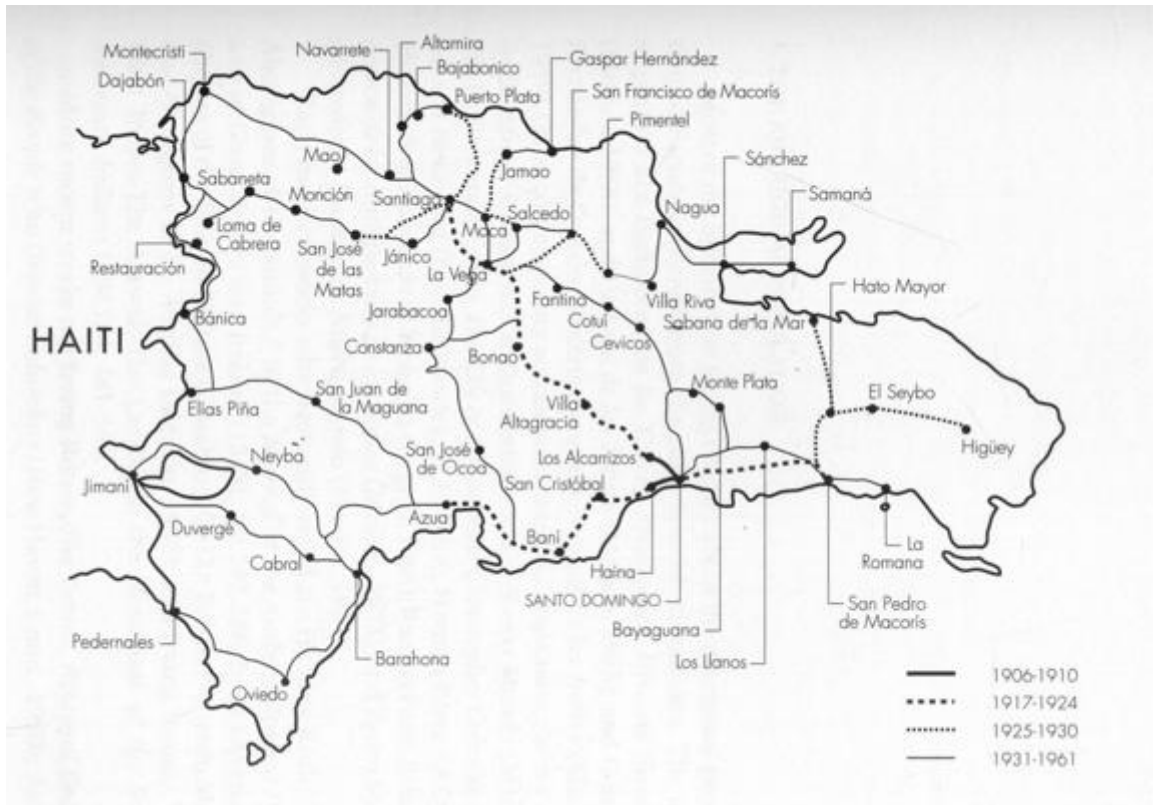


Figure 2: Construction of major roads in the Dominican Republic 1906 – 1961, Source: Frank Moya Pons.

Under the U.S. military government, modernization for some meant increased focus on health, greater opportunities for education, and the opportunity to replace their “houses constructed of palm slats and thatched roofs” with “modern showy structures of reinforced concrete;” however, many others remained poor, and could not keep up with the new consumptive habits of the wealthy urban classes which were alien to anything any Dominicans had experienced before (Moya Pons: 1995, 345). While the U.S. military was in some respects a modernizing force in the country, greatly concerned with improvements in health, education, and infrastructure, it also left a legacy of top-down,

repressive, and secretive political action that failed to address the inequality that it created.

Directly out of the U.S. military occupation emerged the political career of Rafael Trujillo, who soon became the country's most horrific dictator, spreading fear across the country and leaving a legacy of racist nationalism and stark inequality. The U.S. facilitated the political career of Trujillo through the creation of a new National Guard, which was led by a carefully selected group of young Dominicans that could control the military when the U.S. forces left. Leaders and commanders were chosen and trained by the United States Marine Corps and thus became an extension of the U.S. military, both tactically and ideologically. Many former members of the Dominican Navy and Republican Guard joined the new U.S.-created National Guard. Rafael Trujillo was one of many unemployed youths who took advantage of the opportunity to begin a military career. He had formerly been a telegraph operator in San Cristobal and a camp guard for a sugar company in the east. He joined the National Guard on December 18, 1918. In 1921, its name was changed to Dominican National Police (Moya Pons: 1995, 323). When Trujillo took power of the country in 1930, the Dominican National Police reached new levels of systematic violence and murder that never would have been possible without the training and career mobility afforded by the U.S. military.

Trujillo continued the top-down repressive practices of the U.S. military, and took them to the extreme. In the months leading up to his election, of which he was the sole candidate on the ballot, he organized a terrorist band to murder and imprison his political enemies and to spread fear throughout the country. "This band went by

automobile throughout the country leaving a trail of corpses behind” (Moya Pons: 1995, 356). The thorough disarming of the Dominican population by the U.S. military had precluded the possibility of serious backlash from the masses. Trujillo’s rule, not unlike the U.S. occupation, was accompanied by a strict censorship of the press, even including a physical assault of *Listín Diario*, which was forcefully silenced due to its statements against Trujillo. Although U.S. diplomats in Santo Domingo tried to prevent Trujillo’s coup, once confronted with his establishment in office they accepted Trujillo, saying that they preferred him as a “guarantor of political stability” and as an alternative to revolution (Moya Pons: 1995, 357).

These realities were paired with constant nationalist narratives, through endless speeches and radio broadcasts that portrayed Trujillo as the ultimate benefactor and father of the nation. To extend political control, secure popular acquiescence, and develop the country’s economy, Trujillo integrated the peasantry into the nation, and was able to spread his message throughout the entire territory (Turits: 2003, 84). He created a single, legal party, El Partido Dominicano, which required membership and participation of adults. It avoided opposition by any means necessary and spread Trujillo’s message to all social classes. Trujillo’s state machinery was an effort to control the nation and disseminate nationalist propaganda. He employed a populist rhetoric that sought to earn favor in the Dominican countryside, appealing to the rural popular classes as his “best friends.” Popular acceptance of Trujillo was aided through increasing landlessness and poverty brought on in large part by Trujillo himself, making the rural classes susceptible to narratives of state protection (Turits: 2003, 82). Trujillo dispossessed thousands of

peasants and forced them to emigrate to the cities during a period when demographic growth ran as high as 3.6% per year, and then claimed to be their protector.

Although Trujillo's thirty-one year reign arguably provided some economic growth for the country, it did so at the expense and exploitation of the masses, and Trujillo successfully and corruptly sought personal enrichment through diversion of state funds. "It was commonly said that during the Trujillo regime the situation reached such extremes that the Dominicans could not obtain food, shoes, clothing, or shelter without creating a profit in one way or another for Trujillo or his family" (Moya Pons: 1995, 365). Population growth, urbanization, and industrialization under Trujillo only exacerbated the existing inequality, especially in Santo Domingo. During the years before World War II, Trujillo established new plants for light industrial products like shoes, beer, tobacco, alcohol starch, pasta, and vegetable oil, as he aimed to transform the old city of Santo Domingo into the principal industrial center of the Dominican Republic (Moya Pons: 1995, 362). Almost all of his new modern plants were located near the capital, attracting increasing waves of immigrants from the interior of the country, which in turn led to the acceleration of marginalized urban settlements filled with masses of men and women who lacked health care and education but who fled to the cities in search of jobs, and settled in the peripheral zones. According to Richard Turits, "controlled modernization pursued by the Trujillo regime and its discourse valorizing the peasantry and rural values both eased and coerced peasants into the country's processes of modernity in the twentieth century (Turits: 2003, 263). Modernization and growth thus resulted in vastly disproportionate economic prosperity and asymmetrical urbanization

that depended on a system of exploitation and tyranny that could not satisfy the needs of the entire population.

By 1960 it was already apparent that the hospitals constructed were inadequate; that the schools could not handle the population growth and that illiteracy had increased; that the cost of living had risen while real wages remained stagnant; that unemployment was growing in the cities while Trujillo's tiny family oligarchy drained the country of capital that should have been reinvested in the creation of new jobs; and that the countryside was impoverished because several hundred thousands hectares of land had fallen into the hands of landlords who managed to increase their holdings at the expense of traditional peasant lands (Moya Pons: 1995, 379).

The scars of inequality and exploitation are still extremely evident in the nation's capital city, as residents of Santo Domingo's numerous peripheral informal settlements continue the struggle to obtain adequate jobs, education, healthcare, and basic city services.

Although the reign of Trujillo decisively ended with his assassination in 1961, bringing the return of political parties, exiles, trade unions, and freedom of the press, it was not the end of political chaos. Traces of the Trujillo dictatorship were far from extinguished, even with the formation and reestablishment of democratic organizations. (Vargas: 15, 1985). Three main political organizations: the Union Civica Nacional (UCN), the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD), and the Vanguardia Revolucionaria Dominicana, all formed in opposition to Joaquin Balaguer, who had become the puppet president after Trujillo's death. Balaguer, a masterful poet and eloquent speaker, proclaimed that in the time of pain, marked by the loss of Trujillo, the nation must remain more united than ever to promote the spirit and solidarity given by the fallen dictator (Vargas: 1985, 28). However, despite a brief presidency by Juan Bosch of the PRD, the conflict between the opposing parties resulted in a Civil War. Balaguer won the presidency in the elections in 1966, by successfully suppressing the

leftist party, the PRD. He had prevented the PRD from even campaigning by threatening to kill Juan Bosch, its leader. Balaguer then proceeded to govern in ways much reminiscent of the previous dictatorship (Turits: 2003, 261). He would eventually become the dominant political figure of the remainder of the twentieth century, serving as president from 1966 – 1978 and again from 1986 – 1996. Like the Trujillo government before him, Balaguer silenced opposition and spread fear throughout the country. During the early years of his presidency, the PRD was severely persecuted, and later Balaguer's military and paramilitary groups terrorized and jailed political opponents whether they were leftists or not. In dealing with opposition, Balaguer freely authorized the armed forces to carry out repressive acts and practiced a policy of co-optation with extremely limited tolerance of even moderate oppositions (Hartlyn: 1998, 111). During his first presidency, Balaguer's method for dealing with the immense urban poverty left by Trujillo took the form of massive displacement of urban slums, precluding the urban poor from improving their communities, and removing them from their social networks and economic means. He ruled in an authoritarian fashion, in which human rights violations were unacknowledged and thus unpunished (Hartlyn: 1998, 1010).

During his second presidency, from 1986-1996, Balaguer more vigorously sought to continue the modernizing efforts of Trujillo through large-scale capital projects and new infrastructure, such as ports, highways, streets, aqueducts, and energy plants. He led a gradually liberalizing regime that sought economic modernity but lacked liberal democracy (Turits: 2003, 261). He personally controlled more than half the nation's budget, and carried out grandiose infrastructure projects to bring in tourists, such as a



\$250 million lighthouse in 1992 to commemorate Columbus and beam rays of light over the capital city (Economist: 2002). Some of his projects, such as this one, were celebratory recognitions of the year 1992, marking the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what the Dominican Catholic Church called the “discovery and evangelization of the Americas.” Other large projects included the Jigüey-Aguacate Dam and the Valdesia-Santo Domingo Aqueduct (Hartlyn: 1998, 193). His main strategy for economic reactivation consisted of massive expenditure of public funds, especially for construction and public works, which he then directed to companies of his good friends. The construction projects extended throughout the country, but with several major highway, road, bridge, and public housing projects concentrated in the capital (Hartlyn: 1998, 193).

The policies of the Balaguer administration thus led to worse inequality and income concentration grew to unprecedented levels. Although Balaguer’s second presidency, from 1986 to 1996, was not as violent or authoritarian, it was marked by severe economic crisis and many Dominicans lived without electricity, running water, and extremely limited access to foodstuffs. During months of crisis, there was no transportation, police protection, schools, or hospitals (Moya Pons: 1995, 443). Yet, like Trujillo, he fostered acceptance through populist appeals and became the “Father of his country.” “On Saturdays and Sundays he would travel, by helicopter or in his special ‘Balaguermobile’, to tiny villages, where he handed out bicycles to children and scarlet underwear to women and listened, with grave attention, to stories of failing water pipes and sick cattle” (Economist: 2002). While he continued Trujillo’s populist rhetoric of inclusion of the nation’s progress, he pursued a different state model, and led

development through a neoliberal vision of modernity (Turits: 2003, 263). In the Dominican Republic as in the rest of Latin America, the neoliberal model failed to create sufficient jobs alongside its economic growth. The deterioration of the labor market thus resulted in high unemployment or precarious employment through the growth of the informal sector that ultimately exacerbates inequality (Portes and Roberts: 2004). While in 1984 there were one million Dominicans below the poverty line, by 1989 this figure had already doubled to two million (Moya Pons: 1995, 434). This is the legacy that Leonel Fernández assumed when he succeeded Balaguer as president in 1996.

From the outset of his first term as president, from 1996 to 2000, Leonel promised to be a new kind of leader, and in many ways he was. After recent decades of dictatorship, Fernández was elected with the promise of a “new path” for the Dominican people, and he aimed (at least in appearance) to be one with the people. According to *New York Times* reporter Larry Rother, “When his 12-hour work day at the National Palace is over, this country’s new President does not always head home. He is just as likely to make a late-night, unannounced visit to a poor neighborhood, market or hospital, just to see what is going on and what he can do” (Rother: 1996). Unlike his predecessor, Fernández promises to govern openly, with more participation and dialogue. Rother goes on to point out, however, that this is a virtue born in part of necessity, since Fernández’s Dominican Liberation Party held only 1 of the 30 seats in the Senate and barely a tenth of the 120 seats in the lower House of Congress (Rother: 1996). Fernández was thus more likely to dialogue with his political enemies, largely because his political enemies still controlled the largest bloc of Congress. Furthermore, while Fernández makes efforts to

stand with the people, arriving at times to the poor neighborhoods from where he claims his roots (although much of his early life was spent in Manhattan), he has done little in the way of forming new social policies or creating reforms to mitigate social inequality. His main focus was foreign policy, traveling around the world and wishing to be in the good graces of many foreign leaders, as well as the United Nations. Early on in his presidency, he raised his own salary to \$6,740 per month, while Mr. Balaguer's had only been \$262 per month (Rother: 1996).

Fernández's presidency ended without the possibility of reelection in 2000, but he returned to the presidency in 2004, after a four-year hiatus during the office of Hipólito Mejía. The term of Mejía was dominated by a horrendous economic crisis spurred by the failure and collapse of the large commercial bank, Banco Internacional, long tied to political corruption in the country. Also during the Mejía administration, running for consecutive presidential terms once again became legal, but Mejía was defeated in 2004 and Fernández returned to office. Once again, Fernández finds himself leader of a country in economic crisis and in dire need of change. During his inaugural parade, one supporter remarked, "Leonel is more intelligent than the alternative. We're ready for a little bit of happiness, a little bit of relief" (Romero: 2004). Yet although Fernández speaks against corruption, he does little to restructure the internal structural and bureaucratic maladies that have produced stark inequality and resulted in political impunity. He again focuses on the Dominican image abroad, and speaks of an urgent need to engage international leaders and lending institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

It was also in Fernández's second term as president that he began to speak of plans for the new Santo Domingo Metro. A Metro feasibility study was conducted in 2005 and by early 2008, the construction of the first line was already completed, just in time for Fernández's re-election. The Metro, indeed, was his campaign promise of progress to the Dominican people. As Marc Lacey reports for the *New York Times*: "Dominicans who went to the polls on Friday had been given chickens, poured beer, promised new homes and even handed cash during a spirited frenzy of campaigning. But President Leonel Fernández won a third term in office largely as a result of a campaign gift to the populace that dwarfed those of his six opponents: a shiny new subway system." (Lacey: 2008) Just as in the era of U.S. military occupation, and the nationalistic dictatorships that succeeded it, the political culture of Fernández invites the Dominican people to judge the success of the administration by the tangible infrastructure it constructs.

#### **DEVELOPMENT OF THE SANTO DOMINGO METRO**

In terms of transportation options, the Santo Domingo Metro does represent something entirely new. Rapid population growth combined with deteriorating roads and increased car ownership has led to a transportation mess. The extremely clogged roadways mean slow commutes, chaotic conditions, and increased air pollution for everyone. Most Dominicans rely on public transportation, which prior to Metro, meant squeezing into crowded mini-buses or public cars. According to OPRET, 70% of daily trips during peak hours are made on public transportation, and 85% of Santo Domingo

residents do not own cars. However, the public transportation vehicle fleet is disorganized, outmoded, dangerous, and pollutant.

The Metro has the capacity to ease the strain on this vehicle fleet and give Santo Domingo residents a more comfortable and reliable ride. The first and only line currently in operation runs north-south with about 14.5 kilometers of track, and boasts sixteen immaculate stations which aim to relieve congestion on the avenues of Máximo Gómez and Hermanas Mirabal. Line 1, shown below (Fig. 3), carries passengers between the southernmost “Centro de Los Heroes,” situated within the administrative and governmental heart of the city, and the northernmost “Mama Tingo,” housed in a more populous, less wealthy neighborhood in Santo Domingo Norte. As shown below, the six stations to the north of the Ozama River are elevated, running aboveground. The ten stations south of the Ozama River are subterranean.

Figure 3: Map of Metro Line 1, Source: OPRET.



The second, in many ways more ambitious, line will run east-west with about 28 kilometers of track, and will eventually contain 34 stations. Line 2 will carry passengers from Los Alcarrizos on the west, across the Distrito Nacional and into Santo Domingo Este on the east. Its main goals are to relieve congestion on John F. Kennedy Avenue and on the Autopista Duarte. The figure below, from *Clave Digital*, shows the intersection of the first two lines, as well as the progress of the second line, as of July 2010 (Fig. 4):

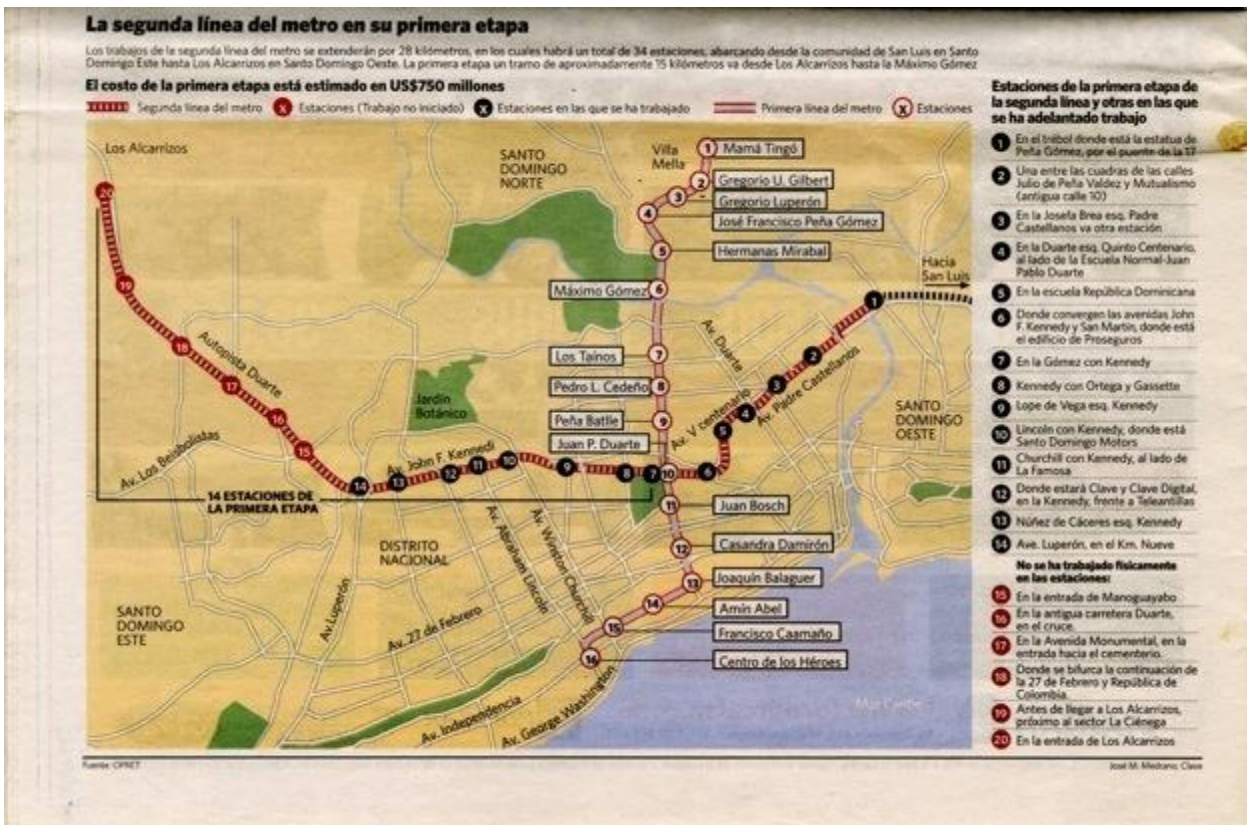


Figure 4: First stage of Metro Construction Line 2, Source: Clave Digital.

Overall, if a greater share of Santo Domingo residents begins using public transportation instead of purchasing private cars, Santo Domingo can accommodate far more trip growth. The Metro thus aims to improve the levels of transportation service for a growing population, without adding pollution and sprawl. Metro plans also to gradually reduce and eventually eliminate the presence of inadequate public vehicles in major public transport corridors. Instead the Metro system will streamline service and organize transport into a system of integrated “trunk and feeder” routes, with physical and fare integration, to adequately serve the nation’s growing transit demand (OPRET: 2007). The Metro technology represents an entirely new approach to easing congestion, in the national district as well as the outer metropolitan areas.

The Metro may also be seen as a new way of addressing urban poverty. Transportation researchers in other developing nations explain that the profile of urban poverty is changing, being created today by unemployment, spatial exclusion and lack of mobility and access to dynamic city centers, and they argue that transportation investment can attenuate that poverty (Barone & Rebelo: 2003). Researchers at the World Bank corroborate these ideas, stating that urban poverty may be reduced through the contribution which transport makes to the efficiency of the urban economy and so to the overall growth of incomes (Gwilliam: 2002).

Furthermore, simply dealing with congestion by expanding road networks helps only car owners, adds public health costs, and reduces the demand for public transit which then often becomes more expensive, creating a cycle which hits the poor the hardest (Figueroa: 1996). It is thus possible that the Metro could greatly serve a society



so marked with income inequality and urban poverty. Alejandro Montás, a Congressional deputy and spokesperson for the PLD, makes just this argument, stating it is precisely the present deficiencies and vulnerabilities that make the Metro so crucial. According to Montás, one must consider that the service of adequate transportation at low cost provides a population of few resources a means to increase their incomes and improve their emotional health by alleviating stresses in their daily journeys to work, and thereby increasing their productivity during employment. Montás further alleges that the Metro is the answer to one of the greatest demands of low-income citizens and of all society (Expreso Santo Domingo: 2010).

In essence, the stated goals of Metro are not unlike those of any other rail project, aiming to reduce traffic and air pollution, and to provide more transit options and opportunities for Dominican citizens. Although there is only one line currently in operation, the master plan contains five more, plus a system of feeder routes and integrated buses, which is expected to make the system much more effective. In the words of OPRET engineer Leonel Carrasco, the Metro is meant to “harmonize transportation” in the capital city. “The system of guaguas, cars, and buses is not enough for the two million trips that are made every day” (Carrasco, interview by author, July 30, 2010), he says. He goes on in praise of the benefits Metro, despite its monetary costs:

The Metro also aims for a sustainable city. The energy used for the Metro trains is clean energy, in line with the regulations in the Kyoto Protocol meetings. The only problem is that the Metro trains are very expensive to build. However, they work toward a more sustainable planet. Also, the system should be able to pay for itself in 10 years. Sometimes the social benefits of the Metro are hard to measure. How valuable is one hour of time saved? Multiplied by 50 thousand? It’s a social value. Before, students, construction workers, lots of people, spent more money, and more time. Now they have rapid transit and more peace of mind. That is worth a lot of money. They also save money on gasoline (Carrasco, interview by author, July 30, 2010).

Already, 70% of people who ride the Metro say they ride it every single day, 85% say they rely on the Metro for their commute to work or school, and 75% say that Metro is their preferred way to travel. About 65% of all riders say they like the Metro because it is so much faster. Another 30% say they feel it is safer and cleaner. A few others are impressed by its superior comfort (Survey results, administered by author, July 2010). For these residents, the Metro clearly brings benefits. Their enthusiasm for and reliance on Santo Domingo's modern new rapid transit system seems to give credence to Fernández's likening the project to a dream come true.

However, according to others, Metro should not be given such a high priority for the nation. COPADEBA, a neighborhood rights group, points out that while traffic is a concern, other areas, such as education, health, and housing have been left unresolved for decades. More attention must be paid to these needs in order to improve the quality of life for most Dominicans. Hamlet Hermann, former minister of transportation and now a fierce critic of the project, echoes the notion of injustice put forth by COPADEBA and asks, "Is it more of a priority than education or fighting poverty?" (Lacey: 2007). While Fernández has allowed the country to pour hundreds of millions of dollars into Metro, he has not complied with a national education law that was instated during his own term in 1997, which stipulates that 4 percent of the nation's GDP should be spent on public education. He spends only about 2 percent. Meanwhile, 61 percent of public schools do not have libraries, and 39 percent do not have safe drinking water (Associated Press: 2010). President Leonel Fernández has said he doesn't plan to boost spending. He says he sees no direct link between money spent and school performance (Associated Press:

2010).

Thus the mega-project of Metro, idealized by the President and the Dominican government, continues to expand construction of facilities for its fast collective transport. Yet according to COPADEBA, the neighborhoods they work with have seen mostly negative impacts from Metro construction. For example, in La Zurza, 126 families have been displaced by the construction of Metro lines. The government and transit authorities, in compensation, provided only 50 houses. To the rest, they only temporarily gave rent money. These families are now forced to find somewhere else to live. COPADEBA asserts that if OPRET and the government worked harder to involve the interests of citizens, and consulted with the national housing association, this displacement could be avoided. Yet they are too much in a hurry to build, and the Metro project has gone on uninterrupted, even when, in the case of the second line, it has far exceeded its budget (Lery Piña: 2010) Recently, OPRET engineers have purchased a new tunneling machine from China, which will speed up the construction of tunnels by 60% (Diario Libre: 2010). The cost of the machine is unknown.

Thus, according to critics, while Metro may benefit many, it has indebted the country and forced many families to move out of their homes, thus simply shifting pockets of poverty from one area to another. According to COPADEBA, the path of construction of the first line contained few houses, but the second line will be far more harmful. There are over 500 families in the path of the second line. As a national government agency, OPRET operates mostly autonomously and unchecked by public officials, and only very recently has it even begun to work with local municipalities.

Furthermore, OPRET has not sought nor heeded the advice of NGOs. COPADEBA, as well as the Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda, have made proposals to OPRET, yet the transportation authority refuses to make negotiations or share much information on their planning process. According to COPADEBA, OPRET will uphold minimal dialogue with outside organizations but continually refuses to comply with any of the proposed actions put forth by the organizations. OPRET has remarked that the Metro project does not have the resources to fix problems associated with housing (Gómez, interview by author, July 29, 2010).

OPRET and the government, then, may be easing transportation problems, but they are exacerbating multiple other problems. Again, according to COPADEBA, the government now has a plan to give 150,000 pesos (approximately \$4,000) to each family who loses its house to metro construction. However, a basic house in Santo Domingo costs 500,000 pesos (approximately \$13,330). With 150,000 pesos, a family will only be able to obtain a house situated in an area of extreme risk and vulnerability, which will be subject to dangerous flooding along with sanitation problems that increase chances of infection and disease. In this way, Metro is worsening the conditions of public health and the overall sustainability that it pretends to promote. The construction of the “Via Perimetral,” which is an “obra conexa” to the Metro – basically a new avenue that will connect some of the stops to each other- along the Ozama river, has severely disrupted the lives of around 250 families. Those who have not already been forced to leave the site have faced severe health and sanitation problems. Because of the construction, water has been cut so they do not have clean potable water. Also, the dense infill used for the

construction has increased flooding, so that when it rains residents are exposed to harmful contaminants in the river water. The photo below (Fig. 5) shows an image of disruption from construction of the “obra conexa.”



Figure 5: A boy runs through a site of construction in La Zurza, January 2010, Source: Photo by Author.

Families were supposed to receive monetary reparations, but most have not been paid yet. Nearby roads used by the community are left in disrepair. Due to protests by the community, the construction has been stopped. Now the project sits paralyzed, but nothing has been done to remediate the sanitation or health problems (Gómez, interview by author, July 29, 2010).

Leonel Carrasco, Vice-President of OPRET, simply remarks that OPRET and the government have always had a plan to compensate for any possible displacement by Metro. He says they have settled everything with the families because they have bought them houses. According to Carrasco, they have bought 72 houses for those displaced by the Metro construction of its second line and connector routes. Furthermore, he argues, poor neighborhoods near the stations will benefit from Metro, and when the feeder routes are constructed, even more people will benefit. He goes on to say that initial ridership figures were lower than expected, but that they are rising. In the beginning, they had hoped for about 100,000 riders per day but got only about 13,000. Now, however, when school is in session, ridership rises to 80,000 (Carrasco, interview by author, July 30, 2010). Coincidentally, COPADEBA cites this same number as the amount of homes needed in the Dominican Republic. “In the Dominican Republic there is a deficit of 80,000 adequate homes for poor families. If the money that was invested in the Metro had been spent toward housing, the number could have easily been reduced by at least half. This shows you where the government’s priorities are” (Gómez, interview by author, July 29, 2010)

The government has not only prioritized the building of the Metro, but also projected onto it a sentiment of nationalism and progress. Therefore, my research aims to look further at how the Metro fits into the path of development in the Dominican Republic, whether it is merely a mistaken priority or a vehicle for progress, and a solution to the reigning transit chaos. Furthermore, I will look at who the Metro serves and who is left out. I worry that Metro, like many public works and infrastructure projects before it,

may be helpful to some but harmful to many others, especially as its massive expenses preempt the funding of more basic human services, and thus take away the social safety net that leaves the poor without the chance to elevate their standards of living and social capital. In the meantime, narratives of greatness mark the Metro as the embodiment of Dominican advancement. I then wonder about the implications of those who do not directly participate or benefit from the nation's new symbol of progress.

## **Chapter 4: State Narratives and Metro Discourse**

As noted in the previous chapter, the Santo Domingo Metro is an attempt to relieve congestion in the capital city and provide increased access and mobility to its citizens. Yet for a variety of reasons, these efforts have proven problematic and become quite controversial. While the Metro may revolutionize transportation options in Santo Domingo, the planning of the Metro in many ways has been hasty and haphazard, and thus may fail to reach its potential (Díaz: 2010). Leonel Fernández, in conjunction with OPRET, has continued to promote Metro and expedite construction processes mostly for political gain, even in the face of economic obstacles and social criticism (Gómez: 2010). Controversies regarding the financing of Metro and the failure to address inequality of residents have arisen through avenues of the media, non-profit organizations, and popular culture; but these problems and challenges to the Metro seem to be stealthily pushed aside, ignored, overpowered or smoothed over without investigation of their merits. Instead of hearing the concerns of citizens and organizations, the administration of Leonel Fernández has overshadowed them with rhetoric of nationalism and modernity. By packaging Metro development within narratives of progress, the government coopts people's perceptions of the Metro and its role in society, often instilling Dominicans with sentiments of pride without actually bringing tangible benefits to them. In the following chapter, I take a more in-depth look at some of the critical voices against Metro, and subsequently analyze the manner in which the government neutralizes these criticisms through its top-down discourse of progress.



Beyond the physical displacement of people and disruption of neighborhoods noted previously, controversies surrounding rail construction arise because of the excessive amount of government spending they consume (Pacione: 2009). The case of the Santo Domingo metro is no different. Juan Bolivar Diaz, a respected Dominican journalist who speaks out publicly and internationally against political corruption and lack of transparency in his home country, decries the Metro as utter waste and misuse of the nation's resources. His article in *Expreso Santo Domingo*, "El primer año de nuestro metro," ("The first year of our metro") provides an economic analysis of ridership benefits. Bolivar Diaz emphasizes that of the average of 50,000 riders per day on the entire network, most are likely riding round-trip. Therefore, roughly 25,000 people, who represent about 1.43% of Santo Domingo mega-region's 3.5 million inhabitants and a mere 0.26% of the nation's total population, are benefitting from the Metro service each day.

These unequal benefits of the Metro were foreseen even by the government's own agencies. The presidentially appointed economic advisory council, CIES (Consejo Económico, Social e Institucional), created specifically to evaluate the social benefits and economic viability of the Metro, foresaw the economic hardships that Metro would bring and advocated against its construction. When the council, after detailed research and outside consultations, recommended that the project cease to go forward, the government simply ignored and discredited the advice of the newly formed professional council and proceeded to authorize construction (Diaz: 2010). Therein lies Diaz's condemnation that, after one year of operation, the Santo Domingo Metro has become the most "improvised, absurd, and anti-economic, investment in which the government has concentrated its

energy, above all rationality, and in the face of opposition of many other leaders and institutions” (Diaz: 2010) Dominican geologist, Osiris de Leon, echoes Bolivar Diaz’s critique, calling it not only an “administrative barbarity,” but also a source of shame and ridicule for the Dominican Liberation Party (PLD) (Osiris de Leon: 2010).

The Metro has also gone over budget and failed to attract a desirable number of outside investors, especially in the initial phases of construction of the second line. As of July 1, 2010, the country had already invested roughly RD\$3.4 million in the second line, when it originally planned only to invest RD\$1.7 million. As reported in *Clave Digital*, public spending up to this point had thus already doubled its originally expected amount at a time when two-thirds of the construction still remained unfinished (Laura Piña: 2010). President Leonel Fernández and Diandino Peña, director of OPRET, have either denied or sidestepped any accusations regarding these budgetary oversights. Fernández, for example, has made a point in stressing that capital from the initial phases of construction for the second line of Metro have come only from the savings left over from the first line of construction (De La Rosa: 2010). In this statement, however, he doesn’t readily clarify what he means by “initial phases” nor does he address where money came from for the first line, nor how much was invested. Peña merely assures that the work should and will continue through economic obstacles, which he does not see as very serious. He states that the government subsidy of the Metro is around US\$15 million annually, and that the Metro will generate around that amount in revenue. He has been reluctant to refer to any total amount that signifies net costs of the second line. He also says that reconstruction of demolished areas and relocation of families displaced in La

Zurza will take place sometime before the end of Fernández's term of office, but the details and timeframe of the compensation are not specified (Dominican Sun: 2010). Of the Metro budget and timeline he says: "The Metro work advances at a rate in keeping with the government's schedule and naturally we have an obstacle, which although certainly is economic, isn't true that it prevents the works from continuing to advance within a framework of minimum accomplishment" (Dominican Today: 2010).

The economic concerns and criticisms of the Metro stem mainly from the realities of inequality. In a country where many people possess little education and a low standard of living, the introduction of rapid transit as a source of progress seems, at the very least, hypocritical. As many households live without electricity or suffer from chronic blackouts, the Metro contains its own back-up generator of electricity that operates on a separate power grid from the rest of the city. Many critics, such as journalist Juan Bolivar Diaz, acknowledge that the Metro investment, with the addition of lines and increased utility, could have beneficial returns in the long run that might eventually exceed the costs of the initial investment. However, Diaz asserts, "... this is only justifiable in a developed society, one that does not lack classrooms or homes or sanitary sewage systems, and where the education level does not average to only the sixth grade because of its various accumulated deficiencies and vulnerability" (Diaz: 2010).

Challenges to this prioritization of Metro have also arisen in popular culture. A young Dominican filmmaker, José María Cabral, has made a proposal for a film satirizing the Metro's call to progress. He shows the high cost of the Metro and the lack of prioritization of education and health. Like Bolivar Diaz, Cabral concedes that the

Metro is nice and may be useful to some. Yet while the Metro is nice, he stresses that this is not the moment for Metro. He visits hospitals and interviews Metro construction workers, teachers, and Metro riders, who favor spending on health and education. (www.josemariacabral.com). A Dominican hip-hop group called La Crema similarly derides the prioritization of Metro spending. In a song titled, “El Metro,” the group raps of the country’s social ills. They speak of the lack of money, energy, and food, as a voice constantly breaks in sarcastically and assures “Don’t worry, because we have the Metro.” (La Crema) In the words of La Crema:

Alli viene el tren. Fijate que bien...  
Sin agua, sin luz, el paisito esta seco  
Pero tranquilo, que tenemos Metro!<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, Metro stations in some neighborhoods seem more “out of place” than others. While every station on the Metro system is clean, spacious, air-conditioned, and wheelchair accessible, many surrounding neighborhoods are marked by unsanitary living conditions and decrepit infrastructure. Dense pockets of urban poverty are almost instantly evident upon exit of the northern stations, starting with Máximo Gómez. The station entrances at Los Tainos, Peña Gómez, and Mamá Tingó are surrounded by busy streets, and are devoid of traffic signals or pedestrian crossings. Adjacent sidewalks, if present at all, are mostly deteriorating and potentially dangerous to low-mobility populations. As the Metro is constructed, these low-tech maintenance issues remain unaddressed. As disparagingly illustrated in an article published by the Dominican

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<sup>1</sup> Here comes the train, look how nice/.../Without water, without light, the country is dry/But don’t worry, because we have Metro!

Revolutionary Party (PRD), “You don’t need to consult an optometrist, nor a magnifying glass, to see in plain view the degree of abandonment and disrepair that characterizes the municipality of Santo Domingo Norte” (Puro PRD: 2009). The article states that three fourths of the territory of Santo Domingo Norte remains in deplorable condition, and that the massive Metro investment fails to meet the demands of the people, and does nothing to improve the crumbling infrastructure that surrounds it.

The article further argues that even the physical presence of the Metro actually endangers pedestrians, who already must manage the lack of sidewalks, “transforming themselves into trapeze artists on a daily basis” to avoid obstacles in the road. The poorly planned columns, which act as physical supports for the Metro on these aboveground stations, obstruct the view for those on foot, intensifying the danger and disorder (Puro PRD: 2009). While the accusations against Metro by the PRD may be fuelled by the same type of political propaganda that characterizes the promotion of Metro by the PLD, they are not unfounded. Even if some infrastructure flaws may be a reality for Santo Domingo residents throughout the city, there is markedly easier access in the southern stations. For example, at Peña Gómez, station entrances sit on either side of a wide busy street, leaving pedestrians to fend for themselves amongst zooming cars and honking horns. The photo below shows the entrance of the Peña Gómez station (Fig. 6):



Figure 6: Station entrance at Peña Gómez in Santo Domingo Norte, Source: Photo by Author.

At Juan Bosch, the station sits on a busy, chaotic, and mostly commercial street, Avenida 27 de Febrero. However, one can easily cross over by way of the large pedestrian bridges on either side which arc over the street and lead right to well-maintained sidewalks which lead straight to Metro escalators and elevators into the underground station. Below is a photo taken from the pedestrian bridge at 27 de Febrero, looking down at the Juan Bosch station (Fig. 7):



Figure 7: Station entrance at Juan Bosch, Source: Photo by author.

Streets and sidewalks near the southernmost Centro de los Héroes station are also wider, cleaner, calmer, and easier to navigate. The disparities in infrastructure naturally represent differences in levels of wealth in the neighborhoods, and of course were present long before the existence of the Metro stations in these locations. However, for Metro to be effective and useful to residents in these neighborhoods, it should be safe and convenient.

Unfortunately, though, serving the poor does not appear to be the highest priority of the current administration's infrastructure projects. Former minister of transportation,

Hamlet Hermann, says that costly transportation projects have simply been exploited for political gain. In an article titled “Sicarios de las obras publicas,” Hermann writes:

Since 1996, the methods for proposing and carrying out the most expensive public works has repeatedly been a process of indebting the country, building up the image of politicians, and not solving a single problem. Part of the tactic stems from the fact that civil society has no say in the approval of large-scale projects. The majority of times, the public finds out marginally through the media when contractors have announced that projects have started and cannot be stopped. (Hermann: 2010)

The process Hermann describes in many ways pertains to the Metro. Fernández uses his power as president to begin the planning of the Metro, and then points to it as a symbol of modernity and progress. He courted approval of Metro construction by appealing to sentiments of nationalism, largely through grand public display of its inauguration on Dominican Independence Day. On this day, February 27, 2008, Leonel took a ceremonial ride to open the Metro, offering a free ride to the entire city on the subway train that he was driving. The televised report of the event on local news called it a historic voyage, and showed Fernández sitting at the driver’s seat of the train for several minutes, and even making the sign of the cross as a Cardinal blessed the new Metro. The news of the event also elevated the 14 kilometers of track to their national significance, as a “radical change for what would now be the transport of passengers in the Dominican Republic.” The news anchor spoke of the city of New York, which also once celebrated the anniversary of its Metro. He went on to say that, “we never thought; we never dreamed we would have a Metro here in the Dominican Republic... We now place ourselves with the avant-garde countries that have this type of system... Its quality is the most modern of any transportation system in the Americas.” (RNN News Clip: 2008)

The news anchor also emphasizes that the Metro was constructed in record time of only



three years, and calls it “a dream made reality by Dr. Leonel Fernández.” On television, the train whistle blows and Leonel takes off. The excitement is evident in the anchorman’s voice:

There it is! The first movement of the Santo Domingo Metro with the applause of everybody present and the happiness shown in the smile on the face of the President of the Republic... during this great dedication to the trajectory of progress and the promise delivered. How great that we are here as witnesses to this important event in the history of transportation in the Dominican Republic. We are so happy with what has been accomplished by this great work. (RNN: 2008)

Leonel has also used this highly publicized event in his campaign ads, which state, “Leonel Conduce el Progreso” (Leonel drives progress), and then take viewers on a virtual train tour of the city with celebratory Dominican music in the background. His campaign slogan, “P’alante” (Onward), along with the delivery of the Metro train, embodies Leonel’s promise of progress. Billboards can still be seen in the capital city with Leonel’s face shown prominently, and the text, “Siempre p’alante, nunca para ‘tras!” (Always moving forward, never backward!) While during his first term in the late 1990s he strove to be one with the people and emphasized his birthplace in a poor neighborhood in Santo Domingo, he now stresses his ability to take the country forward and make it a showcase of modernity and sophistication. He now emphasizes his youth and high school years in New York, where he often rode the subway. As stated by his political consultant and long-time friend, Eduardo Gamarra, “Leonel grew up in New York and has a fascination with the place. For him, the Metro is part of that, a way to make this city modern and boost national pride” (Lacey: 2008).

President Fernández also makes use of a relatively recent law that facilitates voting from overseas and designates polling sites for presidential elections for Dominican

citizens in select major cities abroad. Before his reelection in 2008, Fernández took advantage of his resources as incumbent President to travel to New York and Boston, where he drew parallels between the sophisticated Metro systems in those cities and the one that were to be constructed in Santo Domingo. President Fernández thus has long been projecting the Santo Domingo Metro as a source of national pride for Dominicans at home and abroad. His campaign worked. He was re-elected in May, and is currently serving his third overall and second consecutive term.

Yet while Fernández frames the Metro as a symbol of a new era for the Dominican people, this representational strategy also invokes the top-down nationalism of the past. It is no coincidence that he chose Independence Day to inaugurate the first trains, even though they weren't ready to run commercially until months later. Furthermore, he appeals to a sense of Dominican uniqueness and nationalism by naming the stations after prominent historical figures. Diandino Peña, president of OPRET, goes so far as to say that the Metro has redefined what it means to be Dominican. He states that in the Dominican Republic, there is a certain etiquette to the experience of riding the Metro, and he says that even its construction is particularly Dominican (Mejía: 2010). By equating the Metro construction with the wellbeing of the nation, the director of OPRET heightens the implications of the project for residents of Santo Domingo as well as throughout the country. President Fernández and OPRET have framed the debate on Metro in such a way that to be anti-Metro is not only anti-progress, but also anti-Dominican. The dominant discourse of progress and national worth has rendered the

Metro project as unquestionably good, while it has rendered its multiple criticisms as largely beside the point.

Thus, Metro criticisms have largely been supplanted by an effective discourse of Metro as progress and comfort. While outspoken criticism of the Metro in the media is not censored, it is mostly ignored. Most messages from the media spotlight the Metro as a sort of benefactor to the Dominican people; as Fernández puts it, a dream come true. According to interviews by *Listín Diario*, frequent riders have lauded the Metro for its ability to save them time, to add predictability to their daily routines, to allow them to take on new jobs, or to help them to arrive to classes on time. The articles also include some personal interviews from riders. Rosina Henriquez, for example, reports that before the Metro she had lost many jobs in stores because the traffic jams always made her late. She finds the Metro service to be stupendous and reliable, alleviating her fears of being fired again. Joel Minaya, a student, says that even if he has to stand up in the train cars, he gets to class comfortably. Metro users are extolling the Metro for its dependability, and for the extra time and freedom it gives for sleep, relaxation, exercise, or time with family. Many say they enjoy making the underground journey. Another Metro proponent stated that “a vision of modernity opened up the guts of the earth.” The article concludes that residents of Santo Domingo would like to see more Metros throughout the city ([majagual.net](http://majagual.net)).

Implicit in much of this nationalist rhetoric and Metro pride, is not only the desire to be modern, but also a fascination and preoccupation with how the rest of the world looks upon the country. It is not only businessmen, politicians, and diplomats who seem

to have these concerns. Many everyday working-class Dominicans also seem to feel that the Metro gives them something to show off and take pride in. As one Fernández supporter remarked at the president's inauguration parade, "With this subway, we're going to be world-class. We're poor, but we'll have a Metro, just like New York." (Lacey: 2007). Sometimes, the Metro even appears to be held sacred. Writing for *Dominicanos Hoy*, José Nunez, a journalist and law student, calls for better treatment of the Metro, as it is a source of national pride. He does not want to see trash alongside the stations. He writes: "We hope as citizens and beneficiaries of our most modern medium of transport, that these maladies can be corrected as soon as possible, in order to have, like a good Dominican, the satisfaction of having a project that is so important for our country and for the tourists that visit us" (Núñez: 2009).

OPRET director, Diandino Pena, encourages these sentiments of pride as he states that the Metro will be a symbol of the Dominican Republic for the entire world. "The first line, which is here, is for us something to be proud of... it is one of the few public services we maintain with efficiency, displaying our excellence not only locally, but also internationally" (Mejía: 2010). *Listín Diario* also stresses that, according to the Minister of Transport in Madrid, the Santo Domingo Metro has the same level of performance as the train services in Madrid, and the Metro in Madrid is "the best in the world" (Peguero: 2008). Internationally geared tourist books and magazines have also weighed in on Metro. *Lonely Planet* calls it "convenient and educational" for its use of historical figures and famous Dominican personalities as station stop names. *Latin Flyer Magazine*

goes even further, providing an online video tour of the Metro and calling it “a sleek modern step into the future for the capital of the Dominican Republic” (Chestnut: 2010).

Television commercials for the Metro in Santo Domingo also spread the vision of progress throughout the country. One commercial shows several, stressed people in cars and buses, stuck in fierce traffic jams with ominous hurried music playing in the background alongside a cacophony of honking horns. These images are suddenly juxtaposed with a zooming train and the catchphrase: “Metro de Santo Domingo: Súbete al Progreso” (Santo Domingo Metro: Get on Board with Progress). Another commercial focuses on happy, surprised and relieved faces of people looking up at metro trains passing overhead on elevated rails. In the background, a chorus is singing “Hallelujah.” Each commercial ends with a close-up of a train, and a strong male voice beckons the viewer to “get on board” the progress (Súbete al Progreso). Another ad utilizes a jingle about “gente de Metro” (Metro people). In this commercial, care-free men, women, families, students, and musicians are laughing and joking on the train and while walking on and off the Metro platforms. In the background plays a catchy lighthearted tune about all the Metro people coming and going. The ad then turns to the viewer asking: “¿Tu? Eres gente Metro?” (And you? Are you a Metro person?) This seemingly simple question, compounded with the nationalist rhetoric surrounding the Metro, has considerable implications. In its tone resonates an air of “are you with us or against us?” As Leonel symbolically projects progress, modernity, and national pride onto the Santo Domingo Metro, he transforms respect and ridership of Metro into more of a civic duty than a public service.

It is the utilization of a top-down modernization project, alongside deliberate appeals to national pride, which likens Fernández's presidency to the political culture of the past. Radio broadcasts under the dictatorship of Trujillo effectively integrated and fostered acceptance of the peasantry and the lower classes into his national industrialization projects and political ideology. Balaguer continued many of his policies, and was more engaged in promoting tourism than addressing inequality or social programs for the poor. While Fernández's administration is a far cry from the brutality and authoritarianism experienced under Trujillo or Balaguer, he uses a similar mix of populism and nationalism to boost pride and garner support for his vision for the country's progress, while he neglects to pay serious attention to demands for spending on education or health. In defending the costly investment of the Metro, sociologist Maria Luisa Carbonell, employee of OPRET, states, "the direct beneficiary of the social investment that the State makes is the citizen" (Laura Piña: 2010). Yet residents of Santo Domingo who do not ride Metro are symbolically excluded from that national progress. Are they thus transformed into second-tier citizens? A main goal of my research was to gain perspective on Metro from those who seemed less likely to frequently ride it. Therefore, in the following chapter I explore people's perceptions of the Metro in the informal settlement of Los Platanitos, whether they ride it or not.

## **Chapter 5: Metro Ridership in the Community**

My Metro survey data reveals that typical Metro riders are members of the middle to upper middle classes, using the Metro for their everyday trips to and from work. This drastically differs from the typical profile of a resident of an informal settlement, who is poor and likely to be unemployed. However, the data collected definitely does not exclude the possibility that some Metro riders come from informal settlements. The Metro costs the same as buses and public cars, and although poor residents tend to make fewer trips than their wealthier counterparts, the Metro might provide a new option that gives them unprecedented access to the city. It is also possible that residents of informal settlements may be more likely to ride the Metro at non-peak hours if they are not beholden to a strict work schedule, and my surveys were all conducted during rush periods. Therefore, I conducted interviews in the informal settlement of Los Platanitos, which sits only 200 meters from the Peña Gómez station stop. My goal was to use this community as a case study to see whether or not residents of informal settlements are likely to use and benefit from the Metro. I wanted not only to find out whether they ride it, but also to better understand the perceptions and attitudes towards the Metro of those who are most socially and economically vulnerable.

### **PROFILES OF FREQUENT METRO RIDERS**

After surveying Metro riders on the platforms, I categorized them based on their employment status. The administrative sector makes up the largest group (31%) of the

sample ridership data. The riders with administrative jobs are well-dressed, middle class office workers who tend to be between the ages of 25 and 50. Therefore, almost a third of the total riders surveyed belong to a relatively stable workforce and are not likely to reside in poor neighborhoods. Of these riders, almost 90% say that they use the Metro every day and that it is their favorite type of transportation. About half of them (48%) reported to have arrived to the stations on foot, and thus likely live in walking distance from the stations.

Students make up the next largest group (27%) of surveyed riders. In some ways the student population is a younger version of the middle class administrative sector discussed previously, and many of them will probably reach that class. However, the Metro's catering to students could be helpful to the low-income population as well, giving them the opportunity to reach the universities even if they do not live near it, which could be critical for their future employment. Many Metro stations are purposefully located near universities. Students, who tend to be younger, are a very important demographic, and Metro ridership drops significantly when school is not in session. As is typically stated in articles in the newspaper *Listín Diario*, it is these young students who are going to be the first to fully adopt the concept of the Metro and incorporate it into their daily lifestyle. Of the students surveyed, about 22% reported to have walked to a Metro station from their homes. The majority travel by other means of public transportation to reach the Metro station that will eventually take them to their universities.



Seventeen per cent of the surveyed riders belong to the service sector. Service sector jobs entail low-skilled labor or semi-skilled trade labor, such as employment in retail stores, restaurants, or hotels. These jobs tend to be less stable and residents of informal settlements or other low-income neighborhoods might be able to attain them. However, there is no indication of whether or not the riders surveyed on the Metro with these types of jobs live in poor or low-income neighborhoods. Another 15% of the riders surveyed belong to the professional and technical classes. These Metro riders naturally tend to have the highest incomes and most likely do not reside in poor neighborhoods or informal settlements. Unsurprisingly, they are also more likely to possess their own vehicles and use the Metro only sporadically, when it is most convenient.

The remaining 10% of the riders I surveyed belong to the informal or “precarious labor” sector of the economy, and are likely to be residents of poor neighborhoods such as Los Platanitos. Although some may have semi-stable incomes, most are unlikely to receive benefits or enjoy job security. Also, residents of such neighborhoods are more likely to find informal work in their own community, thus benefiting little from the Metro. The Metro riders surveyed from this group were more likely to ride the Metro only every once in a while, and many of them were not making work-related trips but instead running errands. However, some riders who I placed in this category were women working as domestic servants or street vendors. Also, the vast majority of the riders who belong to the informal sector were boarding at the northernmost stations in Santo Domingo Norte, which are located in neighborhoods that are typically less wealthy than the areas surrounding the more southern stations in the Distrito Nacional. Overall,

though, there does not appear to be drastic differences in ridership profiles from station to station. The majority of riders at every station are students and middle class professionals.

Yet even if most Metro riders tend to have stable employment and relatively high incomes, and most residents of informal settlements do not, the capacity of Metro to serve the poor deserves further exploration. When talking with residents in Los Platanitos who rarely or never ride Metro, I tried to determine whether specific characteristics or features of the Metro dissuaded them from riding, or if they preferred to use other forms of public transportation. I also hoped to uncover some of the dominant ideas and perceptions surrounding the Metro, whether they take the form of excitement, indifference, or anything in between. Whether or not residents of Los Platanitos utilized Metro service, I hoped to learn how they feel its presence affects their neighborhood, if at all.

## **LOS PLATANITOS**

The community of Los Platanitos is one of about 30 informal settlements in Santo Domingo Norte. Informal settlements throughout the country bear the burden of environmental hazards that stem from both inside and outside their settlements, which contributes to their isolation and results in poor public health in their communities. For example, in Los Platanitos, solid waste from within and outside the community accumulates in the channels of water that run through the community. Contamination from trash accumulation is exacerbated by heavy rainfall, causing periodic flooding

which in turn puts residents in contact with trash and harmful pollutants (Sletto ed. 2008). The municipality of Santo Domingo Norte does not provide adequate sanitation services or trash pickup to these areas.

Los Platanitos is situated in a valley region and bordered by Avenida Emma Balaguer on the north and Avenida Parque Mirador on the south. This low-lying position, amidst these two highly trafficked roadways, also contributes to high levels of contamination and noise pollution, as well as presenting physical barriers to the surrounding city. Los Platanitos is approximately 1 square kilometer and has a total estimated population of 2,400 (Sletto ed. 2008). The average household size is 4.75, and the average age is 23.9. Average monthly household income is estimated at 7,030 pesos, or \$204.00 US. The average number of years a family has lived in this community is approximately 13, and the average age of homes is 9.5 years. The unemployment rate of those 18 years or older who would like to work is 39.6 percent (Sletto ed. 2008), which is more than double the national average of 15.1 percent of people unemployed (CIA 2010). The arrival of the Metro station on Avenida Emma Balaguer, about 200 meters from the community, makes it a good case study by which to judge the potential benefits of the Santo Domingo Metro and its capacity to open up economic opportunities in Santo Domingo to the residents of Los Platanitos.

In 62 households in Los Platanitos, I asked residents if they ride the Metro. Although only a small percentage said they ride the Metro often, 63% of the community members I interviewed said they had ridden it at least once. The following chart shows

the breakdown of answers to the question of how often community members ride the Metro (Fig. 8):

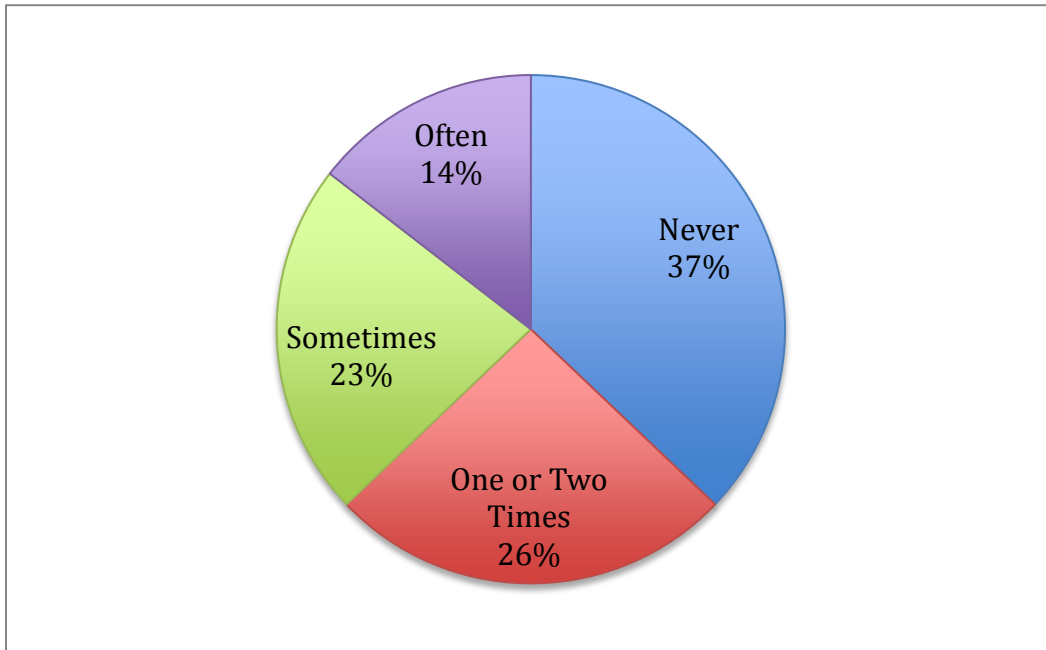


Figure 8: Metro ridership frequency in the community of Los Platanitos, Source: Interview data from Author.

The two main factors that seem to affect ridership were age and employment. Of the people who said they ride “often,” 78% of them either had employment accessible by Metro or attended universities near the Metro stations. Several other respondents who reported that they rode the Metro “sometimes” reported that they rode Metro much more frequently when they had jobs. However, they no longer had jobs at the time of the interviews, so they no longer had a reason to use Metro.

The population group in Los Platanitos that has most embraced the Metro also tends to be younger. Of the interviewees who reported to riding Metro “often,” they were all between the ages of 18 and 35, with an average age of 26. Of the people who had never ridden the Metro, about two-thirds were over 35, with the average of 42. Although not all young people report that they use the Metro frequently, these statistics may give credence to claims that the young people in Santo Domingo will be first to fully adopt Metro into their lifestyle. At the same time, it makes sense that young people in Los Platanitos are the ones to use Metro, since they represent the most economically active population as well as the majority of the student population.

Many community members said they liked having the Metro nearby, whether they ride or not. Nineteen per cent of people I interviewed said it was their favorite mode of transportation even if they do not often ride it. Three people said Metro was their sole method of transportation. Still, most community members prefer *guaguas* (mini-vans for collective transport) and public cars (smaller cars with fixed routes), and rely heavily on these other forms of public transport when they leave the neighborhood. The following chart shows the breakdown of community members’ “preferred” means of travel (Fig. 9):

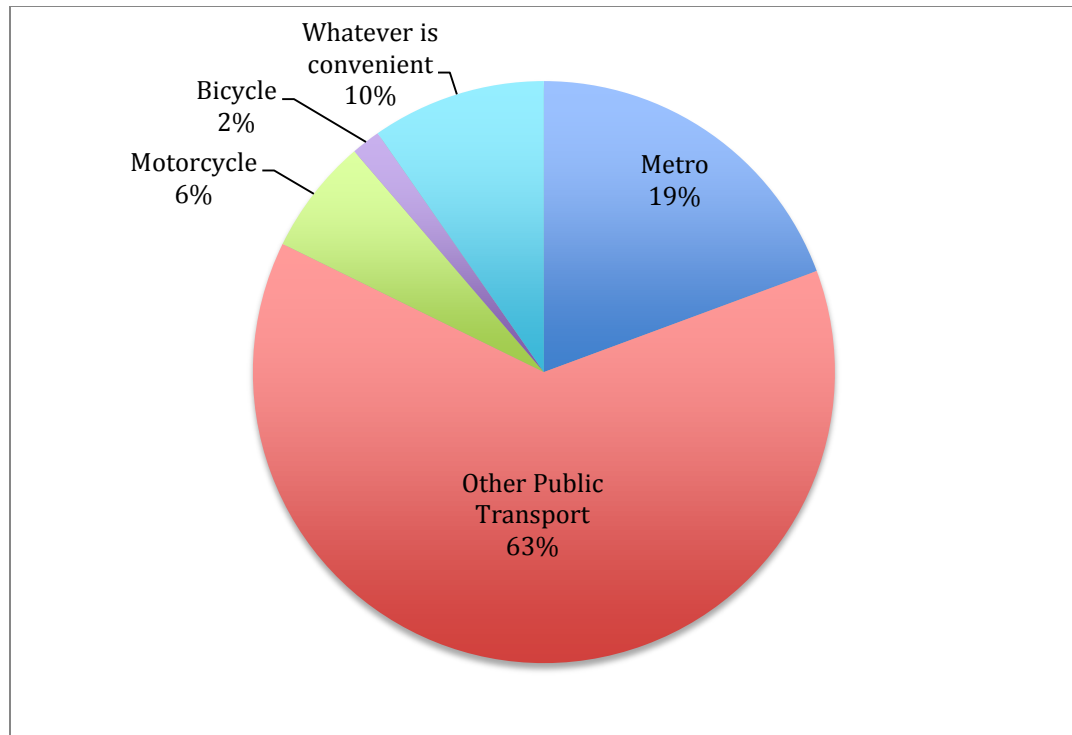


Figure 9: Preferred travel modes in the community of Los Platanitos, Source: Interview data from Author.

The majority of the people who use Metro in Los Platanitos use it only every once in a while to run errands. They ride almost exclusively to Centro de los Heroes, the station at the end of the line, also known as “La Feria.” They like using the Metro for these errands because it is fast and reliable, and they don’t have to worry about traffic jams. With Metro, they know exactly how long it will take to get to La Feria, and they can get there in twenty minutes. Before the Metro, it might take forty minutes or it might take two hours, depending on traffic. One woman, when asked of the benefits brought by Metro, stated, “...it’s nice because sometimes you have to go out really early in the

morning, and you know that Metro will be there.” Many also mention that it is clean and comfortable. A few also mention that they like being in the company of other people riding the Metro.

Still, 37% of people interviewed in Los Platanitos have never ridden the Metro at all, and another 26% have only ridden a few times. Many people said they would ride it if they had a reason to, but they “never had the opportunity.” Others say they don’t need it, because they have no need to travel very far outside Los Platanitos. Some say they don’t like it at all, or they don’t really even know where it goes. Five people said they are afraid to ride it. A few people look at the Metro with a more critical eye, noting that it is just another political project. One man, standing with his wife, said, “We can’t afford to ride the Metro. The Metro was not built for people like us.”

Even more telling, though, was that the majority of people in Los Platanitos felt that the presence of Metro had benefitted the neighborhood, even when they had never ridden it. Overall, when asked if the Metro had brought benefits to the community, 73% of interviewees decisively said yes. (Eleven per cent said they weren’t sure or that the Metro “more or less” or “somewhat” brought benefits, and 16% said that they saw no benefits from the Metro). A few people told compelling stories of how the Metro brought benefits to the community. One 20-year old woman reported that she used Metro twice a week to get to class. She said that, thanks to Metro, she always got to class on time and had more time to spend with her daughter in the mornings. Every once in a while she uses a public car, but she much prefers the Metro. Another woman, age 26, said she now relies fully on the Metro and has stopped taking other forms of transportation because

Metro is so much faster. She said that to get to a doctor's office at the Feria, she used to have to get up very early in the morning and take a combination of buses and public cars. Now she can simply use the Metro, and it is much easier, faster, and calmer.

Yet, perhaps even more strikingly, more than 60% of respondents who have *never* ridden the Metro said that they thought Metro brings benefits to the community, despite never having used it. When asked why, most of them simply said that the people who use it could now get places faster. Despite having no use for it themselves, they believed that the availability of rapid transit brought benefits to their neighborhood. Of this group, nobody gave a concrete reason why rapid transit was important for the neighborhood, and nobody reported having noticed any changes in the character of the neighborhood since the arrival of the train. Instead, conversations with community members suggested their overall susceptibility to the dominant narratives progress surrounding Metro.

One 42-year-old woman, for example, was one of four people who had only ridden the Metro once, on the day that it was free—the same day that President Fernández took his ceremonial ride for the Metro inauguration on Dominican Independence Day. She said that she loved the Metro and that the stations were “so pretty.” She, said, therefore that the neighborhood was better with the Metro, because now they had rapid transit. She never explicitly explained how it improved the neighborhood, but simply said that the neighborhood was better with rapid transit. Sitting under her thatched-roof house, she then said she would ride it again if she could, but that she doesn't have anywhere to go. One 60-year-old man, who had never ridden Metro, said jokingly that he was afraid to ride it; but then he said in all seriousness that



the Metro brings benefits to Los Platanitos because it is good for the advancement of the Dominican Republic as a whole. Another man, age 45, echoed this sentiment. He had ridden the Metro four times in the past year. He said that the Metro has definitely benefitted the neighborhood, because "...everything the government does benefits the neighborhood and the entire country." He said he has noticed changes in the neighborhood since the Metro opened, but he could not say what they were. He said he didn't use the Metro very much because he uses the *motoconcho* (motorcycle for public transportation) every day, since it is more convenient to the type of work he does. He works only in the informal sector.

The most striking conversation took place in a small public gathering place in the community, when I asked two men sitting on a patio about how they felt about the Metro. The first man said that he liked the Metro and that he used to ride it to a job that was farther away. Now he doesn't have that job anymore so he doesn't use it. However, his friend sitting next to him said he didn't like the Metro at all. He had ridden it three times before. He said:

It's supposed to be a social project, a project for everybody; but the government is abusing the people who need more help. People are dying of hunger in the city and houses are falling down. They do not need the metro. The President is just using the project to look good. It's a strictly political act when other areas of the country are more in need...

Before he could finish speaking to me about the political ramifications of the Metro project, his friends broke in and said, "Why are you speaking against the Metro? To speak against the Metro is to speak against your own country and your own progress. You should go to jail for that." The conversation carried on like this, but as the yelling

intensified, I was led away by a community leader, who did not want me to be in the middle of the fight.

These conversations made especially palpable the influence of political discourse on the perceptions of development projects. Here, we see the ability of state narratives of progress to silence criticism at every level, from the broadcasts of national media to the conversations on the patios of Los Platanitos. Political narratives produced by the state and dispersed through the media seem to be readily reproduced by the people. The discourse surrounding the Metro project thus glosses over the complexity of problems in Santo Domingo's urban landscape and points to Metro as the grand solution to underdevelopment. While the Metro brings benefits to some, the uncritical adoption of it as a mechanism of progress may actually subvert the social benefits it could otherwise have. Instead of considering criticism and inviting a diversity of public opinions on Metro, the state portrays Metro as an undeniable source of progress, and frames criticism of Metro as harmful to the nation.

## Conclusion

Throughout this analysis I have introduced some of the goals and controversies of Metro development alongside some of the historical processes of urbanization in Santo Domingo. In some ways, the development of the Metro has been a success. Metro ridership, although initially low, is growing, and Metro riders extol the system for its speed, cleanliness, and comfort. OPRET has stated that Metro, in its first two years, has been a great achievement headed by the government of Leonel Fernández. According to OPRET, the Metro has tried to put all socio-economic segments of society on an equal plane, by providing effective transport from remote areas to the heart of the city. (Dirección de Información, Prensa y Publicidad de la Presidencia: 2011). OPRET Vice-President Leonel Carrasco also states that it reduces the use of fossil fuels, and that it operates in a manner that is fast, safe, and dignified, with practically no accidents (Dirección de Información, Prensa y Publicidad de la Presidencia: 2011). The Metro thus serves the capital city as a symbol of progress and modernity.

However, throughout the history of Dominican Republic, the state has promoted modernity as a goal of nation building through development--but these development processes have constantly produced and reproduced inequality. While use of the new Metro system will deter vehicle trips that are associated with negative externalities like congestion and air pollution, it does not seem to be embraced across class lines sufficiently enough to alleviate inequalities in the city. Although some stations are located on the doorstep of low-income neighborhoods and informal settlements, ridership

among low-income residents appears to be much lower. Furthermore, stations in wealthier neighborhoods are much safer and more convenient to access. While wide avenues and pedestrian bridges accompany the stations in wealthier parts of the city, obtrusive columns, decrepit infrastructure, and chaotic roads are more characteristic of the environment surrounding lower-income stations. The Metro, serving as a symbol of modernity and progress, can only go so far to give convenient transit options to these neighborhoods.

Other problems discussed throughout this analysis include the enormous expenses of Metro, the lack of outside investors, and the disruption of housing and displacement of neighborhoods. Also, initiatives for rapid transit through Metro could be much more successful if combined with other initiatives to promote sustainability and improve surrounding infrastructure. OPRET also does not seek approval or engagement with the surrounding communities. Instead, OPRET, backed by the national government, attempts to act as the sole force to bring effective transportation to the city and imposes decisions from above, at times provoking problems and controversies in other areas. If OPRET worked closely with Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda (National Housing Institute), for example, they could pool their resources to make stronger transportation networks and preserve the integrity of neighborhoods.

As critics such as Hamlet Hermann and Juan Bolivar Diaz note, Metro aims not only to serve the residents of the Dominican Republic but also the political image of its leaders. Narratives of Metro progress have been effectively dispersed through the media and seem to trickle down to all sectors of the city with greater force than the actual

progress. Once Metro was declared by the state as a means of modernity and progress, other alternatives for improving transportation problems were not entertained. The first line of the Metro was built in less than three years, “in record time,” according to Dominican news sources. As discussed previously, the timing seems to have been more political than practical.

It’s possible that the existing criticism of Metro in Santo Domingo will die down, as did criticism of other controversial projects in past administrations, and that the Metro will become far more popular. Andy Meises, director of the controversial monument to Christopher Columbus under Balaguer, says: “Nobody wanted the Eiffel Tower, and now it’s the symbol of Paris... Today we protest and tomorrow we celebrate. That’s the way it is” (quoted in Lacey: 2007). Yet, even if “that’s the way it is,” should citizens not speak out? Should transportation authorities simply make uncontested decisions and plans, alongside the state?

The Metro thus elucidates larger theoretical and practical questions regarding the relationship between transportation planning and political culture, and the impact of transportation planning on urban structures and spatially contingent inequalities. Santo Domingo is not unique in its use of a Metro system as a call to progress and a vehicle to modernity. A similar campaign arose around the Metro in Mexico City in the late 1960s (Siempre: 1969). An issue of *Siempre* magazine from 1969 was dedicated to the Mexico City Metro, and entitled, “Metro: La obra mas audaz del México moderno” (Metro: The most audacious work of modern Mexico). In this issue, Rafael Solana writes:

Physically, what a marvel the Mexican Metro is. Such comfortable stations, and some of them so beautiful...A lot of marble... and cleaner (for now) than the Metros of Madrid, London, or Hamburg; as much cleanliness (for the moment) as the Metro of Tokyo, and as much comfort but better lighting and more modernity than those of New York and Paris... the cars are new and comfortable, and are a pretty psychedelic color; pretty stairways and precious platforms... this is the physical description; as far as its operation; excellent; efficient, without too much noise, not too hot, we hope, once the air-conditioning works, and without bad odors; short stops and high speeds. This is all that makes up Metro. Impeccable. Magnificent. Applause for the artifice of Metro! (Solana: 1969, 1)

Although the article is not entirely uncritical of the Metro, it captures the same spirit of wonder and modernity now surrounding the Metro of Santo Domingo. Another article, more critically states that the Metro embodies “a new form of Mexican Greatness,” and goes on sarcastically to say that the people of Mexico City “...will look at themselves in the mirror, every morning, and will exclaim, with infinite stupefied astonishment: ‘Wow, this is a human being that lives in a city with a Metro! And, beside the hunger in Biafra [former country of Africa], the war in Vietnam, and countless problems close by, they will feel completely happy” (Coccioli: 1969, 2). A final, and far more laudatory, account of the Mexican Metro details the history, evolution, and problems with transportation from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the then present day of 1969. It carries the subtitle: “During many centuries we walked slowly. Now we run at the velocity of progress” (Rosales: 1969). Mexico City, a metropolis easily double that of Santo Domingo, seems to have undergone similar debates regarding rapid transit, yet did so four decades earlier.

More recently, the capital cities of Puerto Rico and Panama have also invested in costly Metro systems. A website for the first line of a new Metro in Panama states that “...with the construction of Metro, Panama can count on a transport system of the same quality as first-world countries, and all of its citizens will benefit from the modernity,

safety and security of rapid transit” ([www.elmetrodepanama.com](http://www.elmetrodepanama.com): 2011). The website then remarks that Panama has now reached the same height of Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Venezuela, Mexico, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, and has now become the ninth country to introduce this modern system of transportation. “It is a system of transport that elevates not only our national image, but also the quality of life of all Panamanians” ([www.elmetrodepanama.com](http://www.elmetrodepanama.com): 2011). Just as in Santo Domingo, narratives of Metro progress are elevated to a national level. The Metro propaganda in Panama similarly projects an image of a project by and for the people, and utilizes the slogan, “together making a better Panama.”

Although these modern systems of transportation may bring several benefits to their cities, it does so in accordance with the hegemonic designs of the state. The simplified narrative of progress extends itself to the whole country, without taking into account who the Metro most serves and who it might leave out. “The first line of Metro will help ease the congestion of public roadways, will generate jobs, and will contribute to the growth of economic activity in the country, making the way for a better future. For the opportunities that it will open for our development, the Metro will change our lives” ([www.elmetrodepanama.com](http://www.elmetrodepanama.com): 2011).

The remarkable similarity of discourse in Mexico, Panama, and the Dominican Republic reflects the tendency of mega-project development to ignore the complexity of cities and employ one grand solution for the supposed betterment of all citizens. The danger of using a sweeping solution like Metro to transportation problems, beholden to

narratives of modernity and progress, is that, as development theorists like Arturo Escobar suggest, they are destined to bear the marks of history and are likely to reproduce or exacerbate existing inequality. Under the guise of progress, they thus contribute to the same patterns of underdevelopment that they seek to combat.



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## **Vita**

Regina Suzanne Casey was born and raised in Houston, Texas, and graduated from Lamar High School in 2002. She received a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and Latin American Studies from The University of Texas at Austin in 2006. Prior to her research in Santo Domingo, she also lived, worked, and studied in Valparaiso, Chile; Salvador, Brazil; Bluefields, Nicaragua, and Washington, D.C.

Permanent email: [ginacase@gmail.com](mailto:ginacase@gmail.com)

This thesis was typed by Regina Suzanne Casey.