

Dominican Studies: A Field on its Own Right

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Witnessing the birth of a new field of study is rare. Having the opportunity to nurture one is a true privilege. We consider ourselves lucky to be able to do so, even in some modest measure, for the field of Dominican Studies, one very close to our hearts.

With about 1.4 million residing in the United States today, people of Dominican ancestry are among the largest Latino groups in the country, with much of the group's growth now propelled by the second generation, or the children of Dominican immigrants.

There are some noteworthy gender and geographic characteristics to this migration. Women are the backbone of the Dominican community in the U.S. They are the first to migrate. More than one third of Dominican families are headed by a single woman. Dominican women form the bulk of the grassroots leadership in the places where Dominicans settle. It is no accident that this special issue of *Camino Real* boasts more women authors than men.

As with many Latino migrant groups, Dominicans have begun to settle in areas away from the traditional Latino immigrant gateways, which in the Dominican case was New York City. In 1980, three out of four Dominicans living in the U.S. did so in New York City. By the mid-2000s, that proportion had dropped to about half. Today, we find major concentrations of Dominican populations in New Jersey, Florida,

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Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island. Emerging research indicates that community formation and notions of national / ethnic identity developed in these newer communities, away from the traditional enclaves, are taking on new contours.

Sarah Aponte's comprehensive statistical study of dissertations produced within the U.S. academy on topics related to Dominican subjects gives us a map of how the field of Dominican Studies has taken shape, first as a trickle in natural sciences, followed by the social sciences, particularly political sciences and anthropology. Political developments in the Dominican Republic's mid-20th Century, and the subsequent growth of Dominican communities in places such as Washington Heights in New York City, attracted U.S. academics who felt the need to understand and explain both phenomena. The 1970s witnessed a remarkable expansion of the field after the publication of the first book dedicated to this population in the U.S., Glenn Hendricks' *The Dominican Diaspora: from the Dominican Republic to New York City — Villagers in Transition* (1974), an anthropological study of Dominican immigrants as they settled in New York, started families, and created an identity fitted to their new reality. The champions of the field in Dominican Studies include as well renowned scholars as Nancie González, Patricia R. Pessar, Sherri Grasmuck, Jorge Duany, and Luis E. Guarnizo. Their works continue to inspire current scholarly trends. The next step in the evolution of Dominican Studies came in the 1990s, with the emergence of scholarship produced by Dominicans and people of Dominican descent who had been trained in U.S. academia and who began to produce work about *their own*.

Getting to know ourselves has in large part involved getting to know all aspects of our history in the U.S. and becoming active participants in the narration of those histories. This has propelled research at the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute to shed light on aspects of Dominican experience that were theretofore virtually unknown. Researchers at CUNY DSI, through archival records from the Dominican Republic, examined and brought to light for the very first time material that helped reconstruct and contextualize a proto-Dominican identity for Juan Rodrigues, a dark-skinned sailor from Hispaniola, who lived in the Hudson Harbor in 1613-1614 after arriving onboard a Dutch merchant ship, and is the first recorded non-Native resident in what today is New York. Ongoing research looks at Rodrigues as the predecessor of notable contingents of Dominican immigrants who arrived in the U.S. in the 19th century through the classic "old immigrant" port, Ellis Island, and through one of the classic "new immigrant" ports for the second half of the 20th Century, John F. Kennedy airport International Airport.

Alas, not everything is glory, and we still have a long way to go to truly establish the field. Founded in 1992, the Dominican Studies Institute at City College of the City University of New York, with which the editors of this issue of *Camino Real* are affiliated, has been the first dedicated institutional outpost for the field, though hopefully not the last. Courses on Dominican history, culture, and society are still extremely rare in U.S. universities and colleges (except perhaps in some schools with large Dominican student populations), and students of Dominican descent outside areas with large concentrations of Dominicans will most likely not find a single course significantly covering their heritage on the campus they attend. Dominican Studies requires more institutional support and political will at the state and the federal level, to secure the resources and the commitment to create the appropriate infrastructure it needs to continue to move forward.

The selection of authors in this issue combines seasoned and up-and-coming scholars. We are honored to be able to include in this issue one of our pioneers, Daisy Cocco de Filippis. Dr. Cocco de Filippis, the first person of Dominican ancestry to complete her PhD in the City University of New York (a virtual wellspring for Dominicanist scholars), has been one of the most tireless champions of Dominican scholarship in general and Dominican literary and feminist studies in particular, and remains an active and influential scholar and mentor despite the demands of being a college president.

The selection of papers in this special issue reflects the boom in literary scholarship since the 1990s outlined in Aponte's study, as half take on literary subjects. Juleyka Lantigua-Williams' interview with Pulitzer Prize-winning author Junot Díaz explores the intertwining of history, gender and migration issues in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Additionally, the pieces by Marisel Moreno, on the Afro-Dominican identification of immigrant poets like Marianela Medrano and Sussy Santana, Daisy Cocco de Filippis' historical overview of *tertulias*, and Emilia María Durán Almarza's reading of Josefina Báez's performance text, show us how much U.S. Dominican literary production is occurring in Spanish, or "Dominicanish," as performance artist Báez calls her "diasporic language." Lastly, in his examination on the racial and affective gaps in the New York memoirs of Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Danny Méndez reminds us that questions of racial and national identity have pervaded the lives and thoughts of even the most cosmopolitan members of the intellectual class, and hints at the work that remains on the pre-1961 Dominican communities in the U.S.

Other papers in this issue point to the ways that Dominican identity, culture and practices on the island and in the U.S. are imbricated. Whether it's Sydney

Hutchinson's assertion that *merengue típico*, seen as one of the most "nationalist" musical forms, has remained viable thanks to infusion from New York sources or the notions of "care" and "trust" in a Dominican-run high school for newly arrived immigrant kids, examined by Ofelia García and Leslie Bartlett, these works present the ideas of *progreso*, *modernidad* and *dominicanidad* as developed dialectically, between *los de aquí y los de allá*. All in all, these papers are a representative sample of some of the new areas that Dominican Studies are expanding into, as the field continues to develop a corpus.

We are grateful to the two anonymous readers who generously gave their time to support this project. Without their wise advice, the task of selection would have been much more difficult for both editors, since many more people responded to the call for papers than we had anticipated and those who ended up delivering manuscripts had pioneering ideas and were strong contenders. Such an enthusiastic response to an issue in Dominican Studies came as no surprise to us. The field of Dominican Studies has expanded greatly within the last two decades and is becoming an established area within academia, in terms of research, teaching and publishing. The process of putting together the present issue of *Camino Real* reaffirmed our belief that there are many more *dominicanistas* out there than what some would like us to believe. The volume and the high quality of work by these scholars should entreat the U.S. academy to recognize their labor. This is particularly true for publications that continue to employ outdated methods for selecting manuscripts, practices which often overlook researchers in Dominican Studies.

We are also immensely thankful to Carolina González, the most outstanding managing editor a publishing enterprise could have. This special issue greatly benefited from her editorial expertise, which has been honed both as a literary scholar trained at UC Berkeley and as a journalist in top U.S. newspapers and magazines. We especially appreciate her verve in working with authors individually to polish each manuscript after it was accepted and received the first round of reviews. Carolina brought passion and vision to the task at hand and for that we are also thankful.

For giving us the opportunity to edit this monographic issue on Dominican Studies of *Camino Real*, we want to thank immensely — more than words can say — the editorial staff at *Camino Real*, but particularly Dr. Cristina Crespo, for her willingness to consider our proposal of dedicating a whole issue of *Camino Real* to Dominicans in the United States and for working with us with the highest level of professionalism. We also want to thank each of the scholars who contributed to this volume, some of whom we knew previously and some of whom we are delighted to get to know, for their commitment to continue to develop a field of study that speaks directly

about a courageous people whose migration process has for ever changed the Dominican Republic as well as the United States.

Finally, our hope is that this broad-ranging selection of studies shows the richness of Dominican Studies and the multiplicity of angles from which the Dominican experience may be studied. We also hope this sample might encourage new researchers to pursue lines of inquiry connected to this field, and for U.S. academic and other institutions to support people who specialize in Dominican Studies by creating the needed spaces to accommodate them. *Camino Real* has certainly put *su granito de arena* with this special issue on this regard. We hope others will follow suit.