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Kiskeyanas Valientes en Este Espacio: Dominican Women Writers and the Spaces of Contemporary American Literature

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**KISKEYANAS VALIENTES EN ESTE ESPACIO:
DOMINICAN WOMEN WRITERS
AND THE SPACES OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE**

A Dissertation Presented

by

ISABEL R. ESPINAL

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2018

English and American Studies

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DEDICATION

A mis padres,
Isabel Fernández Espinal y Pedro Espinal Ureña,
porque me enseñaron a pensar, trabajar y disfrutar
y a tener Fe.

To my children,
Lucas Espinal Solórzano, Lucía Espinal Solórzano, and Sabina Espinal Solórzano,
because they have amazed me with their accomplishments and character
and give me hope for the future.

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Love and dread this section: love to reflect on everyone who helped me and everyone who made me and everyone who was with me; dread the thought that I will forget someone.

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Everyone in my works cited. Especially Gloria Anzaldúa, Latina/o/x Studies scholars in general; Patrick Robert Reid Stewart – for his example dissertation, *Indigenous Architecture through Indigenous Knowledge: Dim sagalts'apkw nisin̄* [Together we will build a village], a dissertation with no punctuation. I read about it in a newspaper article that claimed “Not everyone loved it,” but I did love it, and it came at just the right time—for this, for all those who were stopped or faced obstacles in their educational journeys, at whatever point:

and
my wife wonders
why she failed
kindergarten
what *irony*
i still feel her
sorrow anger
hurt
tears
•

~ Patrick Robert Reid Stewart

ABSTRACT

KISKEYANAS VALIENTES EN ESTE ESPACIO: DOMINICAN WOMEN WRITERS AND THE SPACES OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

MAY 2018

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We can learn and gain a lot by putting Dominican women writers at the center of our attention. Yet they rarely have that place. This dissertation looks at Dominican women authors who have lived and written in the United States —Josefina Báez, Marianela Medrano, Yrene Santos, Aurora Arias, Nelly Rosario, Annecy Báez, Ana Maurine Lara, Raquel Cepeda— and how they fit within the spaces of contemporary American society, and more broadly within world flows of peoples and cultural productions. I draw on the theories and methodologies of Gloria Anzaldúa and her generation of feminists of color, as well as subsequent decolonial, indigenous and Afro-diasporic thinkers, including Marta Moreno-Vega. In heeding María Lugones' call for playfulness, I play with the very words space and place, while exploring how space and place play out in the works and lives of these writers and how sexism, racism, and colonialism have shaped their lives, their works and the lives of their works —the birth, development and dissemination of their works. I include storytelling about my own Kiskeyana life and try to decolonize the very language of analysis: Latina/o becomes Latinx, Dominican becomes Kiskeyana, America becomes Abya Yala and even space and time become egun. I also play around with Latinx, feminist and indigenous research and writing methodologies like Participatory Action Research

and the use of the second person, as when I address you, the reader. These writers offer so much more than any of our contemporary limited critical language and vision can encompass. At the same time, I argue for the application of some language and labels that are not normally applied to Dominican women writers, such as nature writers and mystical writers. I urge you to visit and experience their writings directly and hope that the dissertation achieves that end if nothing else, but I also have in mind the needs of you who will be reading this dissertation, whoever you are, so I hope that the dissertation also serves as a space of reading and learning pleasure for you—and possibly healing.

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CHAPTER 1

DOMINICAN WOMEN WRITERS FROM A HYBRID THINKING-SPACE

Places, Spaces and Placing of Dominican Women's Literature Written in the United States

Before we get started, I want to transport you to a place and a space from which this was all written. An apartment in Brooklyn, New York, USA in the 1970s. You are so lucky to be here! Some very smart people are gathered. Some of them are dishwashers in restaurants, some are janitors, some work in factories, and some own and work in bodegas. You will learn, you will become informed, you will attain wisdom. The conversation meanders. There is no set structure. I hope you are ok with that.

I didn't write from that apartment literally, but from a raised-ranch suburban type house in Amherst, Massachusetts, a college town in New England four decades later. This place from which this dissertation was born takes a space in my earliest memories. It's not a specific apartment — it could be our old apartment from 1971 on 48th Street and 4th Avenue or it could be my mom's uncle's apartment, who we all knew as Tío on 46th and 5th, or the apartment of any number of uncles or aunts. The adults would gather in the living room, fill up the sofa and pull up as many chairs as needed or could be found. They would form a kind of circle and talk about important things as well as funny things. There was a sense of equality among the speakers and listeners — anyone could jump in, although I do clearly remember and know that only the women would stand up now and then to get refreshments from the kitchen, served on bandejas (trays).

In 1975, my family moved back to the Dominican Republic. Like many who moved back to the DR and Puerto Rico from New York in those days, we thought the move was permanent, but it did not last more than one year. Yet it marked me as transnational, created transnational memories and strengthened my transnational spirit. (Of course, at that age, I did not use the term transnational per se, and most people outside of academia and even many within the academy are not familiar with this term, so I will define it later.) It was magical to really be in that place I had

imagined from overhearing all the conversations back in Brooklyn: Santo Domingo (the name Dominicans in New York back then were using for our entire country), or more specifically López and Los Limones, the names of the places my parents were from, places in the countryside of the Cibao region not far from the city of Santiago. I was eleven years old. I don't know what the correct geographic term is for these two specific places — either village or hamlet — but in Spanish we tended to refer to them as simply el campo, the countryside, and we felt ourselves campesinos, country people. Although so many things were extremely different there from what I knew in Brooklyn, in the campo the adults did a lot of the same things they did back in New York City, and one of them was to gather and talk in the spirit of idea exchange and truth-seeking. At my grandmother Mamá Antonia's house, these conversations would often happen in el zaguán — the room that served as dining room and living room between the main house and the kitchen — not really a room but a kind of interior open porch. The room was like nothing in Brooklyn but the conversations had the same underlying spirit of inclusion and openness — anyone could say anything and the ideas could lead anywhere.

I have two pictures of Mamá Antonia in her zaguán:



Figure 1 Mamá Antonia in her zaguán

In this picture below, you can see the dark kitchen behind it, and how open the space is, and close to the outdoors; you can also catch a glimpse of her fogón, the stove for cooking. I'll come back to the word fogón later.



Figure 2 Mamá Antonia with kitchen behind her

I have carried that sense of reciprocal, exploratory, egalitarian conversation with me all my life. I present this dissertation in that spirit.

The world of those living rooms in Brooklyn and zaguanes in el campo seemed very remote from the world I was learning about and being trained in at school and later in colleges in the United States. But one day, years later, as an adult woman sitting in that kind of circle in a living room in New Haven, Connecticut, the different worlds came together. I met Marianela Medrano at a gathering of a second cousin who I had just met. I didn't know it at first, but I found out that Marianela, a Dominican woman, married to a distant relative of mine, was a published writer, which blew me away — to have a writer physically in the same space as my family.

That encounter also turned out to be a genesis for this dissertation. A few years later, in 1994, the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute held a conference titled "La literatura dominicana

al final del siglo: diálogo entre la tierra natal y la diáspora.”¹ It was attended by hundreds of people; I was one of them, thanks to Marianela, who told me about it and invited me to go with her. Although set in New York City, the conference was conducted—as far as I can recall—completely in Spanish. The selected proceedings, published in 1999, are also completely in Spanish. The editor of the proceedings, Daisy Cocco de Filippis, described the status —at that point— of literature written by Dominicans in the United States, referring to the

...estado frágil de los escritores y las letras dominicanas. La situación es tan compleja como la vida y obra de muchos de aquellos que no están ni aquí ni allá; que no son ni dominicanos ni "universales"... No obstante al acercarnos al final del siglo y al considerar lo que constituye la "dominicanidad," comprendemos que la geografía ya no puede ser el factor determinante.² (Cocco-DeFilippis *La literatura dominicana* 3)

It was a moment of Dominican writers in the United States asserting their right to be called Dominican writers even as they lived and wrote and published *outside* the borders of the Dominican Republic. However, Cocco de Filippis also pointed out that the fragility she referred to was not simply the product of the displacement of Dominicans from the Dominican Republic into the United States. She asserted that Dominican literature comes already marginalized within the field of Spanish language literature from Latin America as a whole, as well as within the realm of what had and has been called “universal literature.” For readers, students and scholars of literature in Spanish of my generation and earlier, this marginalization was constantly present, if not always evident, depending on the background of the reader. An example from my own experience: in the 1980s, in my major I specialized in Latin American Literature at Princeton University, which had been recommended to me as the best place at the time to study that literature. Yet, not once, in any of my classes, did we read any authors from the Dominican Republic, not even in the course on Literature of the Spanish Speaking Caribbean, which only

¹ "Dominican literature at the end of the century: Dialogue between the homeland and the diaspora"

² ...fragile state of Dominican writers and letters. The situation is as complex as the life and work of many of these who are neither here nor there; who are neither Dominican nor "universal"... Nevertheless as we approach the end of the century and consider what "Dominicanness" means, we understand that geography cannot be the determining factor.

included Puerto Rican and Cuban authors. My experience is not unique. Very recently, in 2016, Erika Martínez published an anthology of Dominican women narratives in which she recounts similar motivations coming from the lack of inclusion of Dominican women in literary spaces:

Even though I had a master's in English and creative writing and a bachelor's degree in Spanish, I'd never received a syllabus that included a Dominican author. Dominicans were likewise excluded from the Latin American literature courses I had taken when I'd lived in Spain, Argentina, and Mexico. Looking back on my experience, I also noticed that professors in the United States and abroad mostly assigned the work of male authors. By and large, the literary canon was made up of men. (Martínez 2)

Cocco de Filippis' references to universal literature are likely a product and an indication of the historical moment in North American literary life in which this conference took place — the early 1990s, following the 1980s discussions, or “cultural wars,” as some called them, over the place and definition of “ethnic literature” versus “universal literature” that had monopolized a lot of literary energy in the United States and elsewhere. (Donadio) Although it is in many respects a dated dialogue, the question of universalism in literature and art is still relevant today and is one of the push points from which this dissertation emerges.

This dissertation will be a space for some erstwhile devalued Dominican literature in the United States to take center stage. It could be argued that at this date, Dominican literature in the United States is much less fragile than when Daisy Cocco de Filippis spoke to the 1994 group, but many of the concerns still remain. Questions about what is Dominican, what is literature, what appeals to readers either as Dominicans, or universally, are still consequential, even if they may not be talked about in the same way as in decades ago. Additionally, what it means to be a woman Dominican writer is also a worthwhile topic of conversation and exploration today. In this dissertation, seven Dominican women writers take up the main space, and space itself will be a topic as well.

On Theory: All the Theory We Need from a Hybrid Thinking Space

This work you are reading grew organically, sometimes in a wild uneven way that will hopefully not turn off those accustomed to tight (and perhaps too rigid) outlines. At the core, these

are studies of seven contemporary Dominican women writers and their writings: Josefina Báez, Marianela Medrano, Yrene Santos, Aurora Arias, Annecy Báez, Nelly Rosario, and Ana-Maurine Lara. All of them have lived and written in the United States. The theoretical foundation for these studies is US Latina feminism. The thematic motifs that tie and weave the different chapters together are questions of space and place. And the underlying motivation and spirit that conceived and struggled to give birth to this dissertation comes from my own life as a Dominican woman of a particular generation, born in the USA, who has always loved literature. For the purposes of this research, I have grouped them in conversation with each other based on their language choices (Spanish, English, and mixtures of Spanish and English). I will provide a map of the chapters later in this chapter.

Madrinas and Padrinos in Theory and Practice

The midwives, the doulas, the parteras, the *madrinas* of theory and practice of this work and of *the way* it's presented here are the writers of the 1981 anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, such as Norma Alarcón, Naomi Littlebear Morena, Audre Lorde, Mirtha Quintanales, Merele Woo, Luisah Teish, Chrystos, Cherríe Moraga, and on particular Gloria Anzaldúa. They were remarkable and their work was remarkable and of inextricable, but sometimes invisible and unspoken influence on many who came after, including myself. These women wrote *of* and *in* a “theory in the flesh,” in which “the physical realities of our lives... all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity.”³ *The way* they “fleshed out” the theory was by “naming our selves and by telling our stories in our own words.” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 21) Likewise, and with the blessing of these *madrinas*, the physical realities of the lives of the Dominican women writers —and of my own life as a researcher and scholar and reader and writer— will fuse in this study.

³ I cite the 2002 revised edition.

The writers of *This Bridge Called My Back* did the very messy but miraculous work of giving birth to themselves as new women, and also became midwives who helped others such as myself give birth as well — to our thoughts, our ideas, to our writing — in our own way, in our own words, in our own rhythms. As with a midwife birth, the writing here is not absolutely sterilized, which isn't to say that it won't be as pure, clean and healthy as possible.

Another important theoretical and methodological foundation for my study is Gloria Anzaldúa's 1987 book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.⁴ Anzaldúa was one of the writers of *This Bridge Called My Back*. Among the many reasons she stands out among writers of her generation is her delving into core questions about who writes and why we write, and for demonstrating how rich and liberating and powerful writing can be when it comes from our own flesh and experience and when it is honestly written in our own mixed-up language(s) and genres. In her introduction to the second edition of *Borderlands*, Sonia Saldívar-Hull credits Anzaldúa with inventing a new genre in which “personal narrative about her grandmother's dispossession occupies the same discursive space as a dry recitation of historical fact, while lyrics from a corrido about ‘the lost land’ butt up against a poetic rendition of an ethnocentric Anglo historian's vision of U.S. Dominion over Mexico.” (3) Anzaldúa's style and themes were very much about mixture, and although in some ways the writing seemed all over the place, this *way of writing* about *mixed* cultures gives the writing more integrity — it coheres very well to its content: Anzaldúa's methods broke down and defied disempowering and oppressive hierarchies and borders regarding what is appropriate in a book or analytical writing. In Walter D. Mignolo's discussion of Anzaldúa's role as academic theorist, he asserts that Gloria Anzaldúa's “great theoretical contribution is to create a space-in-between *from where to think*,” about Latina/o existence and Latina/o lives, instead of the usual “hybrid space *to talk about*” Latina/o existence and Latina/o lives. Mignolo suggests that this

⁴ I will be citing the second edition, 1999.

“hybrid thinking-space of Spanish/Latin American and Amerindian legacies” provides “the condition of possibility for Spanish/Latin American and Amerindian postcolonial theory.” (xii) ⁵

I am grateful that Anzaldúa and her comadres of *This Bridge Called My Back* did the work of articulating that in-between space from which I embarked on this project. This dissertation **is** written *from* a hybrid thinking space, while it is simultaneously *about* hybrid spaces and hybrid experiences. The concept of a hybrid thinking space resonates on many levels in relation to this project. The methodologies are hybrid, that is, a mixture of methods; the topics are also a mixture. The writing will be a hybrid as will be the presence of both text *and* images, Spanish *and* English; humanities *and* social science, academic *and* non-academic, formal *and* informal. I understand that the readers of this dissertation will also be a hybrid group — some will need certain things explained and others won’t. And that’s not too different from the living room and zaguán conversations: sometimes a story is told in a group where there are some who’ve already heard it and others who haven’t and those who’ve heard the story have to be patient and hear it again. So it is with some of the concepts, both cultural and academic, that I will be discussing.

In addition to the midwife theorists, or *madrinas*⁶, mentioned above, this work has a few *padrinos*, including two European theorists of space, Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, and one Chinese-U.S. geographer Yi-Fu Tuan. These three have in recent decades been go-to theorists of space and place. Since some readers may not be familiar with the traditions of *madrinas* and *padrinos* in Latino cultures, or its variants, I will elaborate a little on the meaning of this metaphor because it sheds light on some of my choices. There is a lot of variation in the practice of *madrinas* and *padrinos* — variations across different regions and generations. For example, in Mexican weddings there often are various sets of *madrinas* and *padrinos* (*madrina de*

⁵ As a Dominican woman, I will add as well Afro American and African legacies to this Spanish/Latin American and Amerindian hybrid space.

⁶ I am aware that midwife (*partera*) and *madrina* are not the same thing! Play with me and forgive me for mixing metaphors.

honor, *madrina de laso*, *madrina de copas*, *madrina de velación*), whereas in the Dominican Republic there is often just one *madrina* and one *padrino* in a wedding. Although the most basic situations in which *madrinas* and *padrinos* come into play are baptisms (where they are the godmothers and godfathers) and weddings (where they are the maid of honor and best man), many other types of ceremonies can also have *madrinas*. In the Dominican Republic, high school graduations often used *madrinas*, and *quinceañera* celebrations in Mexico and other countries do as well. Within any particular use of *madrinas*/*padrinos* for specific ceremonies there can also be variation as to the actual role and character of the *madrina* and *padrino*. In many cases, perhaps in theory in all cases, the *madrina* and *padrino* are expected to be exemplary people and possible stand-ins for the parents as in the case of baptisms and *quinceañeras*, or exemplary role models of good marriages and advisors when marital problems arise in the case of weddings. Yet, one aspect of this complex cultural tradition that comes to mind as I introduce these different influences — in particular the women feminist writers of color contrasted with the white European male theorists of space — is how sometimes *madrinas* and *padrinos* are chosen not for any special or intimate relationship that may exist or may develop between the *comadres* and *compadres* or between the *madrinas* and *padrinos* and the children they are chosen for; but rather, for some potential resources or prestige they may bring to the child or the parents' lives. Oftentimes important or wealthy people are chosen, who aren't that close to the parents or the children and who ultimately do not contribute much, even materially, to their lives. Many times these *padrinos* and *madrinas* simply have too many *ahijados* (godchildren) because everyone wants those possible resources or prestige. Although admittedly a perversion of the ideal role, it does happen. I asked myself if I was doing this with the *padrinos* I had chosen and realized that even though Lefebvre, De Certeau and Tuan are not as intimately tied to the heart of this dissertation as Anzaldúa, Moraga, Lorde, Quintanales and the others, they are not chosen simply because of their prestige

or acceptability — these padrinos offer germane ideas for talking about the writers and writings in question.⁷

Recently, I came across an even greater corruption to what *madrinas* or *padrinos* should be. As I was researching information about the Orisha Oshun, I found a documentary titled *Memoria de Una Hija de Oshun*. This story of an Afro-descended woman in Uruguay presents an example of the worst possible type of *madrina*. María Farías' *madrina* essentially used her godchild as a slave, exploiting her position as *madrina*. When I saw the documentary, a part of me couldn't believe it because the institution of a *madrina* was so sacred in my life and thinking. As I read some background on the documentary, I learned that this was not an isolated incident, but that in this context this was one way *madrinas* functioned in that society: "Era el esclavismo de las domésticas. Las llamadas *madrinas*, mujeres de la alta burguesía, criaban a niñas y niños con la intención de que trabajaran para ellas." ("Estreno de Memoria de una Hija de Oshun") If you're wondering how is this connected to my work, I will say that I bring all this up because it really helps the metaphor I've chosen and that metaphor in turn helps in this section of who I will draw on for theoretical support. If we think of theoretical frameworks as the *madrinas* or *padrinos* we choose, as the exemplary models that guide our work, it's good ask: are we just using them for prestige or money, how close are they to us really, are they using us, or do we choose them because we feel that close and connected to them?

Let me tell you a little more about the *padrinos* I chose. In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau has a section on "Spatial practices," that is, what people do with everyday spaces. One chapter of that section, "Walking the City," lays out the contrast between looking at

⁷ All of these writers/theorists have been very influential. As a librarian, one tool I often use to show influence is the citation database *Web of Knowledge/Web of Science*. Although impossible to find an exact number of citations, Web of science indicates that Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* has been cited over 1000 times, De Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life* over 650, Tuan's *Space and Place* over 1308, and *This Bridge Called My Back* over 687.

a city from the heights of its tallest building, such as the former World Trade Center in New York, versus looking at a city from the point of view of someone walking through its streets. This opens up very useful ways of looking at how Dominican women writers engage with space and spaces. De Certeau celebrates a lack of order that walking a city — in random individualistic patterns - represents. Additionally, De Certeau's concept of a "walking rhetoric" validates and vindicates the meandering nature of this project; this is a very special gift coming from an academically prestigious writer. Thank you padrino.

Henri Lefebvre also wrote of spatial practices. His main thesis is that social space is a social product and he pointed out three aspects of a theory of space and society: 1. *spatial practice*: how space is produced, reproduced and used in daily life; 2. *representations of space*: conceptualized space as developed by scientists, geographers, urban planners, map makers, etc.; and 3. *representational spaces*: how space is lived through images and symbols. Put simply, Lefebvre argued that we could not take for granted that space and spaces are what we think they are. As a Marxist, he specifically wanted to show the connections between how spaces are used, conceived and represented *within* the systems of capitalism and neo-capitalism, and *in the service* of those systems. Lefebvre stated that "for the theory I am proposing to be confirmed as far as is possible, the distinctions drawn above would have to be generalized in their application to cover all societies, all periods, all 'modes of production.'" (41) Well, it's interesting to look at these Dominican women writers in terms of space and the system of capitalism. Nevertheless, although really useful for looking at them, Lefebvre's theory does not account fully for the lived experiences nor the writings of these women. Capitalism has influenced or interfered or intervened in all of the lives and works of these writers. Yes, each of them had found ways to operate outside of that system, in spite of that system or in disregard, unconcern and inattention to that system. In this lies a lot of beauty and power and wisdom of these writers.

In his book, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, geographer Yi-fu Tuan, unlike Lefebvre, makes no attempt to produce a totalizing theory and admits that his "approach is

descriptive, aiming more often to suggest than to conclude.” (7) Yet he has a more global perspective than Lefebvre, with many varied examples of how space and place play out across the world. He makes a lot of suggestive observations and distinctions about these concepts that I will draw on. His basic idea is that “place is security,” while “space is freedom.”

So these padrinos are very helpful and healing — and fun too. But it’s really Anzaldúa who can take credit for the gist of all this work. In writing up this project, I found it impossible to conform or contort myself into what I perceive as the standard dissertation style of writing, the standard style of academic conference papers, the standard style of cultural and literary criticism journals. This caused some inquietud, nervousness about the compatibility of my approach with the academic standards that would be used to judge the outcome. What a relief then to read Edén Torres’ exaltation of Anzaldúa as theorist, pointing out that “sexism, racism and homophobia sometimes come disguised as academic standards,” (39) and that Anzaldúa provided “a firm base from which to produce *and read* all the theory I will ever need.” (40)

Egun, and the Healing Power of Trans-Generational Spaces

Nevertheless, for me, unlike for Torres, Anzaldúa does not actually provide *all* the theory needed in this study. Additionally, in thinking of space and in thinking of thinking, this dissertation will refer to ideas and concepts from Caribbean santería that have to do with space and spaces. This spiritual tradition is usually not regarded as an academic or theoretical framework, yet it provides a very rich language from which to look at the meaning of spaces, places and how people interact with spaces and places. Vodoun, santería, espiritismo are important elements in the makeup of New York Dominican culture⁸, although they are oftentimes hidden. In this vein, I will draw on the work and inspiration of Marta Moreno Vega, among others, in particular Moreno Vega’s book *The Altar of My Soul*.

⁸ Espiritismo is usually associated with Puerto Ricans and Santería usually with Puerto Rico and Cuba, but in the context of Dominican York culture, they have become part of the cultural landscape that Dominican Yorks live in.

Not surprisingly, these spiritual traditions of West African heritage have found their way into the writings of some, if not all, of the authors I study here. It is only fitting that concepts of the traditions be evoked and used in the discussion of the literature. Although santería and vodoun have traditionally been treated in USA academic circles as limited to religion and spirituality, I maintain that they can also be considered and engaged as thought systems or theoretical frameworks in their own right. Of particular interest in this dissertation are ideas about spaces and places encapsulated in the concepts of egun, as well as what anthropologist and theologian Aisha Beliso-De Jesús calls “copresences.” (504)

***A Hybrid Thinking Space, a Hybrid Writing Space, a Hybrid Research Space, a
Hybrid Reading Space***

Even as some of Anzaldúa’s theories and ideas do not fully encapsulate or refer to us Dominican-USA women and Dominican-USA women writers, she is the best academic theoretician from which to launch this project. She can’t fully account for us in that her concerns have to do with literal as well as figurative borderland areas and the Dominican Republic does not literally border the United States; also, Dominicans have an African heritage that is not present in the cultures of Anzaldúa’s experience. But borderlands and hybrid spaces as a way of being and living is very much present in the experiences of Dominican —USA women. And if I had to pick one name to focus on, one egun of theory, one madrina, it will be hers.

In many ways this dissertation is a hybrid thinking space, a hybrid writing space, a hybrid research space and a hybrid reading space. Anzaldúa’s use of first person writing and poetry in academic texts is not the usual style for a dissertation, but there are a few here and there that approach it in some way. One example of a successful dissertation in my own department, which did get published later as a book and used a first person narrative style is Robert Hayashi’s 2002 American Studies dissertation “Haunted by Waters: Race and Place in the American West,” in which he narrates his travels through Idaho while also writing a history and analysis of racial ideologies in the Western United States. In May 2015, I was given another boost by coming

across the recently defended and archived dissertation of an indigenous architect in Canada. A newspaper article circulated online with the title: “UBC student writes 52,438 word architecture dissertation with no punctuation — not everyone loved it.” (Hutchinson) The article contained the graphic below, and it hooked me: I HAD to look up this dissertation and read it, which I did. I found the dissertation riveting.

in this dissertation
i am writing as in an oral fashion
writing like i speak
and hopefully **read**
it is being **speaking directly**
as if i am **speaking directly**
to you ♥ to your
heart

Figure 3 A citation from an indigenous dissertation (Stewart 7).

From this quote and reading the actual dissertation, I felt validated not only in using the first person in my writing, as Hayashi had done, but also in my use of the second person, as I did in the opening paragraphs of chapter one, and as in this other quote from Stewart:

As mentioned above, I will take you on a journey that will make you question what you are reading and perhaps you will wonder why the writing is structured the way it is. I will introduce you, perhaps for the first time and for others perhaps not, to a way of writing that reads as if speaking. One Indigenous reader said he could hear his grandfather speaking at feasts in my writing (C. Menzies personal communication April 23 2015). The formatting of this dissertation purposely provides an oral / aural / visually designed context and thereby underlines an indigenist research approach. This is the manner in which this dissertation will privilege indigenous knowledges. The style of writing presented here in this dissertation will not be standard or conventional academic English. Perhaps there will be those who will not question what they are reading but there may be those who cannot “slog it out” (L. Walker, personal communication, February 5, 2015) alone and may need further translation of the dissertation. That is okay (Cole, 2002). This

dissertation is innovative for this university and supports those indigenous students wanting to privilege their own languages, stories and culture (M. Marker, personal communication, February 5, 2015). (x)

I read this after I had written my own introduction in which I invited you into a space of conversation. How wonderful to find a kindred spirit within the ranks of the world's previously accepted doctoral dissertations! Another blessing.

I found it interesting and affirming too, that like me, Stewart was an older student, 61 years old, when he finished. Like him, I have (an)other career(s) outside of the doctoral path (in his case architect and community advocate as well as father, in my case librarian, poet, writer, translator, as well as mother). Did that also give me more courage to do this non-standard approach? Like him, I am writing about my culture, my own people, and even my colleagues. His being an indigenous architect is at the center, and there's also a lot of other things going on, (as with me):



Figure 4 Example of indigenous methodology (Stewart 5).

Working on this project over so many years, I often felt my way of writing was circular and I remembered that non-linear discourse was seen as valid by a writer in *This Bridge Called My Back*. Judit Moschkovich wrote:

Let me illustrate some differences in language. English expository writing goes in a straight line (sound familiar?) from introductory paragraph, to thesis sentence, to conclusion. Spanish composition follows a form more like a zig-zag, sometimes deviating from straight, linear thinking. I am fighting against this when I write in English so I can be understood by English readers. (Moraga and Anzaldúa 88)

I thought I also remembered something about indigenous styles of discourse being circular and I googled the words indigenous circular discourse style in order to show that I was not alone in not being able to answer these questions in straight line, that not writing in a straight line did not mean I was not straightforward. That Google search turned up a book that was exactly what I needed even though it did not address the issue of circularity directly. The book was *The Authentic Dissertation: Alternative Ways of Knowing, Research, and Representation* by Four Arrows (Wahinkpe Topa), aka Don Trent Jacobs. I had not even been looking for anything related to dissertations directly! Didn't even put the word dissertation in my search. Here is a quote from this book that helps me now as I leave this section and move on the next:

I also open with Indigenous stories because I believe most of the alternative ways of knowing, research, and representation illustrated in this text originate from Indigenous principles about the sacredness of space and place; the purpose of research to benefit the community; and the spiritual awareness that everything is connected; and that knowledge must incorporate the mysterious. (Jacobs 5)

Of Spaces and Places

Why Space and Place?

Sometimes when we choose a topic for a study, what we're really choosing is an excuse, or something to grab onto, some way to interact with or even play with the object of our fascination. I *have to* admit that, to a large extent, this is the case with this dissertation and the themes of space and place. I say this with no disrespect to my topic or my readers; on the contrary, this is a sacred project. Here's the thing: when people have asked me what I'm writing my dissertation about, I didn't say that I'm writing about space and place — I said that I'm

writing about seven Dominican women writers. Punto. That's my focus. The simple act of highlighting them and focusing on them in a context where they are not well known, in a context where Junot Díaz or Julia Alvarez dominate the definition of Dominican or Latino writers and writing in the USA is already enough. But there is so much more that can't be pinned down to one thing or one focus or a single theoretical lens. The stories of these women — both the ones they write and the ones they've lived and are living — will do us good, will do us all good. They have written and lived from places of fracture in the bigger space that we all inhabit. Those places thus tell the story of all of us. We cannot know our story without knowing them. None of us. The beautiful thing is that their stories and verses also heal those fractures. And the even more beautiful thing is that their stories and verses cannot really be contained in any space or place. That is one other thing I hope to show in the coming chapters.

There is a story behind why I chose questions of space and place to anchor and focus this dissertation. I had up to that decision point conceived the project as a study of the production > creation> reception cycle as it pertained to the Dominican women writers I chose to study. The original prospectus I wrote and received approval for did not mention space and place as a primary focus, although these concepts were included, for example in the proposal to look at “the spaces and flows of Dominican literary production and reception.” But one day, months, perhaps a year, after it had been approved, I showed the accepted prospectus along with some chapter drafts to a potential fifth committee member and he made a comment along the lines that he felt my work lacked focus, that it seemed I was all over the place. He asked in a challenging way: What was it about? I didn't have a quick answer for him other than it was about six Dominican women writers and the context of their writing, and I wasn't sure I needed one sole focus, especially since it had already been reviewed and approved by a committee of four other academics. I did mention this conversation to my two committee co chairs because I could not shake it off and one of them reassuringly said, no: she felt I *did* have a focus and that my focus was that these Dominican women writers were creating ”a space for themselves and their writing”

and the question I could answer in the dissertation is “how is that taking place?” That got the gears turning in my thinking not only to this question but more broadly to the words space and place. I wasn’t sure that the question this professor identified was *the* *one* question. As I thought about the words space and place and looked over my research up to that point, and read and reread the writers’ works and words that showed up in interviews and social media, these concepts kept popping up everywhere: space, place, espacio and their many permutations. I actually already had a chapter draft that concentrated on space and, somehow in the next few months — not clear to me now as I try to remember — I decided to make space and place the themes I would focus on for the entire dissertation: to follow the many ways these ideas of space and place emerged from looking at what was originally proposed — the production > creation > reception cycles.

As a librarian at a university since 1998, I know that space and place have been academically trendy for some time. I had been the librarian for anthropology and saw that the geographer David Harvey has been extremely popular influence in that field resulting in journal articles, books and conference papers focusing on space and place in relation to culture. Closer to home, in terms of literary studies, a search of the two words space and place in the database *MLA International Bibliography*, results as of this writing (August 5, 2015) in 1,728 hits, 1,119 in the last 10 years alone, 707 in the last 5.

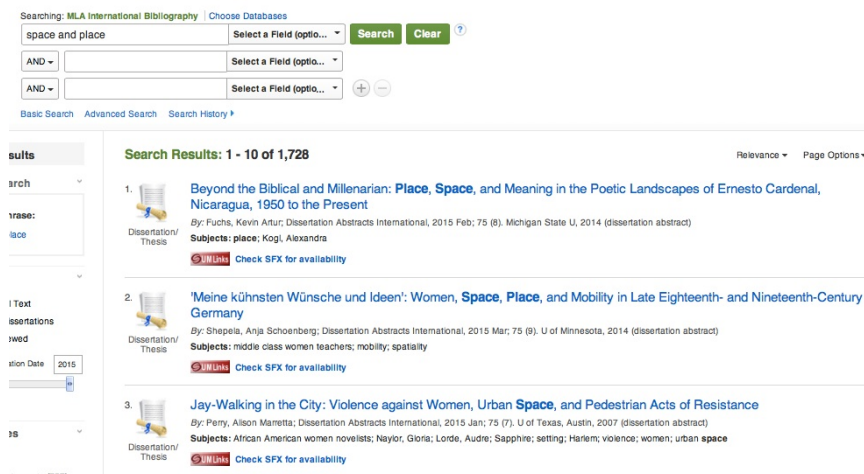


Figure 5 Space and place in MLA database, 2015

Dissertations alone, there were 177 total titles in the database with the keywords space and place.

Additionally, the themes and the very words space and place were undeniably there in the works and lives of the writers I had chosen. Questions of space emerge from the context and content of these authors' writings. Space as a focus in examining these writers helps understand not just their own writing but also sheds light on the conditions necessary or conducive to writing and to "success" in the various world literary sphere and markets. It also gives a greater appreciation for what they are able to produce if we consider that what they produce carries the weight — and the lightness — of the spaces in which cultural production and reception occur. At some point I thought that it would be worth organizing the dissertation around these questions if it would make it easier for readers. The ease of readers was a primary concern.

It might have been when I recalled a conversation many years ago with one of the committee members about the concept of *egun* in Yoruba traditions that really sealed it, as far as choosing space and place as a focus. It was in that conversation that he had told me about *egun* and that one aspect of *egun* is how spaces take on the spirits of those who inhabit them and how people carry with them the spirits of the places and spaces they have been in. I had wanted to use ideas from Afro-Latino traditions as a support for or even as a base for the dissertation, and as I moved to space and place as a focus it seemed perfect that here were some ideas about spaces and places from that tradition that could be another guiding force. Note: I chose the term Afro-Latino rather than Afro-Dominican at this point because I do not claim these ideas to be in the Afro Dominican tradition *per se*. Nor do I deny it. I simply did not have enough time to develop the depth necessary to be able to confidently refer to Afro Dominican traditions specifically. Given that this work is part of an American Studies program and that much of what goes on in academia imposes a European or USA paradigm on all that is studied, I'm ok with this choice of possibly imposing a paradigm that is not completely or uniquely indigenous to the subject matter as a matter of practicality.

Defining Space, Place and Placing

To get started, let's define and delineate these terms. In his discussion of space and place for the *SAGE Handbook of Geographical Knowledge*, John Agnew points out the complexity of these words in the English language and of these terms in academic as well as everyday use, noting that the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives over two pages to space and three and a half pages to place. (316) Although sometimes the two terms will be interchangeable, there are some differences and distinctions in how they are used in this dissertation and what the two words refer to.

Space in this dissertation generally refers to either a physical or virtual entity. But it often also refers to an experience. Literary tertulias are a space⁹. Conferences are spaces. An online blog is a space. Facebook is a space. Most often a space happens or is created in a place but not always. Place is used to refer to a geographical location. Dominican Republic is a place. New York is a place; Spain is a place; India is a place. A specific building or house or beach or riverbank is a place. Place has a certain physicality that space doesn't always have. Space can refer to a general concept, for example, a library as a concept is a space; a specific library in a specific location is a place. A place may offer a space but does not guarantee a space. A space is created. A place may not have a space for you.

Both place and space are social constructions as well as social understandings. I use the word understanding to refer to how one socially constructs a space or place in one's mind, how one understands a place. This construction does not come from action but rather from thinking or intuiting a place or space. So for example, one socially constructs a space like a conference if one is the organizer. But the person who attends the conference has a certain understanding of

⁹ Definition of tertulia: "Las reuniones informales y periódicas, donde se congrega gente interesada en un mismo tema para debatir, informarse y compartir opiniones, se conocen como tertulias. Se trata de una costumbre española que fue muy frecuente en sus colonias independizadas hasta mediados del siglo XX." ("The informal and regular gatherings, where people interested in a particular subject gather to debate, inform themselves and share opinions, are known as tertulias. It is a Spanish custom that was very common in its former colonies until the middle of the XX century.") [My translation.] ("Qué significa tertulia.")

that space that might be quite different. They socially construct that space in their own minds and in their experiences.

When it comes to Dominican women authors living and writing in the United States, the idea of *placing* is also significant and productive to look at. Placing refers to how authors and literatures are categorized. Where do readers and gatekeepers of literature place these writers and their writing? Where are they placed in courses? Where are they placed on physical shelves — in bookstores and libraries? Where are they placed at book fairs and book events? It's very obvious that placing and placement are social acts too.

Literature itself can be seen as a space, and each individual work can be a space for characters or the feelings and experiences embodied by people. Literature creates a space of possibilities, for example, for specific ideas to be discussed or specific people to be recognized. Likewise, as I have mentioned, this very dissertation also is a space.

The Spaces of Reception

In the course of looking at spaces of literature and of these authors, I became fascinated by book fairs as spaces of literary reception. I was able to attend book fairs in Spain, New York, Dominican Republic, and Cuba. Conferences are also spaces of literary reception. The historic 1994 conference mentioned previously produced the feeling that there simply was not enough space and time to give attention to all of the worthy Dominican writers and books. With packed, standing-room-only auditoriums, it also gave the impression of a large audience in the United States for Dominican literature. Thus the conference organizers created a space to affirm the importance and vibrancy of Dominican literature in the United States, as well as the vibrancy of its audience.¹⁰

¹⁰ Ironically, in the research I did, I also uncovered the idea that Dominicans often do not think of ourselves as a reading audience.

One result of my participation in the space of that 1994 conference was to take some pieces to other spaces (one way egun works academically). So two years later, in 1996, as a Dominican librarian, I was in a position to bring two Dominican authors from that conference in New York, to Austin, Texas, to the first conference of REFORMA: the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and The Spanish—Speaking. One writer was Marianela Medrano and the other Diógenes Abréu. (This was around the time that Junot Díaz published his first book, *Drown*.) Writing for *El Diario, La Prensa*, the largest Spanish language newspaper in New York City, Abréu commented on the marginalization he experienced at that Latino librarianship conference as he perused the literary offerings:

Es una lástima ver cómo en la referida conferencia de Texas todavía había personas queriendo continuar expresando la realidad latinoamericana sólo a través de las experiencias de los puertorriqueños y los chicanos.

Entre miles de títulos publicados y catalogados no aparecía uno sólo dedicado a la literatura dominicana, esto así aún cuando algunos libros eran "antologías latinoamericanas". No creo que tal exclusión se deba a que nuestra literatura es inferior a la de otros países.¹¹ (Abréu "Silvio Torres")

Having witnessed and participated in both of these literary spaces, I was struck by the contrast in the attention given to Dominican writing, writers, and books between the two venues. Looking back and reflecting on these spaces, different feelings reemerge, and yet commonalities also resurface. They were both very vibrant and exciting events. But the 1994 Dominican literature conference, by definition, did not marginalize Dominican writing or Dominican authors for being Dominican. It seemed that many people sharing that space were enthralled by these writers, hanging on their every word. Some of the words echoed in the auditorium and are probably carried to whatever spaces and places the listeners now inhabit. To this day I remember,

¹¹ It's a shame to see how in this aforementioned conference in Texas there were still persons wanting to express the Latin American reality only through the experiences of Puerto Ricans and Chicanos. Within the thousands of published and catalogued titles there wasn't a single one dedicated to Dominican literature, even when some of the books were "Latin American anthologies." I do not believe that such and exclusion is due to our literature being inferior to the literature of other countries.

for example, lines from Abréu's poems "y estos apartamentos que ni apartamentos¹²" and "Este tren no para en Dyckman,¹³" words that contained pieces of my own experience and spaces of life in the USA, particularly in New York (apartments, trains, street names from Dutch to English yet said in Spanish, and thus becoming Spanish words). In 1994, in my 30 years of being Dominican York, I had not experienced that. There is no way that I can reproduce here the full import of Abréu reading these words himself, with a Dominican accent, in the academic space of CUNY. I can only report here the memory of the feeling, of the chill that ran through my body as a Dominican American reader and listener of these words. It's likely I shed a tear or two in those moments as I had never ever experienced that before — never experienced hearing my Dominican American life echoed in literature in such a way.

Like the Dominican diaspora literature conference, the 1996 conference of librarians serving Latinos had a lot of novelty — the first of its kind. It was also something I had not experienced before, and that probably elicited tears as well. For all of us Latina and Latino librarians present (as well as many non-Latino librarians and non-librarians), the event and spaces were also viscerally impressive. It was at that conference that the Pura Belpé award for Latino children's books was inaugurated (Ríos Balderrama xv) in order to "honor Latino authors and illustrators and ultimately affirm the diverse experiences of Latino children" (Ríos Balderrama xiv); the award went on to become a major children's book award co-sponsored by the American Library Association, alongside the Caldecott, Newbery and Coretta Scott King awards. The librarians at the REFORMA conference were gushing, happy, dancing and hugging each other. At long last we'd reached this milestone of having our own conference and honoring our own authors. And yet, a significant part of the Latino experience, specifically Dominican, was still missing, as Abréu so strongly noted.

¹² "and these apartments that are not even apartments"

¹³ "This train does not stop at Dyckman"

Years later, in 2013, New York City was the site of the 1st Biennial U.S. Latina/o Literary Theory and Criticism Conference, titled *Haciendo Caminos: Mapping the Futures of U.S. Latina/o*. At that conference, literary critic Sobeira Latorre, spoke about how Dominican American Literature has been marginalized in her unpublished paper, “(Re)Defining the Margins of Dominican American Literature.” By this time, two Dominican writers, first Julia Alvarez, then Junot Díaz, had made inroads into American literature that had not been present when Cocco de Phillipis spoke nineteen years earlier. But Latorre had found that the changes were not very deep. She commented on how at the 2013 conference, papers about Junot Díaz dominated the panel offerings, as 10 years earlier, in 2003 at other conferences, papers about another Dominican writer, Julia Alvarez, had been dominant. But Latorre pointed out that there are *many* other Dominican writers in the USA who get no or very little mention at these conferences. She focused her observations by looking at two Dominican women writers in particular: Marianela Medrano and Ana-Maurine Lara, both of whom are included in this study.

Transnationalism as the Space of Dominicans and Dominican-USA Literature

The frameworks in which Dominican women and Dominican writers have been looked at in academia frequently focus on issues of transnationalism and migration. In this vein, Emilia María Durán-Almarza analyzes the works of Dominican performers in terms of the diasporic experiences in the works and lives of the authors, with particular reference to New York City and Dominican Republic. Durán-Almarza states that “Dominicanyorks have been challenging the illusion of homogeneity in the definition of Americanness for decades, creating transnational social networks that transcend traditional national and ethnographic boundaries” (139). Transnationalism has been a concept from which to understand the Latino experience in the United States, and indeed the experience of much of the contemporary world itself, as Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick and J. T. Way suggest in their *American Quarterly* article, “Transnationalism: A Category of Analysis.” (2008) Studies from various disciplines have viewed Dominicans as a quintessential transnational community, at times highlighting not just the change

from Dominican Republic to United States but also from rural DR to urban northeast USA (Guarnizo 1994 & 1998; Duany 1994; Gutiérrez 2004; Hutchinson 2008; Itzigsohn 1999; Levitt 2001; Mitchell 2004; Stevens 2010; Torres-Saillant 2000; Upegui-Hernández 2010; Weyland 1999). For example, there is the 1974 book *The Dominican Diaspora: from the Dominican Republic to New York City—Villagers in Transition*, by Glenn L Hendricks and, the 2001 book *The Transnational Villagers* by Peggy Levitt, and many articles and other books in between and after. Of course Dominicans are not unique just by being transnational; studies of Dominican transnationalism often are combined with other Latino groups, such as in Upegui-Hernandez’s exploration of the transnational social lives of Dominican and Colombian children (2010).¹⁴

Recently also, scholars have begun to look at ways that even transnationalism is a limited concept. For example, Ana Aparicio has examined how Dominican activists in New York City “established and utilized numerous networks that extend beyond local and transnational Dominican circles; these networks include African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and progressive whites. While they use these networks, they also help to transform them.” (Aparicio 253) Aparicio asks, “...could we not theorize on how people are simultaneously becoming transnational, global, and local — or “transglocal” — in a globalized world?” (253) This dissertation will provide one possible answer to Aparicio’s question.

Literary studies have also picked up on the idea of place and displacement of Dominicans. For example, one literary study that takes as its focus the geographical context and content of Dominican American writing is Kelli Lyon Johnson’s book-length study, *Julia Alvarez: Writing a New Place on the Map*. The idea of geography has even made it into the title of a novel by a Dominican American: *Geographies of Home* by Loida Maritza Pérez (1999).

As a result of our massive migration, Dominicans have also become synonymous with particular places in certain areas of the United States — Lawrence, Massachusetts, for example,

¹⁴ There have also been many studies done about Mexican transnationalism, such as Casillas’ recent study of Spanish language radio in US-Mexican communities (2010).

and of course, Washington Heights in New York, the iconic Dominican barrio in the USA. The Dominicaness of this neighborhood is evident in that there is even now a street in the Washington Heights area named after a Dominican patriot: Juan Pablo Duarte Blvd in Manhattan. Many in the Dominican and greater Latino community in New York have even come to call Washington Heights Quisqueya Heights, as Quisqueya is the word of indigenous origin that is commonly used by Spanish-speakers to refer to the Dominican Republic, and by some, to the entire island.¹⁵ Washington Heights is also the setting for various Dominican American novels, such as *Soledad* and *Let it Rain Coffee* by Angie Cruz.



Figure 6 Juan Pablo Duarte Blvd, New York. Google Maps, <http://maps.google.com>

Additionally to the questions of nation(s) as place, questions of space emerge from the context and content of these authors' writings. In this vein they and their writing can also be considered "trans-spatial," since they occupy and work within different kinds of spaces.

The Spaces of Creation

Where do writers — where do Dominican women writers — find the space to write and where do you find the space to read? In what place or places? Some of the answers that came up

¹⁵ The origin of this word is not clear and has also been in dispute. Many have claimed that it is one of three indigenous words used to refer to the entire island, the other two being Ayti (which later became Haiti) and Bohio (See for example Fombrun "Rename the Island"). Yet, Ginetta Canelario reports that various Dominican scholars have suggested that the name was in fact invented in the 16th century by a European cleric. (Candelario 281)

are spaces and some are places: tertulias, the homes of the writers, New York, Dominican Republic, New England, Washington, the New York subway, buses, commuter trains.

An important aspect of space in relation to a considerable part of Dominican literary production in the United States are the tertulias that take place¹⁶ in private homes and other informal locations. (Ventura; Cocco de Filipis 1997; Ruiz). The Dominican tertulias in North America and elsewhere, often occur far away from the gaze of the literary marketplace, and are spaces of production, reception and text. They are places where literature is *produced*, since they sometimes have the role of workshop, where a writer will get ideas about how to change or improve a text. They are also places where literature is *received*, since there is always an audience, which often consists of other writers, academics, and a variety of readers and listeners who might be invited. The tertulias are also places for the texts themselves to exist before and apart from their reception.

Tertulias happen in particular places and spaces. The tertulias that occurred in the home of Dr. Fillipis have been perceived and written about in terms of space — both at the international/geographic level as well as the domestic level. (Ruiz) Yrene Santos, Marianela Medrano, Anney Báez, Josefina Báez and Nelly Rosario were active, frequent members of this particular tertulia. In fact, Medrano recruited me to be a “founding” member of the group in 1993 and it was there where I personally met Santos for the first time.

Creating from and of Non-typical Dominican Places and Spaces

Some of these writers create from and about spaces that can be considered Dominican. On the other hand, although Washington Heights is closely associated with Dominican culture in the New York area, most of these writers do not reside there. For example, Medrano has resided in various towns in Connecticut, while Santos has resided in a neighborhood in Queens, New York that has more of a South Asian cultural identity rather than a Dominican or even Latino

¹⁶ Interesting to note another play on the word place. I almost changed the phrase “take place” to the word “occur,” but decided to leave it and just make note of its presence.

identity. In Medrano's case, this is an intentional living situation. In an interview I conducted with her, Medrano explained that it's not that she wishes to be far away from a Dominican community, but rather that she does not find fulfillment away from nature and feels she cannot thrive in an urban environment. Medrano questions the extent to which to be Dominican-American has been defined in exclusively urban terms. (Medrano Personal interview)

Places and Spaces within Creation

Place and space are also very fruitful concepts for looking at what happens *within* these author's works, within the pages, within creation. What spaces and places are evoked? What are the places and spaces where the characters live? What is the role of place and space?

Other Aspects of Space and Literary Creation

Many other aspects of space and place and kinds of spaces show up in this dissertation. Because these writers are active right now, online spaces provide a lot of insight and context. This includes blogs, Facebook, YouTube and websites. Language as it relates to both space and place is a huge issue. For example, one way Dominican identity can be discerned is as a way of speaking and writing and reading Spanish; Josefina Báez works a lot with this concept, particularly in the book and performance piece *Dominicanish*. Yrene Santos embodies and expresses the place that is El Cibao (a region in the Dominican Republic) with the way she reads her poetry.

Related to space and language is the question of gender and space and language. Who gets to speak and in what spaces — literally: who talks? The tertulias at the home of Dr. Cocco de Filippis came out of the need to combat sexism within Dominican literary spaces in New York. I remember the intense conversations and intense feelings that led up to the creation of that particular tertulia in the early 1990s Outside of these tertulias, when thinking of space and language, one thing that immediately comes to mind is how men in the streets of Santo Domingo and New York frequently monopolize the physical space through language and the constant sexual catcalls and sexual and “romantic” utterances that they direct to women as they walk by. Although not unique to the Dominican Republic or Dominicans, this is a very Dominican

experience. As a Dominican woman who has walked both Dominican and New York streets, I have a very personal experience of this and many questions about this cultural practice. Why is it mostly only men who speak these things? Why must they do it so often? How are other women feeling or responding to it? What is the effect? Do women feel complimented? Assaulted? Censored? Objectified? Frustrated? Threatened? Controlled? And what does this have to do, if anything, with Dominican women writing? I won't attempt to answer the questions here, but will hopefully be able to revisit in the course of this project.

Mapping This Dissertation as Space

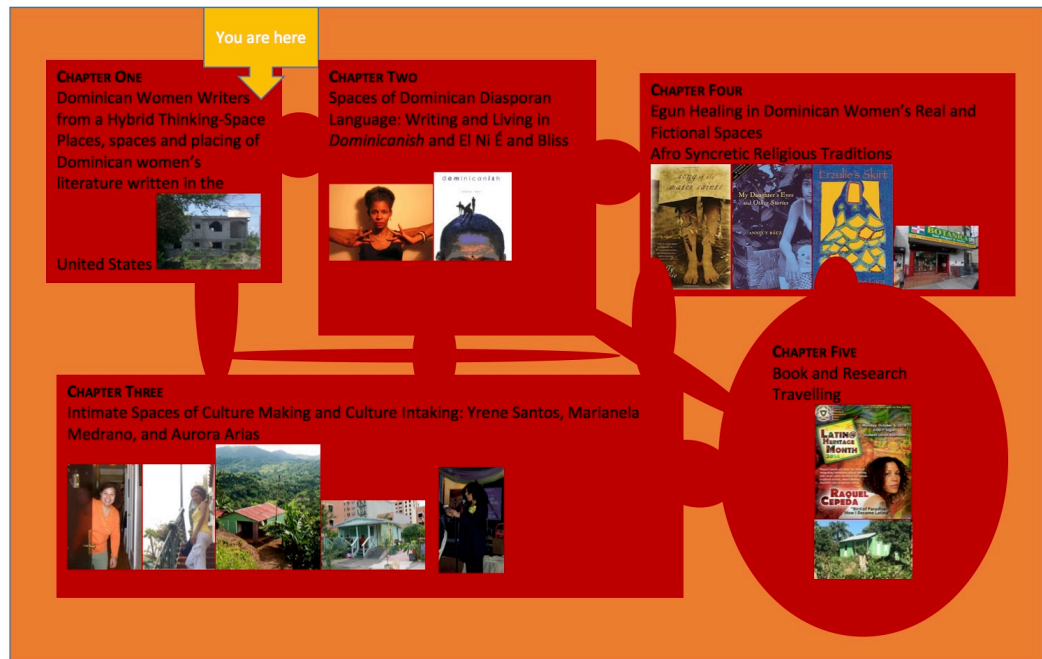


Figure 7 Dissertation map

This dissertation has a sequential arrangement, as in most dissertations, so it can be read from beginning to end. But unlike a narrative film that builds on previous scenes and dialogue, where coming in the middle might not make any sense at all, here you can skip over chapters and still get something out of it. In that vein, it might be helpful to think of this dissertation space like a museum in which you need not see every room to have a productive experience.

In the spaces of this dissertation, in spotlighting some of the marginalized Dominican women writers writing in the United States, I address the factors governing all the levels of marginalization alluded to by Latorre, Cocco de Filipis, Abréu and others: the marginalization of Dominican writers in the United States vis-a-vis Dominican writers in the Dominican Republic, the marginalization of Dominican writers within Spanish-language literature, the marginalization of Dominican writers and Spanish language literature within the United States, the marginalization of Dominican writers and Spanish language literature within the realm of the so-called “universal.” In addition, this study focuses on women writers who have been marginalized within the male-dominated Dominican literary scene, and within contemporary international literacy spaces more broadly.

Yet marginalization is a limiting concept for a study or for reading the works of these writers. This study intends to focus instead, on the strengths and challenges faced by the writers rather than on merely the negative position they often find themselves in. It will also draw attention to the wisdom they offer for all people. Marta Moreno Vega said: “We had an altar everyday, we spoke to spirit every day. My grandmother healed us everyday — not because of oppression but because she believed in the traditions of her parents, of her grandparents and those who came before here, and honored them.” (*Vega Flash of the Spirit*) Likewise, while this dissertation looks at how, in the words of one of my dissertation co-chairs, these Dominican women writers in the United States “create a space for themselves and their writing — how is that taking place,” it’s not just in relation to oppression. It also draws out the quiet but frequent instances in which these writers do travel the world and receive recognition in a variety of literary spaces and places.

The dissertation is organized first by presenting the context and background for the study, then looking at individual writers or groupings of writers as a way to flesh out the introductory concepts. This chapter, Chapter One, presents background to the issues and a history of both the Dominican community as well as Dominican literature in the United States via the spatial

concept of transnationalism; it also includes a discussion of auto-ethnography and Participatory Action Research within the context of methodologies in American Studies, Latino Studies and literary studies and hopefully it also has prepared you for my writing style. Chapter Two explores the work and working context of writer Josefina Báez. Báez is a good writer to start with because she takes up both the issues of Dominicaness as well as universality in her work; she also takes up the issue of language, setting the stage for the chapters that are organized around language use. Chapter Three focuses on writings in Spanish in the United States, while Chapter Four focuses on some writers who write in English. Chapter Three explores Marianela Medrano, Yrene Santos, and Aurora Arias in the context of poetry, genre, literary spaces, sex, social class and the tastes of American audiences. Contemporaries of Josefina Báez, Santos, Medrano, and Arias have produced and distributed their work in the Dominican Republic and the United States, as well as in other Latin American countries and Spain. Like Josefina Báez, and the community from which they come, they and their work are transnational. Much can be said about the crossing of nations in the production and reception of their work. Chapter Four explores Nelly Rosario, Ana Maurine Lara and Annecy Báez, within the context of Dominican writers who write and publish in English (such as Junot Díaz, Julia Alvarez, Rhina Espaillat, Loida Maritza Pérez, and Angie Cruz); that chapter will explore egun and healing in transnational, trans-generational Dominican women's spaces. In doing all this, I initiated a Participatory Action Research process, which I detail further in this chapter.

Part of what I explore in this dissertation is the extent to which Dominican women authors take the authority to speak on topics that have not traditionally been expected of them or "assigned" to them by the dominant literary marketplace, which is related to how they are placed in the spaces of contemporary literature in the USA and elsewhere. I also explore the extent to which these authors' authority *is* recognized; and the different spaces in which they are welcomed and to which they are invited. I take a transnational look at the spaces and flows of Dominican literary production and reception, including the flow between Dominican Republic and United

States, especially Santo Domingo and New York. I also examine places of book circulation, including Spain, other parts of Latin America, and other parts of the world, for example, New Zealand. In October 2011, I had the opportunity to do research at Liber-Spain, the leading exhibition devoted to Spanish language publishing and one of the largest international events for the publishing industry. In 2013 and 2014, I conducted similar research at the Dominican book fair, the Feria Internacional del Libro in Santo Domingo.

On Methodology

Mixed Methods

This study combines various methodologies. In addition to traditional literary analysis that looks at how themes play out in the works of these writers, I use interviews and show photographs of some of the spaces of production and reception. Some of the interviews were conducted entirely in Spanish. I include visual as well as textual materials.

Auto-Ethnography

My analysis uses elements of ethnography, and in particular auto-ethnography, as employed by scholars such as Brian Keith Alexander. Alexander researches issues of African American male teachers in the college classroom and brings elements of his autobiography into the analysis. I too bring in elements of autobiography into this analysis. Auto-ethnography has been described as “the defining of one’s subjective ethnicity as mediated through language, history and ethnographical analysis; in short... a kind of ‘figural anthropology of the self.’” (Lionnet qtd. in Alexander 309) It has also been described as part autobiography and part cultural ethnography. (Goodall qtd. in Alexander 309)

Participatory Action Research

I also use elements of Participatory Action Research, a methodology not often used in literary or American Studies, but used with some frequency in Latino Studies. PAR is a methodology elaborated and used extensively in Latin America, which has spread throughout the

world. Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals-Borda is credited as one of the early developers and proponents of PAR. (Mato 495) PAR seeks to articulate the production of knowledge with social change. Central to PAR philosophy— what Mato calls “a radicalization of earlier Freirean approaches” —is the belief that every person and community possesses self-knowledge that must be considered a key element in designing any research project and/or political work. According to the PAR approach, the articulation of expert and local knowledges results in a productive synergy. (Mato 495)

Fals-Borda characterized PAR as a Third World methodology. (Mato 496) So it is no wonder that PAR has been embraced in Latino Studies. The 2004 book, *Latino Social Policy: A Participatory Research Model*, exemplifies the Latinos Studies connection to PAR. In laying out this connection, editors Mora and Díaz highlight the following tenets: that the entire research process be participatory, including the identification of problems and needs to be studied and solved; participants in the process will collaborate with the professional researcher to select appropriate research methods, develop meaningful questions, collect the data and analyze and interpret the findings; in PAR the role of the researcher changes to that of facilitator. Such a process could involve, for example, community members co-designing questionnaires and collecting data door to door. (Mora and Díaz 5)

Research defined as participatory is conducted by, for or with the participation of community members and it should result in some form of policy or social change. Research that is conducted from this perspective values the knowledge implicit in community settings... It is research that studies problems identified by the community and not only from the vantage point of the researcher. In addition, it is research that is disseminated widely in the community, not solely for research publications, which are generally not accessed by non-practioners. Participatory research includes communities in significant aspects of research, from the planning stages to the dissemination and utilization of findings. (Mora and Díaz 7)

There are many different ways of undertaking a PAR approach, and ideally the research participants themselves would get to decide on that. But it is not a straightforward process. Smith, et al 1997 document the kinds of changes that researchers must be prepared to make in participatory projects. Additionally, other conditions, including institutional constrictions, can

become a barrier or at least a limiting factor. Fals-Borda pointed out, "the PAR methodology is not compatible with some academic constraints, such as the time pressures of writing a dissertation." (Mato 496) (Yikes!) Likewise, researchers have found it difficult to actually investigate with some groups that are considered "subaltern," often for logistical reasons. On the other hand, communities that are more powerful than the researcher may exercise that power by refusing to be participatory. In response to difficulties, many practitioners of PAR have either made modifications to the PAR ideals or have focused on a few tenets of PAR but set aside others. For example, a researcher or research team may involve a community in the formulation of research questions but not necessarily in conducting the research. Or vice versa, the community could be very involved in the gathering of data, in writing up the research and dissemination but not so much in the initial formulation, such as one research group reports: "We did not collaborate with the practitioners on the identification of the problem. We, the outsiders, identified a suspected problem area — and in that case set out the agenda for the research." (Bensimon et al. 109) Modifications can come about due to the very nature of the participatory process, which means that the researcher can lose too much control as changes to the research are made by the participants along the way.

One of the first challenges of PAR is how to define the community that is to participate. Sometimes it's not so obvious where to draw the line. The line may be drawn for logistical or strategic reasons as well as theoretical or geographic reasons. For example, in a study of minority student inequalities in higher education, a research team admits that PAR could have been applied by working directly

with students of color ... who were experiencing inequalities in educational outcomes. Instead, we worked with faculty, administrators and staff to conduct research on this problem... because we felt they were closer to and could have more direct effects on the decision-making systems of the institutions. (Bensimon 109)

Since this dissertation project was carried out for a degree in an American Studies program, let's look at how and if this methodology has been used within American Studies.

Although Participatory Action Research has been used frequently in Latin American and Latino studies and also in other "ethnic studies" as well as Women's Studies, it has not figured prominently in American Studies, if at all. A search on September 11, 2015, of articles from the journal of the American Studies Association, *American Quarterly* (in *JSTOR* and *Project Muse*), yielded only one marginal hit on the keywords "participatory action research" — an ad for a non-profit organization seeking book donations ("Front Matter") — and only one article on the related keywords "community based research." (Linkon) Nonetheless, there has been a related thread of research, debate and writing in *American Quarterly* on the social role of American Studies in U.S. society as well as on various collaborative projects between American Studies scholars and K-12 teachers and/or museum professionals. There has also been a focus on how to make American Studies a public intellectual enterprise. (Susman; Zaggarell, et al; Brommell; May)

The lack of PAR in American Studies is not surprising in that American Studies is firmly grounded in the humanities (even as it has repeatedly sought to be inter-disciplinary). The humanities as a whole has not embraced PAR, and it's a challenge to apply PAR to traditional humanities topics, which have been more text and object-based rather than human-based, despite the root word "human" in humanities. A search of indexes in September 2015 bore this out. In the *Arts and Humanities Citation Index*, only 33 articles appeared in a search of the words "participatory action research," whereas the *Social Sciences Citation Index* yielded 1,307 articles. Likewise the *MLA International Bibliography* yielded only 14, while *Sociological Abstracts* yielded 565.¹⁷ Note that Participatory Action Research had become big enough on an international scale that there was at one point an entire database dedicated to it — *PARnet* (www.parnet.org).¹⁸ Yet, in

¹⁷ This is an increase over the numbers I obtained the first time I tried this search, in July 2004. In the *Arts and Humanities Citation Index*, only six articles appeared in a search of the words Participatory Action Research, whereas the *Social Science Citation Index* yielded 258 articles. The *MLA International Bibliography* yielded 2, while *Sociological Abstracts* yielded 85.

¹⁸ Although this URL is no longer valid, it is validated by the Internet Archive Wayback Machine <http://www.archive.org/web/web.php> as having been active at least between 2003 and 2006.

2004, with 602 citations dealing with Participatory Action Research, very few, if any, of the entries in *PARnet* dealt with the humanities, literature, or American Studies per se, as evidenced by search results of zero on these keywords.¹⁹

Nevertheless, the concern in American Studies with making the field more relevant, more public, and more engaged with American society, makes PAR a natural methodology. Over the years, there have been many calls in *American Quarterly* for scholars to connect their work more directly with American publics. In 1995, Nicholas Bromell called for "more varied and consequential forms of professional engagement with groups and constituencies outside the profession" and for a lessening of the split between "thought and action" in American Studies. (Bromell 104-105) In 1996, Elaine Tyler May asserted in a speech to the American Studies Association that "publicly engaged scholarship is essential." (May 191) In 1998, Sandra Zagarell et al. called for more collaboration of university-based American Studies scholars with elementary and secondary teachers. (Zagarell 802) In 2008, Vicki Ruíz wrote that "American Studies Association members participate in myriad coalitions from K-16 partnerships to public history, art, and theater programs to nonprofit grassroots initiatives," and that "the key ingredients are respect and collaboration." (Ruíz 13) I hope to show that Participatory Action Research is an appropriate avenue for addressing American Studies' desire to be engaged, involved and relevant.

I want to suggest that specifically within literary studies, Participatory Action Research can be used to study writing, reading and literature at the level of cultural production, by involving writers and publishers, and at the level of cultural reception by involving writers, readers, librarians and publishers. It seems this hasn't really been done anywhere. In my literature search, I found no examples of PAR used with published writers, although there were a few examples of PAR projects with non-published writers (Evans; LeBlanc; Hurtig; Lau; Cho).

¹⁹ Because this website is no longer active, I was unable to reproduce this search today.

Focus on Action

An important aspect of PAR is action; it's the second word in the phrase. This was another reason that PAR was really valuable: it kept the idea of action and even activism ever present, not as something separate from research. In a forum published in the journal *American Quarterly* in 2012, Scott Lauria Morgenson wrote: "Yet any sense that the terms activism and academia posit an intelligible distinction implodes once Indigenous methodologies demand, in the first and last instance, decolonization." (Morgenson 808) Similarly, research on Dominican women writers, even the very act of doing research on them, let alone with them, constitutes activism and action. Throughout the years that I have worked on this project, I looked for moments where there might be action. PAR kept that motivation alive and justified the resulting actions as part of the research. I summarize these in the last part of each chapter.

Very Slowly Built

As in the introductory paragraphs to this chapter, throughout the dissertation, I use metaphors from my Dominican experience to explain or justify aspects of my method, my analysis, and my conclusions. One aspect of this dissertation is that it took a very long time to finish. Many times it sat there partially built, like the partially built houses that dot the landscape of the Dominican Republic itself, as well as the landscapes of other countries of the Caribbean and Latin America.²⁰ Often I would think of these images when reflecting on my dissertation, and for that reason wanted to share one here, since it is part of the spirit that made this research and writing happen and that validates my dissertation experience. I won't feel ashamed of my pace — it's somehow part of a bigger story of things that take a while and why they do:

²⁰ I noticed this in the state of Jalisco, Mexico and a friend confirmed that it was also common in Panamá.



Figure 8 Unfinished Dominican house, debris

I took the photo above during one of my research visits to the Feria Internacional del Libro in Santo Domingo. One day I was curious if there were others who'd noticed and written about this phenomenon of unfinished homes. I came across the photo below on the blog of a USA philanthropist who works with a non-profit in the Dominican Republic:



The street, many unfinished homes, they continue to build when money and dry climate converge

Figure 9 Dominican unfinished home (O'Reilly-Hyland "The Street.")

The caption reads: "they continue to build when money and dry climate converge." So too I built this dissertation when time and energy converged.

CHAPTER 2
SPACES OF DOMINICAN DIASPORAN LANGUAGE: WRITING AND LIVING IN
JOSEFINA BÁEZ'S *DOMINICANISH*, EL NI É AND BLISS



Figure 11. Facebook post.

The above post by Josefina Báez’s Facebook alter ego, Ay Ombe T, perfectly situates Báez in a conversation about space, place, and her writing —and about her. She is definitely a writer for whom place is not only important but also explicit. A poet and performance artist, Josefina Báez has authored several books, including: *Dominicanish: a Performance Text* (2000), *Comrade Bliss Ain’t Playing*. (2008), *Dramaturgia Ay Ombe I* (2011), , *Dramaturgia Ay Ombe II* (2011), *Levente no.Yolayorkdominicanyork* (2011)²¹ and *Como la una Como una* (2011 & 2014). This chapter will focus on three printed works: Báez’s central and most widely known book *Dominicanish*, which contains the text of a solo theatrical piece by the same name; her more recent *Levente no.Yolayorkdominicanyork*, which evolved from a blog titled *El Ni É* and quickly and progressively gained traction among critics and audiences (Mena; Uptown Collective; Rojas; García-Peña 2016); and *Comrade Bliss Ain’t Playing*. These three works exemplify Báez’s “particular-limited-

²¹ The book has been published via the print-on-demand service Blurb and also digitally via Amazon Kindle, which has different pagination, actually, no pagination, and slightly different text. Unless otherwise noted, citations from *Levente no. Yolayorkdominicanyork* will be from the print Blurb edition.

highly personal take” not only on Dominican popular culture, but on life itself and writing itself, a take that has proven to strike a chord with many different people in many different places and cultures.

Báez’s paisano, Junot Díaz gave this assessment of her work and its significance:

Josefina Báez has been breaking open hearts and re-ordering minds for more years than I care to count. She is one of North America’s finest artists and she is, without question, one of my favorite writers. She is a sword bathed in flame, she’s a marvel. *Levente no. Yolayorkdominicanyork* is her finest work yet. (Báez 2011 back cover)

Given Junot Díaz’s extreme popularity among readers and critics alike, this blurb really stands out. It reminds me of how I encountered Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*. It was not in academia, but in my public library work. The American Library Association distributed a bookmark with a list of books recommended by Sandra Cisneros and Anzaldúa’s book was one of them. There a few big names in Latina/o literature at the moment, with the short list including Junot Diaz, Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros and Esmeralda Santiago. There are of course many hundreds of worthy Latino authors who are under appreciated and under mentioned. It’s great when those who the literary spaces are so fixated on make space for other Latino authors.

Junot Díaz is actually a compelling author to compare and contrast with Josefina Báez. Both writers have highlighted Dominican blackness while critiquing racism both in the United States as well as in the Dominican Republic. Each finds affinities with African American culture and with the African American experience, both within their texts as well as within their lived experiences. However, unlike Junot Díaz, Josefina Báez has had to work outside of the mainstream American publishing industry, with limited access to its literary marketplaces and spaces. These two literary Dominican allies have had very different experiences in both the production and reception of their works. Junot Díaz published his early stories in prestigious and well-known publications such as *Story Magazine* and the *New Yorker*, and eventually his books were published by Riverhead, a division of Penguin Random House. By contrast, Báez, although arguably no less prolific nor talented, has mostly self-published her work.

On the other hand, the very economic and political context of her writing vis-à-vis her position as a Dominican woman and a woman of African descent, places Báez within the company of many *other* Dominican writers, of Dominican women writers in particular, and of women writers and playwrights of African descent. Through her specific style and philosophy, Josefina Báez puts forth an abundant, almost overwhelming field of “evidence” that elucidates a context that is as rich as the literature itself. Throughout the course of her career these past years and into this moment, she has offered to the cybersphere: blog posts, Facebook posts, photographs, online interviews, commentary —spanning now years— that illustrate what spaces she is referring to when she writes, “Where I was born...where I live..where I have been...where I imagine.”

A steady stream of academic critics have written about Báez’s work over the past few decades: Rivera-Servera 2000 & 2002, Mariñez 2002 & 2005, La Fountain-Stokes 2003, Irizarry 2006, García-Peña 2008 & 2016, Stevens 2010, Durán Almarza 2012 & 2013, Victoriano-Martínez 2014, Gonzenbach 2014. In the following discussion, I will in part amplify these critics’ insights. Even with all this literary criticism on her work, Josefina Baez is still not as well known as she should be in the fields of English or Spanish language literature, African American studies, Performance studies, Latinx studies, and Women’s studies. She is also not sufficiently well known by the readers and potential audiences that she could have all over the world — even as her work has traversed the world. I will also review insights and use methodologies that other critics have not done and draw on social media as well as my own auto-ethnography as it pertains to the themes in Baez's work. Although some critics have focused on the Dominican identity, Baez encourages many other readings.

Writing and Living in *Dominicanish*: The Body as Place and Space of Knowledge

Within and surrounding *Dominicanish* and *Levente No.* are conglomerations of factors and themes about Dominican and Dominican American or Dominican York²² identity and relationships with different spaces and places: language and translation, racial politics (including ideas of blackness and whiteness), economics, gender, transnationalism and migration. Of course, none of these factors are separate.

Two of the most discernible themes that Báez plays with in these works, especially in *Dominicanish*, are blackness as a translational category and transcultural encounters between various groups in New York City and beyond. I choose the term “translational category,” to indicate how in *Dominicanish*, blackness itself can be translated, blackness is a kind of *language* as well as a *homeland*, and to look at the degree to which blackness (needs or) does not need translation. In some ways blackness becomes a language that supersedes English and Spanish. At the same time, a crucial feature of Báez’s work, that pervades all her texts and performances, is her transcultural and multicultural vision, which extends beyond black, white or Dominican, even as it includes all of these identities. Báez’s cultural experience is multi-vocal, multi-locational, multi-chronological, multilingual and multicultural. She is a performer as well as a writer; she is a theorist of both writing and performance. Báez’s own black dancing body²³ is a site, a space of many knowledges. For example, Báez upsets expectations with her multicultural knowledge, which extends beyond the Latin@-black-white triangle, and beyond the Dominican-USA diasporic spaces. Specifically, in *Dominicanish*, Báez embodies knowledge of the Indian traditions of

²² According to the *Urban Dictionary*, A Dominican York is: “1. A Dominican immigrant living and working in New York City. 2. An American-born person of Dominican descent who was raised in NYC.”

²³ The term “black dancing body” was used by Anthea Kraut in her 1998 article "Reclaiming the Body: Representations of Black Dance in Three Plays by Zora Neale Hurston," and in the title of a book *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography From Coon to Cool* by Brenda Dixon Gottschild (2003).

Kuchipudi. Blackness does not function in isolation or merely as a counterpoint to whiteness; Dominican is not simply presented in contrast to (North) American.

In her works, Báez presents a lot of information but does not do the work of translating or making connections for the reader or audience. In this, she follows very much the paths laid out in *This Bridge Called My Back*. Cherrie Moraga wrote in the preface to the 1981 edition: “How can we — this time — not use our bodies to be thrown over a river of tormented history to bridge the gap?... I cannot continue to use my body to be walked over to make a connection.” (as cited in 2002 ed. page xlvi) Other writers in *This Bridge* also appear as intellectual spirit guides to Báez, including Audre Lorde, in her famous essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” Speaking to mostly white feminists, Lorde wrote: “Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and this time,” and she urged all women “to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears.” (*This Bridge* 109, 2002 ed.) Likewise, Báez demonstrates how our bodies themselves become places of knowledge and of difference.

Gloria Anzaldúa had also made references to her body as a space that holds and carries culture. In *Borderlands/La frontera*, she stated: “...yet in leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins because *lo mexicano* is in my system. I am a turtle, wherever I go, I carry ‘home’ on my back.” (1999 ed. 43) And in a key poem in that book:

To live in the Borderlands means you
are neither *hispana india negra española*
ni gabacha, eres mestizo, mulata, half-breed
caught in the crossfire between camps
while carrying all five races on your back
not knowing which side to turn to, run from
(1999 ed. p. 216)

For Anzaldúa and the writers of *This Bridge Called My Back*, the body is a space and a place like a country or a bridge. Language itself also is a space and is associated with space and place.

Anzaldúa writes “For some of us, language is a homeland.” (*Borderlands*, 77) Max Wolf Valerio

writes of Native American spaces and language in the same breath, as something yearned for that is a part of oneself:

... and I feel it's my yearning for the wide spaces — for the flat and nude plains. Yes, I've been denied. What a shame not to speak Blackfoot. It was my mother's first language — she'd talk it over the phone long distance — she'd speak it when she went home ... she even spoke it in my dreams but I never learned. All that talking denied me... (*This Bridge* 2002, 42)

Henri Lefebvre is considered one of the major theorists of space in academia. He asks about the relationship between space and language: "...does language — logically, epistemologically or genetically speaking — precede, accompany or follow social space?"

(Lefebvre, 16) But he seems quite confused about that relationship:

Perhaps what have to be uncovered are as-yet concealed relations between space and language: perhaps the 'logicalness' intrinsic to articulated language operated from the start as a spatiality capable of bringing order to the qualitative chaos (the practico-sensory realm) presented by the perception of things. (Lefebvre, 17)

To be honest, I can't say I fully know Lefebvre's confusion or his sense that the relations between space and language are concealed and uncovered; maybe these statements are not meant for me or the many on this planet who navigate multiple languages and spaces on a daily basis, for whom those relations are not so concealed. Gloria Anzaldúa and Max Wolf Valerio don't have this confusion. They write assertively and directly about that relationship. Anzaldúa is clear about how language is created in her specific spaces and why — also that it is not just about her, but also about "a people." Her words rather than Lefebvre's relate to this new language,

Dominicanish, that Josefina Báez documents in her written performance text:

For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castilian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? (*Borderlands* p. 77)

In *Dominicanish*, Dominicanish is a language formed in a particular space and place, while also being transnational — and so is blackness. Transnational blackness is intertwined with a historical world economic system, the same system that invented "blackness" and "whiteness" in the first place, that contributed to the very development of the Dominican Republic and the

United States as countries, and that fuels the migration of Dominicans to the United States to this day. (Callinicos 1993 as cited in McLaren and Torres 1999; Quijano 2000; Baron 2000; Portes 2000; McLaren 1998; Hernández 2002; García-Peña 2015) We can tease out some aspects of a historical transnational blackness and its relation to the politics and economics of cultural knowledge and production. And then there are the elements that somehow fall outside of this analysis, as Josefina Báez continuously takes herself and her audiences to “other places,” refusing to be pinned down by any one label, cultural location or theoretical construct. She also escapes easy definitions in her second book, *Comrade Bliss Ain't Playing* and in her third, *Levente no. Yolayorkdominicanyork*. She does this in her performances as well, which have taken place not only in the United States and Dominican Republic, but also in disparate parts of the world, such as New Zealand. How and why does Báez wind up in places like New Zealand? The answers may have something to do with the ethos and aesthetic of a woman who does not “stay in place” and is not easily “put in her place.”

There is a biographical and even ethnographic quality to *Dominicanish*.²⁴ The ethnographic is indicated by its very title, suggesting to the spectator and reader that one will be introduced to what it means to be of a certain culture in a certain place: Dominican in New York City. It is noteworthy that in her self-produced back cover, Báez claims for her text the first person plural — “a nonlinear expression of our nonlinear life” — while in her English preface, she highlights the first person singular with her “acute awareness of the ordinary/ from my gladly, not so unique life.” (6) Thus she moves between the singular and the plural, from the dramatic presentation of a life to the performance of a collective cultural experience, which is pretty

²⁴ According to the *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, “Traditionally, the term [ethnography] was used to label what anthropologists did when they did their research... By ‘anthropologist’ is meant here those anthropologists—sometimes called ‘ethnologists’—who work with living peoples to explore and document their culture. Their research involved long-term involvement in a community called ‘participant observation,’ discussions of topics of interest with community members called ‘informal interviews,’ and a record of the experience called ‘field notes.’ Ethnography also labeled the book-length report that an anthropologist wrote.” (Agar 4857)

common in Latin@ and African American theater and literary traditions. In theater and performance, for example, the theme of the individual black woman's life as emblematic of the community appears in Ntozake Shange's *Spell# 7* as well as in her more well known *For Colored Girls Who have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enough*. In *Spell #7*, the "Male Cast Members" say "aw babee/ I've never met anyone like you" to which the "Female Cast Members" respond, "that's strange/ there are millions of us!" In this way, the "Female Cast Members" insist that their lives are, like Báez's "not so unique." *For Colored Girls* developed, like *Dominicanish*, out of individual poems. The similarity in the style led reviewer Yuleyka Lantigua to categorize *Dominicanish* as a choreopoem, a term invented by Shange.

But whereas *For Colored Girls* was able to break out of a seeming individualism by employing various women in its cast, *Dominicanish* has not yet been able to do this, mostly on economic, not artistic grounds. Báez reported in an interview with me in 2005 that a group of women, who met in an international venue, had expressed interest in doing a group performance of the piece. Although she was excited about the prospect, it was never able to materialize on a stage because the money wasn't there. Báez insists that *Dominicanish* is not just about her, and it is not just about Dominicans or Dominican identity. I will show, via a discussion of how different non-Dominican audience members have responded to this work as well as how we can analyze those responses, that the message and experiences performed by and in *Dominicanish* can reach and have reached across many cultures. This is an important point of the performance and the book — but it is not the only point. In referring to her multicultural and transnational audiences, Báez says "Al fin y al cabo, tú haces tu propio Dominicanish. Haces tu propio "ish."²⁵ Artistically, it promises a lot for anyone or any group that would care to and have the commitment and resources to perform it. This will be included in one of the possible action items that could form

²⁵ Ultimately, you make your own *Dominicanish*. You make your own "ish".

the action part of this overall project in line with the attempt to do literary Participatory Action Research.

The way that Joni Jones describes performance ethnography in African American theater is helpful to an understanding of what Báez achieves in her work, specifically, to an appreciation of the cultural space inhabited by the body itself, “how culture is done in the body... If people are genuinely interested in understanding culture, they must put aspects of that culture on and into their bodies..., the aim of the work is to explore bodily knowing” (Jones 7). Think of an ethnographic theater, one that blurs the line between ethnography and theater. Theater by African American women has often emphasized how knowledge is practiced and exhibited in the body. For example, Anthea Kraut highlights Zora Neale Hurston’s use of dance: “Ultimately, this attention to dance in Hurston’s dramas serves to demonstrate the extent to which, through performance, Hurston sought to reclaim the black (dancing) body as a crucial site of knowledge, communication, and artistic expression” (Kraut 36). Likewise in *Dominicanish*, Báez emphasizes how culture, even language acquisition, is done in the body, as in the lines:

I thought I would never learn English
no way, I will not put my mouth like that
No way jamás ni never no way
Gosh to pronounce one little phrase one must
become another person with the mouth all
twisted Yo no voy a poner la boca así como
un guante (22)²⁶

Thus, in the same way that Hurston’s plays carefully detail the extent to which dancing is not a natural spontaneous act, but rather an activity and even way of being that is developed through study and practice, so does Báez slow down for her audience the ways that language acquisition happens through painstaking work and through a manipulation of one’s body and very being. It also suggests the ways in which learning English can be a scary undertaking.

²⁶ I’m not going to put my mouth like that like/ a glove.

Unlike traditional anthropological ethnography, this ethnographic theater does not *explain* culture to the audience, but rather *performs* it and *invents* it. It also is not geared primarily to a white audience that seeks to “know” another culture in order to somehow control it. *Dominicanish* makes references that it does not explain. *Dominicanish* presents a series of statements and gestures and also doesn't explain them. In this way, the audience and readers are able to learn about the culture(s) by participating directly in aspects of said culture(s), learn the language(s) by being immersed in the language(s). Junot Díaz once said that he refuses to take on the role of a “native informant” who explains Dominican cultural experience to white audiences (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 900). Specifically, with regard to the appearance of Spanish in his texts, he, like many other Latin@ writers, consciously does not set off the Spanish in italics nor does he provide translations for the Spanish phrases. This line of thinking and writing has a rich tradition within Latin@ literature, as summarized by Martín-Rodríguez (1993 & 2003) and as epitomized and theorized in Gloria Anzaldúa's foundational *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Báez most definitely follows this tradition and acknowledges its influence, as opposed to the “post-modern” label through which some critics and audiences have viewed her. In our 2005 interview, she stated, “Gloria Anzaldúa es una maestra importante para mí.²⁷ I've had to tell people, do not just Foucault or Derrida my work. Go to la Gloria for theory. She's much closer to me.” In the preface to the 1987 edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa wrote:

Presently, this infant language, this bastard language, Chicano Spanish, is not approved by any society. But we Chicanos no longer feel that we need to beg entrance, that we need always to make the first overture — to translate to Anglos, Mexicans and Latinos, apology blurting out of our mouths with every step. Today we ask to be met halfway. This book is our invitation to you — from the new *mestizas*. (np)

In *Dominicanish*, both in the theatrical production and in the book, the intermixing of English and Spanish and the refusal to translate for the white English speaking audience is taken to a further extreme than even in Díaz or Anzaldúa's works. In the book version, she masterfully

²⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa is an important teacher for me.

upsets the very expectation of translation, by providing English and Spanish language prefaces that *appear* to be translations of each other, being of similar length, presented side by side, and written by the same people, but which are completely different texts! In an interview, Báez admits doing this purposely, and needed to cajole the (bilingual) preface writers into doing such an unorthodox and unusual thing. In this sense, she privileges the bilingual English-Spanish audience and bilingual English-Spanish reader, who is rewarded for knowing both languages and is thus in on the joke.

As a text, *Dominicanish* introduces the question of language in its very title and never lets up from there. Báez in her playful style brings in the issue of the specificity of Dominican culture and Dominican language. She suggests that it is not enough to speak of English or of Spanish or even of Spanglish, but that it is important to look at the specificities of the languages in particular contexts and space and places, such as in the Dominican Republic or New York context for Spanish, or the use of Black American English in the USA. In *Dominicanish*, blackness makes English come alive. It makes English relevant and compelling for the protagonist. Likewise, the Dominicanness of the Spanish makes that more relevant to both Dominicans as well as any reader or audience member familiar with Dominican culture. Báez suggests that there is a uniqueness in Dominican language, implying that it is a language all its own. The readers or audience are drawn into a context where Dominicanness has come into contact with English to form something new: a new language. Over the course of Latin@ Studies, writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Juan Flores have addressed how the intermingling of English and Spanish in the United States results in something completely new, that is neither one nor the other. Flores and Yúdice point out, with the use of the term “trans-creation,” that for Latin@s, the flow between English and Spanish is not a process of translation or preservation, but of constant re-creation. Trans-creation has been used in various ways. It can mean creating a new language via translation, or it can mean re-creating the original message so that the language that it is translated into need not change. The advertising industry uses the term trans-creation to describe

how they often avoid literal translations in favor of creating original scripts and images that make sense to Spanish language audiences and markets (Flores and Yúdice 213). Báez adds to this conversation and USA Latin@ tradition by detailing the way in which a specific, Dominican version of Spanish intermingles with English.

Dominicanish suggests the power that English has, even in the country of origin, even in just one word. In her books, Báez privileges the bilingual Spanish-English reader and makes a playful commentary on language and translation in the process, suggesting that it is not always possible or preferable to translate. There are occasions in her work where Báez seems to specifically privilege the English and Dominican-speaking bilingual person. This play on words is not translated nor is it translatable. It is only possible for an audience that understands Dominican use of English as well as Dominican use of Spanish. By doing so, Báez shows the utmost respect for and engagement with the Dominican-American audience member. In some ways what is at stake is the very dignity of this particular audience member and of Dominican culture. It is a risky move in that with such specific word play there is always the danger of losing those in the audience who do not share this cultural background.

Báez's Spanish language references and interlingual punning are sometimes very specific to Dominican experience. One of these references appears in the piece's "Isley Brothers" sequence, in the lines "gu nai naigu." (28) The word play here is rather complex. The first phrase, "gu nai", is an example of Báez's many intentional misspellings in the written version of *Dominicanish*, which perform what the voice would ordinarily perform on the stage but which also perform something that the staged version might not: how do these words "look" in the mind of this Dominican English-language learner? Gu nai reads as a Spanish speaker's phonetic transcription of "good night." In the same way that "Every sin"(21) is a transcription of "every thing," "sursdei" (21) a transcription of "Thursday" and so on. The word "naigu" is an inversion of "gu nai" but is also a Dominican way of saying the Spanish word "nalgudo" which means he who has a big butt. Even as Spanish is marginalized within the United States and in international

venues, Dominican Spanish is further marginalized in the Spanish speaking world, in much the same way that black English is marginalized in the English speaking world. For this reason, it is very likely that even a Spanish speaker may not fully get the joke. With the use of this one pun, Báez inverts the language politics that stigmatizes Dominican colloquialisms and would put Dominican speakers at the bottom of a hierarchy of Spanish language speakers. It turns out to be a very economical way to perform language politics. In just three words! Another place where Dominican knowledge gives the bilingual reader/audience rewards is in the lines “morisoñando con minute maid,/ to die dreaming as a maid in a minute” (31). Morirsoñando is a Dominican drink made from orange juice and milk; the word is a compound of the words “to die’ and “dreaming.” A third example of Dominican language play is in the use of the “chi” language, a “play language” like pig latin practiced extensively by Dominicans and Dominican Yorks. The line “chi tu chi sa chi be chi mu chi cho ” (35) thus translates as “you know a lot.”

Báez also makes an original line of language commentary about the versions of English that an immigrant to the United States would want to learn and be exposed to, and the racial implications of those choices. There is a sequence in which the performer pays homage to the African American singing group the Isley Brothers, claiming that they were her teachers, that they taught her English, that that was the English she wanted to learn: Black English, not just the “White English” that she was being fed in ESL (English as a Second Language) classes. Thus Báez achieves what she calls “language acquisition with soul.” (*Dominicanish* back cover) As García-Peña indicates (2015), blackness does not “translate” from English to Spanish into a one-to-one correspondence, in particular as it relates to how this word and concepts concepts about it function in the United States and in the Dominican Republic. Yet, for the protagonist of *Dominicanish* in this instance, blackness is a language that does not need translation, that speaks directly and is immediately understood.

For the non-Dominican or the non-Spanish speaking audience members, Báez offers a way to experience part of the culture of Dominican Yorks, not by her acting it out, but by having

that audience experience what it's like to not understand everything, to not have everything explained to them, and to not have the upper hand when it comes to the cultural knowledge needed to get the joke. Very much in tune with Joni Jones' paradigm, this is an experience that is often felt and exhibited *in the body* of the audience member. Báez remembers one woman in an audience in New Zealand, who kept physically squirming throughout the performance. During the dialogue that followed, she told Báez that as a white woman in New Zealand, it was the first time she ever felt like an immigrant or minority, out of place, that the constant switching of languages was disorienting to her. To this statement Báez replied that she has felt this way all her life. (2005 interview)

Some of her non-Spanish speaking reviewers seem to have missed this point, however.

This reviewer for the theater trade magazine *Backstage* wrote:

... Baez [sic] confounds her own wisdom and offers a work so rich in visual (and aural) distractions that we are too aesthetically bewitched to contemplate meaning. While we hear references to Billie Holiday, New York City zip codes, "brutality in blue," and Soul Train, and realize the piece is inspired by a Dominican woman's encounters with American culture, we prefer to look and listen, rather than think and feel... As she speaks in Dominicanish—her self-coined language of English, Spanish, and nonsense words and syllables blended into rhythmic poetry—she underlines her text with gestures, steps, and stances derived from Indian dance. ... Baez presents her thoughts in a rapid, piecemeal fashion that inhibits analytic reflection, and maintains a sour attitude that grows tiresome and elicits little empathy. (Sagolla)

Although I did not see this particular performance of *Dominicanish*, the performances I did see (a DVD recording and a performance in the Bronx) and the book version do not corroborate the experience of this reviewer, making me suspicious and resentful of the royal 'we' she chooses to use in her review, which has a different effect from Báez's own use of the first person plural. In the short space of two paragraphs, this reviewer refers to incomprehensibility repeatedly as a flaw in the piece and not as a flaw in herself as the listener/viewer, nor as a conscious part of the piece's aesthetic and socio-political message. Indeed, the reviewer refers to "nonsense" words twice, claiming that oftentimes Báez's words "make no sense." I personally found not a single case of a nonsense word in the whole piece! So again, I'm suspicious. My suspicion is informed by my

experience as an audience member and by a review of the texts, and also to some extent by seeing the reactions of other reviewers who are of different cultural backgrounds from me whose response nevertheless is more akin to mine.

My suspicion of critics like Sagolla extends to non-Latinx critics of Latinx performances in general. If a critic like Sagolla can get *Dominicanish* so wrong, what about critics of other Latinx performances? It's important for us to note responses like Sagolla's so that we can all remember to be critical of the critics. I suppose that Shakespeare would appear to be nonsense to someone who does not understand the language of the English Renaissance. This treatment is similar to the historical turns that the phrase "Mumbo Jumbo" has taken in the English language, whose origins are of an African deity, but which has come to mean utter nonsense.²⁸ The reviewer also takes on an exoticized view of *Dominicanish*, evidenced in her declarations that "we are too aesthetically bewitched," that "we prefer to look and listen, rather than think and feel" and that Báez is "deliciously gratifying to see and hear" while she "elicits little empathy." Coming as it did in a major English language mainstream theater publication, this review may have had dire economic consequences for the performance future of *Dominicanish* within New York City theater venues as well as spaces outside of New York. By contrast, Báez's reception in Spanish language newspapers published in the United States and the Dominican Republic, as well as in newspapers in other international venues, have been much more positive. (See Connor; Johnston n.d.; Lantigua; Maríñez 2001 and 2002; O'Brian; Rivera-Servera 2001 and 2002) The experience of economic vulnerability vis-à-vis mainstream theater critics again puts Báez in the company of African American playwrights. (Elam and Krasner 331-334)

Báez's use of language falls firmly within Latin@ literary tradition. Anyone familiar with Latin@ literature in the United States would know that this mixture of languages, this Spanglish

²⁸ The history of Mumbo Jumbo is actually complicated in that, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it seems to have been a god invoked by men to scare women. However, its contemporary usage is more aligned with racism than feminism.

or code-switching, is not entirely new or out of context with other Latin@ experiences. Báez joins a long list of poets and performers who have been code-switching in New York and other parts of the United States for many years (Flores and Yúdice), as indicated very eloquently and poetically as far back as 1975 by Algarín and Piñero, who highlighted a relationship between the spaces Latinos inhabit and our language:

The experience of Puerto Ricans on the streets of New York has caused a new language to grow: Nuyorican. The Nuyoricans are a special experience in the immigration history of the city of New York. There is at the edge of every empire a linguistic explosion that results from the many multilingual tribes that collect around wealth and power. (Algarín and Piñero 15)

So even as Anzaldúa, in a book published in 1987 (*Borderlands*), theorized and validated the mixture of languages in a particular border space—the creation of a new language in a specific geographic space of Latino life—she wasn't the first to employ this method or point this out.

Of course the history of Spanglish in the United States goes back much further, as evidenced in writings such as the Spanish language newspaper series “Pochos y Pochismos,” which Salgado Álvarez published in 1928 and which circulated in the western part of the U.S. What is perhaps surprising is that some audiences, especially educated New York audiences, were still surprised and taken aback by this use of Spanish and English in Baez's work in the year 2000. (Sagolla) By that time, there was much published material as well as precedents for at least being aware that new languages were being formed in New York and other US Latino spaces. Of course, the spaces that these audiences and critics actually come from influence the way they experience the theatrical space. When the language that appears on the theater space reflects the intimate spaces that the audience members come from, including the most intimate — their own bodies — the theater creates a different experience, one infused with more knowledge. How different is Sagolla's reaction to Báez as opposed to Moraga's reaction to a performance by Ntosake Shange years earlier:

I went to a concert where Ntozake Shange was reading. There, everything exploded for me. She was speaking a language that I knew — in the deepest parts of me — and that I had ignored in my own feminist studies and even in my own writing. What Ntosake

caught in me is the realization that in my development as a poet, I have in many ways, denied the voice of my brown mother — the brown in me. I have acclimated to the sound of a white language, which, as my father represents it, does not speak to the emotions in my poems — emotions which stem from the love of my mother.

... for years I had disowned the language I knew best — ignored the words and rhythms that were the closest to me. The sounds of my mother and aunts gossiping — half in English half in Spanish — while drinking cerveza in the kitchen. (Moraga, *La Güera*, 29 in 2002 ed.

Questioning Ideas About Author-ity: Báez's Black Dancing Body as Site and Space of Many Knowledges and Many Places.

Josefina Báez has not limited herself to that which is “Dominican,” nor is her work limited to *Dominicanish*. Her more recent printed works, comrade *Bliss Ain't Playing* and *Levente no.Yolayorkdominicanyork* demonstrate cultural, linguistic and artistic versatility. Báez takes the authority to speak on topics that have not traditionally been expected of Dominican women or “assigned” to them by the dominant literary marketplace. But we should ask to what extent is her authority recognized. And yet, even as Báez does not limit herself to that which is Dominican does not mean that that which is Dominican is limited or of lesser value than other cultures or languages in her writing.

To live in the Borderlands means to
Put *chile* in the borscht,
Eat whole wheat *tortillas*
Speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent;
(Borderlands 216)

As with Anzaldúa, Báez's experience of culture is not straightforward, not linear, as her text repeatedly insists; but it is also not binary, not just a simple dialectic between English and Spanish, between Dominican Republic and United States. In this sense, even Anzaldúa's borderlands theories are not sufficient. Báez's cultural experience is multi-vocal, multi-locational, multi-chronological, multilingual and multicultural. Báez's black dancing body is a site of **many** knowledges and holds and exudes knowledge of many places. Like Shange, she demonstrates black women's global knowledge as well as its invisibility in United States and international white-

dominated and dominant discourse. In her play *Spell #7*, Shange's character Lily complains that in international arenas, she is not expected to know other languages, specifically Portuguese, if she is a black woman from the United States. (Shange 32) Likewise Báez reports that in many international theater conferences and venues, she is the only black woman attending, and that she is often 'disqualified' based on her looks and her attitude and behavior. There is a sense in which a playwright and performer in the contemporary art world has to play the part of one even when not performing. She is asked,

Where are you from? Oh how come you do this technique? Muchas veces soy la única negra. Así te descalifican antes de ver el trabajo. Me río mucho. La gente cree que la seriedad está en la carota. Una cosa no tiene que ver con la otra. Cuando la gente ve el trabajo²⁹ people really change because it upsets their expectations of me. Muchos se visten de cierta forma para parecer que son artistas. Pero eso afecta. Crea una distancia que corta las posibilidades de diálogo.³⁰ At least my work can open a dialogue.

Báez upsets expectations with her multicultural knowledge, which goes beyond even the Latin@-black-white triangle. In *Dominicanish*, Báez embodies knowledge of the Indian traditions of Kuchipudi, a dance from from a place that may seem far far away, with a history many times older than the now venerated European dance form of ballet, but which does not get the same economic nor political rewards as ballet. (Uyehara) Her use of Kuchipudi does many things and represents many things. It allows her to dance "the politics of affinity"³¹ with a non-Dominican place, although as García-Peña points out, the culture of India is part of Caribbean culture. In her review for *Listin Diario*, the best known newspaper of the Dominican Republic, Sophie Maríñez wrote that the "reference to something so different as India is symbolic of the inclusive and heterogeneous character of Dominicaness." [translation mine] This suggests that hospitality to difference is part of Dominicaness for this reviewer, that Dominicans are "at home" in difference,

²⁹ Many times I am the only black woman. And in this way they disqualify you before even seeing your work. I laugh a lot. People think that seriousness is in a long face. One thing has nothing to do with the other. When people see my work,

³⁰ Many of them dress a certain way to look like they are artists. But that has an effect. It creates a distance that limits the possibilities of dialogue.

³¹ To use a phrase by Ramón Rivera-Servera.

and welcome it, and that engaging in something not Dominican makes the piece more Dominican. This assertion and view are arguable or at least complicated, given the Dominican-Haitian binary that operates in the country (see Abréu 2004) — a discussion that is beyond the scope of this analysis. Suffice it for now to note that the view of “difference” and of “the other” is itself quite different for a Dominican audience as opposed to a traditional white North American or European audience.

Rivera-Servera sees Kuchipudi in *Dominicanish* as performing a politics of affinity, while simultaneously, on the stage, it produces a distancing effect. He offers an excellent extended discussion of Kuchipudi and summarizes its other functions in regard to space, gender and culture:

Kuchipudi offers a series of elementary parallels to Baez’s project: focusing on divinity, positioning the traveler-performer in a collaborative relationship to the community, and presenting a history of intervention by women in a space traditionally reserved for men. (154)

... her adoption of Kuchipudi as a movement base for a performance about Dominican identity is a signal of how she makes a space for innovation in a tradition of theater about the Dominican experience that has largely remained restricted to the conventions of realist drama. (155)

But Rivera-Servera acknowledges that this effect is not immediate and that Kuchipudi on the stage may initially be a distancing technique. Its many meanings are not transparent to the typical spectator, including the otherwise privileged Dominican York audience member, who is assumed not to have knowledge of Kuchipudi. In this way, “Báez performs a feminist politics of the body, demonstrating dance’s capacity to produce meaning critically.” (Rivera-Servera 155) Of course, for one who is Indian and/or familiar with Kuchipudi, its insertion in this text and performance will have an altogether different effect. Such an audience member may experience a coming together as opposed to a distancing, or may become further distanced by seeing this dance form which is familiar to her or him, danced by someone who is not “supposed to” do that type of dance. Such a spectator may be honored by Báez’s use of Kuchipudi or may become hypercritical of how she is dancing it. It’s a brave and risky move on Báez’s part.

Another way to read the Kuchipudi in *Dominicanish* is as a manifestation of the speaker's "ajentaismo." This is a word I made up from the Dominican adjective *ajentá* or *ajentao*. In the pre-preface to the book version of *Dominicanish*, titled "Origen," Báez mentions that as a three year old in the Dominican Republic, she surprised people by speaking an English word: "American Bel," which demonstrated how "ajentá" she was. (5) *Ajentá* (and *ajentao*) is a word used to describe a person who is assertive or does things in an assertive manner or who boldly puts herself in situations where she is not expected to be, perhaps even presumptuously. The word covers both Báez's approach to learning English as well as her approach to Kuchipudi — to dare to speak a language that she is not expected to know, even as she may not fully know what she is saying, to go to a place where she is assumed to not belong, to represent a place where she is assumed to not be from. The word *ajentá* suggests riskiness — and in performing Kuchipudi as in speaking English, Báez takes all sorts of risks. The risk that she will get it wrong, the risk that she will lose her audience, the risk that she will offend. She may be seen as appropriating that which is not "hers." To this, Rivera-Servera points out that here is "a significant difference in approach from the more problematic Eurocentric appropriations of culture by American and Europeans practitioners." (Rivera-Servera 2002, 155)



Figure 12 Josefina Báez in *Dominicanish* performance
(photo credit: L. Sanchez/Ay Ombe Theatre)



Figure 13 Kuchipudi dancers in traditional costumes (Dalbéra 2008)



Figure 14 Male Kuchipudi dancer (Rajesh 2016)



Figure 15 Kuchipudi dancer in traditional costume (Kalakar 2015)

Critic Sagolla's response notwithstanding, Báez is careful not to exoticize or spectacularize Kuchipudi dance as well as not to exoticize or make a sexual spectacle of *herself* for economic purposes:

No estoy haciendo esto para nadie en particular. Pero trabajo para una audiencia inteligente.³² They know that I'm not stealing their money. Cuando piensan en una artista dominicana, todo el mundo se supone que vas a enseñar el culito, que vas a bailar merengue. Ese tema es tan importante.³³ It's all right to entertain, but that is not what I am trying to do. If I want to make money of course I know what to write (que mi marido me pega etc.). En los apart-arte,³⁴ I did one sketch in front of a mosquito net. I would ask, do you want me to entertain you? Then masturbate, I would tell them. (Báez interview 2005)

Dominicanish does work at the level of spectacle but not by performing the spectacle per se — as Báez's costuming and movements can be considered minimalist and abstract (she often performs in a simple black dress; see Figure 14)— but by *referencing and invocation* of spectacular performances. She does this with Kuchipudi, which is traditionally performed in elaborate costumes (See Figures 15, 16 and 17). In the text, she refers to loud colors associated with divinity, in the India sequence:

Forgotten deities
Looked at me recognized me
In the process they became
Turmeric yellow
I jet black
Home is where theatre is
Loud colors
On silent faces
Rude dances
On angel faces
Sounds dancing angels facing loud silent

³² I'm not doing this for anyone in particular. But I work for an intelligent audience.

³³ When they think of a Dominican performer, it's assumed that you are going to show your butt, that you will dance merengue. This topic is very important.

³⁴ That my lover/husband beats me, etc. In the Apart-arte,

Silence on color faces

take take take off every safety pin in your way

unleash this starched sari

let its prints and colors play

wild ragas

foreplaying to the juiciest kalankhan

foreplaying to the juiciest dulce de leche (35)

In Kuchipudi and aspects of Indian culture, she sees theater and in theater she sees home. Thus ragas, loud colors, rude dances the prints of an unleashed sari become home. Dulce de leche — expected in a Dominican home, is the equivalent of kalankhan, something not thought of as belonging to a Dominican woman's home.

Josefina Báez also invokes spectacle with the Isley brothers sequence, by referring and paying homage to the group's **visual appearance**, in particular to their 1970s funkadelic period that inspires the subject of *Dominicanish*, and very specifically with the 1974 album *Live it up*, that features the musicians in elaborate costumes. By speaking the name of the Isley Brothers within the context of their 1970s work, and by dancing using the vocabulary of Kuchipudi, Báez invokes images in those audience members who are familiar with these forms. And for those who are not — the unfamiliarity may lead to some research (as was my case). I was not at all familiar with the Kuchipudi tradition, as I researched it, I was struck by the spectacular aspect of it. Similarly, although I was familiar with the Isley Brothers in a generic sense because I have heard their music on the radio for years, by digging, I uncovered the spectacular album covers. Thus the minimalist performance invokes a rich iconography, that must be part of what is conveyed in theatrics.

For the Dominican audience member, such as myself, the possibilities are even richer. Because the Isley Brother's imagery invokes a further association with the imagery of Dominican merengue music bands, which overwhelmingly are composed of mostly male Black musicians who

are usually very dressed up and often are even related, like the Isley Brothers, as in the famous Hermanos Rosario. There is much in the imagery of the Isley brothers that parallels the imagery of merengue bands, and that would make a Dominican feel “at home” as opposed to experiencing an “exotic” spectacle (just as the speaker in the India sequence feels at home in the loud colors of Kuchipudi). Both of these visual-musical traditions presents a strong, positive, celebratory and sensual black male image. As with the Black “Budweiser guys” on a popular U.S. commercial, Black men engaging each other “at home” can become a public spectacle to white audiences and thus are read differently in different cultural communities. (Watts and Orbe 2002) Likewise, the Kuchipudi tradition presents Indian men — men of “color” — in a similar way, displaying their bodies and in colorful costumes with gilded adornments. Perhaps it is just as well that these are not represented *literally* by Báez on the stage because her multiracial audience, which so often included whites from the United States, Europe or even New Zealand, may misinterpret these displays of colored manhood as fetish, minstrelsy and colonial exoticism and totally miss the divinity and “at homeness” of the spectacle.

It is transatlantic blackness and hetero-eroticism that invites and allows this black female Latina subject to learn English — as indicated in Hermanos Isley/the Isley Brothers sequence. E. Patrick Johnson describes soul music as “one of the most powerful signifiers of blackness” which “culturally saturated” his and other African American’s children’s lives and which moved many of them to dance at an early age due to exposure rather than innate dancing ability. (Johnson 2003, 249) Likewise, Báez is also moved by soul musicians: “In an LP jacket I found my teachers/ Stitched suede bell bottoms on / opening displaying their horoscope signs” (26) Báez’s text and performance present the Isley brothers in multiple dimensions — flashy, yes, however, that flashiness is not ridiculed but rather celebrated and even revered by Báez as audience member, and as a woman. It’s a certain kind of feminism that allows and celebrates love of men and that associates what may seem mundane with spirituality and the divine — themes that will surface in her other works as well. She underlines the divinity in the text, as when she quotes the lines from

their songs “you are the heaven I need to see” (28) or refers to their lyrics and performance as a “prayer.” (32) In this sequence, Báez performs black heterosexual female reception of black male beauty. It is akin to the reception by Indians of the spectacular aspects of Kuchipudi: in India, “Kuchipudi has now gained immense popularity because of its lilting music and graceful and flowing movements and vibrant stage presentation.... Beautiful costumes, enchanting music and vivacious dance technique make this style a delight to watch.” (*History of Kuchipudi*) Flashy, yes, but also tender and knowledgeable — the Isley brothers are her “teachers” and speak to her in a way that her official ESL teachers cannot. This comes along with a positive valorization of her blackness informed by the language of the black arts and politics movement: “Discos del alma con afro. Con afro ³⁵black is/ beautiful. Black is a color. Black is my color./ **My cat is black.**” (26) The sentences are simply constructed, as in beginning ESL classes. But the speaker is not only learning the words, she is also learning a new way of looking at herself: as beautiful. Even an acknowledgment of one’s blackness (“black is my color”) is something that is not always possible in the Dominican Republic, as discussed in the scholarship on the Dominican Republic (Torres-Saillant 1999, García-Peña 2008, 2015, & 2016; Candelario; Stinchcomb). But she is not only learning English, she is learning Black English, and aligning herself personally and politically with African Americans. This is highlighted in the sentence that appears in bold in the text “My cat is black” which in a traditional ESL class may likely only be presented with one meaning, but in black English also has the meaning “my boyfriend is black.” In the performance of the Isley brothers’ sequence, Báez also learns and displays the language of African American dance and movement. Of course, we must remember that even such a concept as “Black English” and “Standard English” are to some degree arbitrary and contingent on the racial politics of the day, as performance scholar E. Patrick Johnson points out (Johnson 5). Báez is not suggesting that she can learn black English easier more easily because of an essential or biological blackness, nor that

³⁵ “Records of the soul with afro. With afro”...

the Isley Brothers' English is a stable language, but rather that given international racial politics around culture, it was morally, politically and spiritually easier for her to learn the English that she heard from the Isley brothers at the moment that she was both coming of age as a young woman and coming into English as an immigrant. Having lived a life where she is “disqualified” for her Black looks, she finds solace and identity in performers and English speakers who look like her and seem to be speaking *lovingly* to *her* as a black female. Thus blackness and the black diaspora are a language and a space to feel at home.



Figure 16 Isley Brothers *Live it up* album cover (Isley Brothers 1974)



Figure 17 Johnny Ventura album cover (Ventura 1979)



Figure 18 Los Hermanos Rosario, Dominican band 2002 (Dmitrieva 2002)

Black female playwrights such as Suzan-Lori Parks have also evoked the politics and aesthetics of language vis-à-vis blackness and of speaking “correct English.” In *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, some of Parks’ characters although officially considered “monolingual,” struggle with correct pronunciation and word usage (axe versus ask, lay down versus lie down). What they are struggling to learn is middle-class White English, which will lead to better economic opportunities. In choosing to align herself with Black English, one may say that Báez has chosen soul over money. Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes has pointed out the contrast between Báez’s approach to English and that of fellow Dominican immigrant writer “Julia Alvarez’s (nearly white) *García girls*, who, in fact, lost their accents on their way to becoming full Americans.” (La Fountain-Stokes 11). And it’s not just race that differentiates the main protagonist in *Dominicanish* from the protagonist in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*: social class and economic standing play an important role as well.

Political and Economic Context —and Affinities— in Production and Reception Spaces

Economics is an ever-present theme within the spaces of *Dominicanish* and within the spaces where it has been produced as well as received. It is part of a constant battle that Báez articulates frequently. In this August 16, 2011 Facebook post, via her artistic company Ay Ombe T(heatre), Josefina Báez, chides professors and teachers of her work:

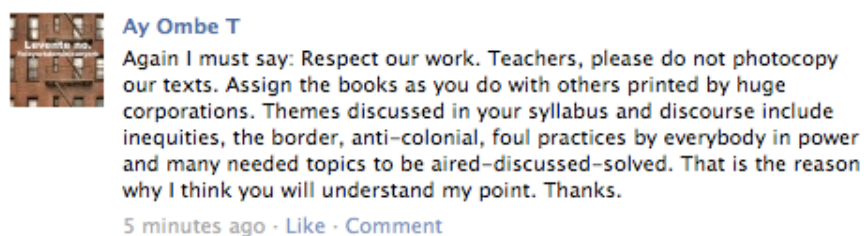


Figure 19 Josefina Báez 2011 Facebook post

Almost two years later (Mar. 2, 2013), she makes a similar statement:



Figure 20 Josefina Báez 2013 Facebook post

That same day, she also posted:

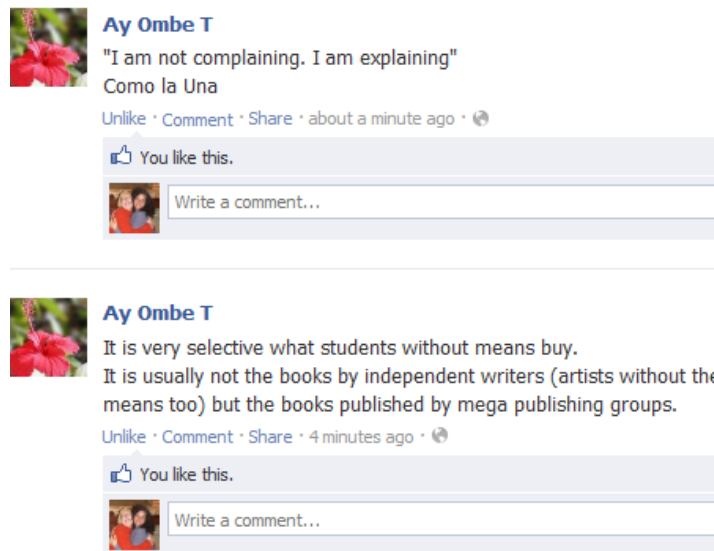


Figure 21 Josefina Báez 2013 Facebook posts

Thus Báez continues the struggle in 2011 and 2013 that has gone on for a very long time, and that is in many ways not unique to Dominican performance and writers, as Diana Taylor suggests in her work on Latin American theater:

Nuestros dramaturgos y públicos, en su mayoría, tienen poco contacto directo entre sí— en México, no se conocen las obras argentinas o chicanas. En Guatemala no se pueden comprar ni las mismas obras guatemaltecas. Pero siempre se encuentran las obras de Ibsen o Shakespeare o Sófocles. Nuestros productos teatrales, marginales y minoritarios en relación a la metrópolis, son considerados "menores" y "poco originales" en comparación con las obras maestras dominantes que son elogiadas por su originalidad y valor universal.³⁶ (Taylor 50-51)

Economics also played an important role in the development of *Dominicanish* and in its production history and in the use of spaces for the productions. In regards to the use of space in theater, there are many affinities between Báez and African American women's theatrical traditions. A primary one resides in her *Casa-arte* — *Apart-arte* productions and technique, which inform and feed into *Dominicanish*. In *Casa-arte* and *Apart-arte*, Báez performs in people's homes. The terms are a play on words because they mean literally house-art and apart(ment)-art but also are sounded out as casarte and apartarte, which are Spanish-language verbs meaning to get married and to separate yourself, respectively. Thus they reinforce some of the themes of Báez's performances — the domestic sphere and its critique, marriage as an institution, distance from culture or from oppression, and other distancing. Ramón Rivera-Servera's review of *Apartarte/Casarte* describes them as

a performance series initiated by Baez [sic] in 1996 as an alternative to her work in traditional New York City theatre venues. The performances, organized as social events, take place in living rooms, bathrooms, and kitchens in Washington Heights and other Dominican immigrant households throughout the city. The host, a member of the community, collaborates with Baez in organizing the gathering. Invitations are sent out, food and drinks are served, and an air of camaraderie dominates the event. In the intimate environment of a home, Baez sets out to explore with her audience the pains and pleasures of the Dominican immigrant experience in New York City. The performance is

³⁶ Our playwrights and publics, for the most part, have very little contact among themselves — in Mexico, Argentine or Chicano works are not known about. In Guatemala you can't even buy Guatemalan plays. But you can always find the works of Ibsen or Shakespeare or Sophocles. Our theatrical products, marginal and with minority status in relation to the metropolis, are considered "minor" and "unoriginal" in comparison with the dominant master works that are lauded for their originality and universal value.

as much about creating community among the participants as it is about the development of Baez's performance work. (Rivera-Servera 2000: 110)

And indeed, over the years that Báez performed in homes, the performances functioned as exercises that led to revision in developing *Dominicanish* and other works. Thus as Rivera-Servera points out, the dramatic work is authored in community. This also links her to African American and African Caribbean traditions, where the concept of a community-produced art is a salient and recurring feature, from religious sermons (Moss 2003) to musical performance such as the Afro-Puerto Rican bomba and plena.

In terms of the use of space in production, the *Apartarte/Casarte* project echoes the theatrical practices of African American women at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many plays written by African American women were not produced in theaters per se, but rather in people's living rooms as part of the club movement of that time. Later in the 1930s, African Americans performed plays in apartments in New York as part of rent parties. The reasons for the plays to be performed this way had very much to do with the economics of theater production for African Americans. Even award-winning playwrights like Marita Bonner and Zora Neale Hurston found it extremely difficult to maneuver the racist economics and politics of American theater. In the case of Hurston, many of her plays were never produced (Perkins 77-78); in Bonner's case, none of her plays were produced despite her winning the *Crisis* award for best play. (Perkins 190). Yet, even as Báez acknowledges the economic constraints that lead her to perform in people's homes, she does this with a variation on the African American traditions. In the very naming of the practice, she indicates a purposefulness to the practice and a connection to artistic as opposed to economic implications — apartment-art and house-art point more to the art than to the economics. She also obviously uses the Spanish language as opposed to English. At the same time, her audience is not limited to the Spanish speaking nor is her text merely in Spanish. Additionally, Báez incorporates the house as *theme* as well as location in her work. She has also managed to break out of the private sphere of the home as stage and have the *Apartarte/Casarte*

project be critiqued publicly, especially through the work of Ramón Rivera-Servera, but also through her public appearances and newspaper interviews. However, the economic issues are never far away and Báez does not hesitate to discuss them.

From discussions of *santería* concepts with one of the professors on this dissertation's committee, I learned of the phenomenon of *egun*. *Egun* is about how whenever a person is in a place, they take elements and spirits of that place with them for the rest of their lives, and likewise, the spaces and places they have been in retain spirits of those beings who have ever inhabited those spaces. It's applicable to these theatrical economic histories of contemporary performance artists such as Josefina Báez and earlier African American women playwrights. In both cases there may be a certain *egun* at play when theater is produced in an intimate environment. If spaces and places co-penetrate the beings and people who inhabit them, they must continue on from the intimate informal spaces to the formal theatrical and academic spaces and even to the printed pages. The European theory padrino DeCerteau wrote nicely about part of this phenomenon, not knowing to use the word *egun* and also not knowing that *egun* went in the other direction too. That is to say: that spirits of the people stay in places — that part De Certeau describes well — just as spirits of places stay in people — that part De Certeau does not address here.

There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can 'invoke' or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in — and this inverts the seam of the *Panopticon*. But like the gothic sculptures of kings and queens that once adorned Notre-Dame and have been buried for two centuries in the basement of a building in the rue de la Chaussée-d'Antin, these 'spirits,' themselves broken into pieces in like manner, do not *speak* any more that they *see*. This is a sort of knowledge that remains silent. Only hints of what is known but unrevealed are passed on 'just between you and me.' (108)

(Some might also argue the assertion that spirits do not speak, many religious traditions are based on the belief that spirits of the past do in fact speak to us in the present.)

Báez also moves in international circles and spaces, where she has performed and told the stories of her “house” work. Thus she has dispersed the *egun*, the spirits of her theater and the apartments of her early audiences, across continents. One of those venues has been The

Magdalena Project, an “international network of women in contemporary theatre,” which hosts conferences in different parts of the world. At one of those events, an Australian participant reported that:

One of the most interesting and inspiring women was Josefina Baez, a Dominican immigrant living in New York. Too black to be Latino, too Latino sounding to be black, there were no roles for her in theatre, and she comes from a community that doesn't exist, that falls through all the loop holes of assistance, funding and has no identity on the American political and moral landscape. Unfunded, she has created projects with street kids and also has an apartment project where she makes performances in peoples apartments using poetry, rap and Kuchipudi (Indian) dance and gesture in the telling of the story. These performances then develop into a feast and a discussion regarding the issues that have been raised. One of the young women from Colombia who works with street kids asked the question, "How do you cope with that feeling of uselessness as an artist? These kids' problems are so great and you are there for two hours a week and you wonder what your contribution is." Josefina answered that sometimes the bigger issues are too difficult to tackle in that time frame, but what she does do is try to give strength to the foundations, what is inside the person, and she teaches mediation and movement to these kids. She has created a performance using the F word, and run competitions where the prize has been to take the kids into the shopping plazas of New York to have a cup of tea. Most of the kids had never been out of Washington Heights and in the shopping centers the police were often called because of inherent racist attitudes. (Johnston "Journey To Holstebro " n.d.)

The relationship between black women playwrights and economics has always been a difficult one, even for those playwrights who did get to see their plays produced. Renowned playwright Adrienne Kennedy once said in an interview,

...(I was about forty), I realized that although I had many first-class productions, apart from grants my plays did not seem to generate an income. That produced another set of conflicts. I had been living on grants, and hadn't quite realized that.

Interviewer: Isn't that always true of experimental theater?

Kennedy: Beckett and Ionesco make money. (Betsko and Keonig 255)

Báez's artistic economics are even more drastic since she does not have the luxury even of living off grants. In an interview with me in 2005, Báez spoke of the complicated relationship between audience, race, economics and cultural identity; “For grants you are not black enough. [Josefina Báez] in the U.S. context does not read as an African American name. I don't use the term “Afro-Dominican” When I say Dominican it's implicit that I'm African.... La negritude mía

no me la va a imponer nadie.³⁷” But she does not want to “sell” herself as an African American because “al mismo tiempo no quiero robarle la historia a los African Americans.”³⁸ It’s a complex negotiation. On the one hand, she states “Estoy haciendo conecciones con mis hermanos negros.”³⁹ And she has found that African Americans identify with her performances, as in a University of Michigan African American college student who told Báez that when watching her perform *Dominicanish*, she felt she was looking at an older version of herself (2005 interview). On the other hand, Báez critiques those Latin@s who use the prefix “afro” as a trendy way to move ahead: “Muchas personas están usando “afro” para comerse los dulces en la calle.”⁴⁰ Like Adrienne Kennedy, she acknowledges that in the final analyses, it’s the white players who control the resources in the game of theater. Kennedy stated:

...as a black woman, or as a woman writer, or as a black writer, I don’t stand in line for the income and the rewards, and that bothers me a lot. The white male writer can take steps. He’s Off Broadway, and the next thing you know, he’s writing screenplays for Sidney Lumet. He does stand eighty percent more chance of getting his writing career to pay off. It’s that simple. (Betsko and Keonig 258)

Furthermore, for Báez, the critique includes white women as well as white men; in making her statement of the problem, Báez specifically uses the feminine form of gringo: “La que tiene dinero es la gringa. (2005 interview)”⁴¹

Taking a transnational perspective, we see that the economic context of her work aligns her in African American women’s theater history but also is part of Dominican literary history and literary economics. The context for literary and theatrical production in the Dominican Republic is very different from that of (white) mainstream United States. As a librarian, I know that self-publishing carries negative connotations in the United States. Yet, in the Dominican

³⁷ No one is going to impose my blackness on me.

³⁸ I don’t want to steal the history of African Americans.

³⁹ I’m making connections with my black brothers and sisters.

⁴⁰ Many people are using “afro” in order to eat their candy. [Meaning, in order to make an easy buck.]

⁴¹ The one with the money is the gringa woman.

Republic, most authors are forced to self-publish and it therefore does not carry the same stigma. Dominican writers routinely pay for the publication of their own work, as there is not the same elaborated system of publication and distribution that exists for (white) writers in the United States. Indeed, in the U.S., self publishing is considered “vanity” and often not taken seriously in literary circles or by newspapers, libraries and bookstores. By contrast, in the Dominican Republic and in other parts of latin America, there is no such stigma. Dominican writers who self publish are reviewed in the major newspapers, are easily found in major bookstores, including one of the country’s oldest and premier bookstores, *La Trinitaria*, and are featured in major literary events such as the Feria Internacional del Libro. Like other Dominican writers working in the U.S. (such as Yrene Santos, Marianela Medrano, Diógenes Abréu and many others), Báez has drawn on the Dominican self-publishing tradition to produce the book version of *Dominicanish*, which she financed herself and which, five years later, she reported she still owed money on. (Personal interview 2005) As with her theatrical performances of *Dominicanish*, Báez put much attention to the details of the book and to harmonizing its elements. For example, she had the cover redone various times until it came out the way she wanted it. (2005 interview) The book is subtitled “a Performance Text” and indeed it is a text that performs in various ways. One way is that there is in the bottom right hand corner of each page a reproduction of Báez doing an Indian dance pose; as the reader flips the book, s/he creates a moving image of Báez dancing. The overall result of the book as a physical, material object takes on many extra dimensions that *perform* the themes and words it contains. It thus becomes a performance space itself.

Economics is everywhere *within* Báez’s text as well, and often is tied to language as well as space. In one of the various list sequences in the text, Báez presents a list of commercial signs and ads found in the Washington Heights neighborhood, what she sees when “walking the city,” to use that phrase from De Certeau. “ESL free classes” and “citizenship classes” are interspersed with signs for “smokeshop 24 hours calls 39 cents a minute”, “Gimbles o Korbette/ 10 for 1.99 and free with purchase/ **pay for it it’s free** “ (24 & 25). The neighborhood is a space of

language and literacy. In this context, language itself becomes an economic commodity. In addition to ESL classes, “Traducciones” [Translations] are also advertised, as well as the service of filling out government welfare forms — “Se llenan solicitudes de welfare”⁴² (56) (For those who do not know English or who may not even be literate since many government forms are now available in Spanish). Dominicaness is also something that is bought and sold as in “10 plátanos por un dolar,” “Se hacen bizcochos al estilo dominicano./ También picadera, kipes y pastelitos,” ... “Botellas preparadas. Mamajuanas con / huevos de Carey,” (56) “Majarete y pudin de pan./ Lo mejor. Como allá”⁴³ (59) Economics is tied to this place and to nostalgia of place- “como allá”. Economics is also tied to spirituality and religion: “Brujo Haitiano/ Brujo Colombiano/ Brujo de las Matas” and “Bingo aquí en su iglesia.”⁴⁴ (58)

Economics is tied to migration since poverty is linked to the condition of exile which inspires the art, as indicated in the Pachatantra sequence of the book. “It is said that the poor, the sick, the dreamers/ and the fools always go into exile./ ***Poor, sick, dreamers and fools exile.***” (40-41) In the text, the words “poor, sick, dreamers and fools exile” are not just repeated, but stand apart in a separate line, in bold and italics, and in a different font from the rest of the text.

Yet the signs of Washington Heights also show another side of Dominican Yorks — non commercial messages that aren’t meant to sell anything, but rather refer to social and political conditions. These are interspersed with the commercial messages as in this sequence:

Cambio hoy 12.50.
 Se cuidan niños y se buscan a la escuela. Señora seria.
 Se alquila una habitación a dama que trabaje.
 Que se vaya Balaguer.
 Viajes al aeropuerto.

⁴² Welfare applications filled out.

⁴³ 10 plantains for a dollar. We make Dominican style cakes. / Also picadera, kipes and pastelitos.... Prepared bottles. Mamajuana with/ tortoise eggs. Majarete and bread pudding./ The best. Just like back there [back home].

⁴⁴ Haitian witch doctor/Colombian witch doctor/ witch doctor from Las Matas and Bingo here in your church.

En paz descanse.
Quien mató a Kiko García.
La maldita policía.
Quien mató a Sagrario Díaz.
La maldita policía.⁴⁵ (55)

Kiko Garcia was killed by police in New York in 1992 and widely considered innocent by the community; Sagrario Díaz was killed by police in Dominican Republic in 1972. (Dao 1992; Leclerc 2012) Other such messages in the Washington Heights list are: “Marcha en contra de las drogas./ Marcha en contra de la brutalidad policial./ Que viva Trujillo. Pa’ matarlo otra vez./../ El Nuevo camino. Con las viejas mañas./.../Seamos realistas. Hagamos lo imposible./ Recordando al Che.⁴⁶/ Block party./... / If you don’t come in, smile as you pass by.” (58-59) The effects of all of these signs is the presentation of a world infused with language and literacy, English and Spanish, in the service of economics, spirituality and politics. Thus, with the singular performance and singular voice of Josefina Báez, a multiplicity of voices and lives comes through on the page and on the stage. Lives enmeshed in making do, in getting ahead, in striving for excellence, in fighting state-sponsored violence, in searching for pleasure and satisfaction. The words come to us seemingly unfiltered as it were, in the languages of the (Dominican York) community, *the public languages* that community members use to *reach out to each other*. Yet they also represent a universal language:

In embodying the hyphen, the marginalities that inhabit the underground of New York City, Josefina Báez has created her authoritative space. Furthermore, in confronting the city through the very language of her racially marked body, she has subverted the system that sought to subdue her, making of herself a universal subject on the stage. (García-Peña 2008, 39)

⁴⁵ Exchange today 12.50./ Childcare, including school pick-up. Woman of good character./ Room for rent to lady with employment./ Get rid of Balaguer. [former president of Dominican Republic]/ Trips to the airport./ Rest in peace./ Who killed Kiko García./ The damned cops./ Who killed Sagrario Díaz./ The damned cops.

⁴⁶ March against drugs../ March against police brutality./ Long live Trujillo. So we can kill him again. / The new way. With the same old habits. / Let’s be realistic. Let’s do the impossible./ Remembering Che.

A popular saying in the Dominican Republic and among Dominican Yorkers is: cada cabeza es un mundo — every head is a world.

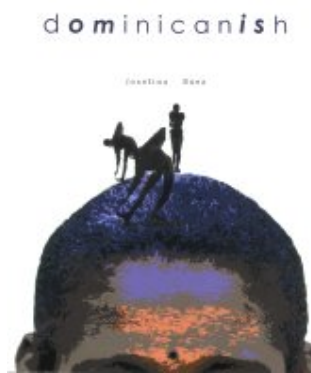


Figure 22 Book cover for *Dominicanish*

As her book cover suggests, in the head and body of Josefina Báez, a whole multicultural world pours forth and performs. Later, in a more recent work, the multiplicity is expanded.

Writing and Living in El Ni É: *Levente no. Yolayordominicanyork.*

En este building-isla-barrio-pueblo
está el mundo y muchísimos universos.
Cada cabeza es un mundo.
Hay muchos mundos en cada cabeza.⁴⁷
Made and in the making.
Made in Ni'E'.
Ni'E' making.
(*Levente no.*, 175)

That whole bit I wrote above about every head being a world, cada cabeza es un mundo, about a whole world pouring forth from Josefina Baez's head, was written in 2005 — 10 years ago as of this writing. In 2011, what a treat to read in Josefina's newest book, her own reference to that phrase. It's a great phrase and concept for tying the two books together, and for tying them together within the themes of space and place — for tying but maybe also just for stringing.

Josefina Báez does take up many of the same themes she introduced in *Dominicanish* and expands upon them in *Levente no. Yolayordominicanyork.* The expansion happens in many ways and

⁴⁷ In this building-island-neighborhood-town/ is the world and many universes./Every head is a world./There are many worlds in each head.

directions, consequently expanding on the philosophical, sociological, and political themes, arguments and effects of her work. In *Levente no*, the space of one building in Washington Heights, just as in *Dominicanish* the space of one body in that same neighborhood, becomes a reservoir of many knowledges, a place of cultural critique and wisdom.

The theme of language permeates this book as well. As with *Dominicanish*, the text is bilingual, although in this case probably more marginally so, leaning much more heavily on Spanish. As with *Dominicanish*, Báez provides an introduction in Spanish that is not a translation of the English, thus reinforcing the detachment from the ideal and practice of direct translation that she advocated in the earlier work. She also references in *Levente* the idea of Dominicanish as a language. In the preface to this one, Báez introduces the book as:

A performance theatre text	Realismo panfletario.
(a text that performs, a text from performance or a text to perform) with character(s).	Saga simplista. Verismo mambo. Verisisisisimo.
A novel in Dominicanish.	Bucle interminable.
A poem with grajo.	Eros con un pa'cá y un pa'llá,
A commentary without visa	Buscando lo que nunca se ha perdido.
neither a dream.	Una isla-pueblo-barrio-mundo-edificio.
a film script for one actor to exercise	Película diaria.
her many cells; for many actresses	Documental de todos los días.
without make-up nor private camerinos	Donde si ves algo no se dice algo.
nor adopted or twin kids.	Se dice de más. Aquí es Manhattan. Allá Erre De.
Hyper-quotidian aesthetic.	Tú, yo o alguien a quien conocemos.
	Dominican@ o no. ⁴⁸ (5)

⁴⁸ Pamphletary realism. / Simplistic saga. Verismo mambo verisisisisimo. / Never-ending curl. / Eros with an over here and an over there, / looking for something that's never been lost. / An island-town-neighborhood-world-building. / Daily movie. / Everyday documentary. / Where if you see something you don't say something. / You say too much. / Here is Manhattan. There, Dee Are. / You, me or someone we know. Dominic@n or not.

She continues to write in Dominicanish. However, having laid the foundation in the earlier book, she doesn't seem to need to make the case for utilizing Dominicanish as a language, nor does she spend as much space defining it. Dominicanish here and in other parts of *Levente no.*, includes the language of academia, here in particular of literary critics and analysts ("a text that performs, a text from performance or a text to perform", "Hyper-quotidian aesthetic," "Realismo panfletario," etc.). At the same time, true to the Dominicanish aesthetic, other word choices such as the word *grajo* mark the Spanish as Dominican, as do the words *tubi* (34), *mata* (as in the English word *tree*)(60), *vaina* (138), and *degaritá* (150). Also, spaces and places are marked as words are played with, as indicated in the lines and words: "Aquí es Manhattan. Allá Erre De." Thus, in Dominicanish, even the words "aquí" (here) and "allá" (there) have a very specific Dominican meaning (here=Manhattan and there=Dee Are). The work is defined as various literary genres simultaneously (performance theatre text, novel, poem, commentary, film) and also as various places simultaneously (*isla-pueblo-barrio-mundo-edificio*).

The book also manifests Dominican pronunciation and morphology as in the phrase "Te toy diciendo." (133), instead of "Te estoy diciendo." Besides using Dominican vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, Báez also makes Dominican references throughout *Levente no.*, and engages in a lot of Dominican word play, and sometimes does both simultaneously, as in the phrase "Dios. La libertad y su patria. Su patria con patio particular. Si llueve, se moja como los demás. (9) which has a play on the Dominican phrase known as *la Trinitaria* "Dios, Patria y Libertad," as well as a play on the words from a Spanish language children's song known through Latin America, "El patio de mi casa."

Even the word "levente" in the title marks the book as Dominicanish. Yet, even I, as a Dominican reader and speaker was not familiar with this word. I'd gone through this process with many words throughout my life, both in English and in Spanish. As I'd done with other words, I got a sense of what the word meant from its context, and used my skills of deduction to make the best guess possible. I took a guess based on the structure of the title phrase. My guess was that

levente is some kind of insult that is directed or hurled upon a certain kind of person. The title says “Levente no”- Not levente. Then it gives another phrase that I suppose is meant as a correction to the first: yolayorkdominicanyork. I translate it as “Not levente. [but rather] Yolayorkdominicanyork.” Or in other words: I am not (or she or he or this is not) levente but I am (or she or he or this is) yolayorkdominicanyork. With only this deduction, I went for a long time still not knowing exactly what the word meant. I just read the book and plowed right through. I would venture to guess that this is a very Latino experience and strategy — just move on if you don’t understand and eventually it may become clear — the thing that you don’t understand but that everyone else in that “other’ group seems to know. But I got through the whole book and still didn’t know.

Finally, I asked one of the other writers in the group, Marianela Medrano. This was her response: “Levente, en el argot dominicano, quiere decir una mujer "ligera" o "facil" que se acuesta facilmente con cualquiera. Creo que ese es el sentido en el que Josefina le usa en su libro.”⁴⁹ (Medrano, email 6/2/2013) This meaning doesn’t completely contradict my initial guess, but it is not exactly the same. That I could go for two years reading this book, working on this book, writing about this book, getting so much meaning out of this book and yet not know the meaning of one of the words in the title is very much in the spirit of Báez’s cultural philosophy.

I wound up using online spaces to crowdsource⁵⁰ the cultural information and reference I needed for the answer. Right around the time I wrote the paragraph above, and a few months after I had gotten the definition from Marianela, I decided to go further in seeking a definition. I decided to use Facebook to elicit responses from my wide range of connections there, which

⁴⁹ “Levente, in Dominican slang, means a ‘free’ or ‘easy’ woman who easily goes to bed with anyone. I think this is the meaning that Josefina uses in her book.”

⁵⁰ Definition of CROWDSOURCING: “the practice of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people and especially from the online community rather than from traditional employees or suppliers.” (“Crowdsourcing.” *Merriam-Webster.com*.)

includes many Dominicans as well as many Spanish language specialists of various sorts. I posted the following question: ¿Quién sabe lo que quiere decir la palabra 'levente'? Si sabes, por favor, dímelo aquí: ” (Espinal 2013) I received 8 responses. An Uruguayan literary and language critic found the definition in an online open dictionary, that included slang words from many countries:



Figure 23 Levente definition in Diccionario libre⁵¹

This is very different from the definition in the dictionary of the Real Academia Española, arguably the most prestigious Spanish dictionary, which offered: “levente. Del turco *lāwandī*, corrupción de *levantino*, con el significado de guerrero. 1. m. Soldado turco de marina.” Three of the responses came for Josefina herself. Her first response was “Del siglo 16...leve..persona que va facilmente donde quiera.”⁵² Her second response was “De la calle...”⁵³ and her third response was:

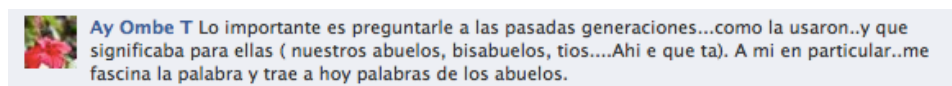


Figure 24 Josefina Báez comment regarding meaning of levente⁵⁴

⁵¹ Lazy charlatan, said of one who is always looking for something to cure himself with or to joke about.

⁵² From the 16th century...a light..person who easily goes anywhere.”

⁵³ From the streets.

⁵⁴ The important thing is to ask previous generations... how did they use it.. (and what did it mean for them (our grandparents, great grandparents, aunts and uncles... That’s where it’s at). For me in particular, the word is fascinating and it brings today the words of our grandparents.

Another person, a Dominican activist, arts and feminist organizer and writer herself, responded from a dictionary of dominicanisms she had at hand.⁵⁵ The dictionary entry gave references and various definitions at once that captured all the meanings so far encountered: directionless; lazy and without occupation; loose or easy woman. It was probably the most scholarly responses of all. A Dominican colleague of hers, mine and Josefina’s also responded, prompted by the instructions Josefina gave earlier about asking previous generations about what their usage of the word was:

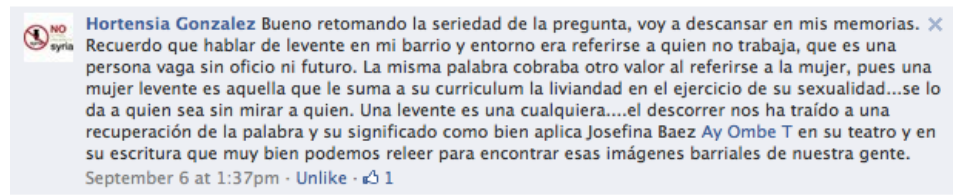


Figure 25 A Dominican woman recounts how levente was used in her barrio⁵⁶

In addition to being a good lesson in the ethos of Josefina Báez’s cultural praxis, this was also a good exercise in participatory research and meaning making via social media. It reminded me of the pre-literacy days in my extended family, when certain “facts” were established communally. For example, often a group of people would be sitting around talking over coffee and someone would state that such and such happened on a certain date, say 1963. And someone

⁵⁵ Later I asked for the bibliographic details of that dictionary and did not yet receive an answer. It was October, 2013 when this happened and I might have wanted to follow up on the citation, but other events had taken over Dominican diaspora life and these online spaces I inhabited with other Dominicans, which made this seem like a trivial and inappropriate question in comparison: the activist who shared this wonderful dictionary entry had begun spending a lot of time protesting and getting the word out about the infamous decision by the Dominican Republic’s constitutional court that would retroactively strip the citizenship of many Dominicans of Haitian descent. (Semple;Yuhas) I myself began struggling as to how to balance spending time on that news event and my role in responding as a US born Dominican vis-à-vis spending time on this dissertation writing project.

⁵⁶ Well, returning to the seriousness of the question, I will rest on my memories. I remember that to speak of a levente in my neighborhood and surroundings, was to refer to someone who did not work, who was lazy and without occupation or future. The same word would take on a different meaning when referred to a woman., since a levente woman is one who adds to her résumé wantonness in the exercise of her sexuality... she gives it to whomever without regard to who it is. A levente is a tramp... A looking back has brought us to a recuperation of this word and its meaning as Josefina Baez Ay Ombe T applies well in her theater and in her writing that we can reread in order to find those neighborhood images of our people.

else might say something like, well it think it was 1964 because it was the year that so and so got married or the year that so and so was born or the year that so and so did her first communion or the year that so and so left for New York. I remember how much effort went into the establishment of these details. And later it occurred to me: in a community in which it wasn't so easy or a habit to write things down, this kind of conversation might have a very important function. This was a common occurrence. We crowdsourced information all the time — in person. I have memories of many conversations that would include this kind of communal fact-checking. Some of my memories are of living rooms in apartments in New York. Some of my memories of this are of people sitting in the dining areas of Dominican country houses, like my grandmother's house, those open—air rooms between the kitchen and the main house structure. Of course, often times a good number of the women would not be sitting but rather working in the kitchen — on the fogón or in the often crowded (and in the summer extremely hot) New York city apartment kitchen. I remember these conversations as a child and as a teenager. Later when I was in college and graduate school I recalled these conversations often while participating in seminars or thinking about the seminars I had taken. I remembered feeling that the paraliterate conversations of my childhood and adolescence had primed me well for academic discussions in the classroom. I have never had particular trouble speaking in a university classroom, even though there were many reasons I could have been intimidated or felt silenced or strategically employed silence, especially as a first generation Latina college student. This is a phenomenon that education researchers have been exploring, as in the study by Shelly Perdomo, *Unpacking Voice and Silence: A Phenomenological Study of Black Women and Latinas in College Classrooms*, (2012), that found significant instances of silence by Latina college students in college seminars. There are now a few studies that examine how elements in Latino cultures can actually be assets in academic environments, (Gándara et al. 2011; Rubinstein-Avila 2007; Kanagala et al. 2016; Zambrana and Zoppi 2002; Rivas-Drake and Marchand 2016) but I've not seen one that gives this particular example. So I'm adding it as a complement to the emerging scholarship in this area.

And What Does Apartment House Mean?

Levente no. yolayorkdominicanyork actually does explore this concept of knowledge, wisdom and analytical prowess residing in and being practiced within the Dominican communities of New York, literally within the Dominican apartments of New York City so similar to the apartments of my childhood. Forty years later, I look back at those conversations with a lot of nostalgia, but also with a lot of respect for the adults I had in my life at the time, who carried on such intelligent discussions. A Dominican York reader then might look at the cover of the book, carefully chosen by Báez, in a very nostalgic —and respectful— way.

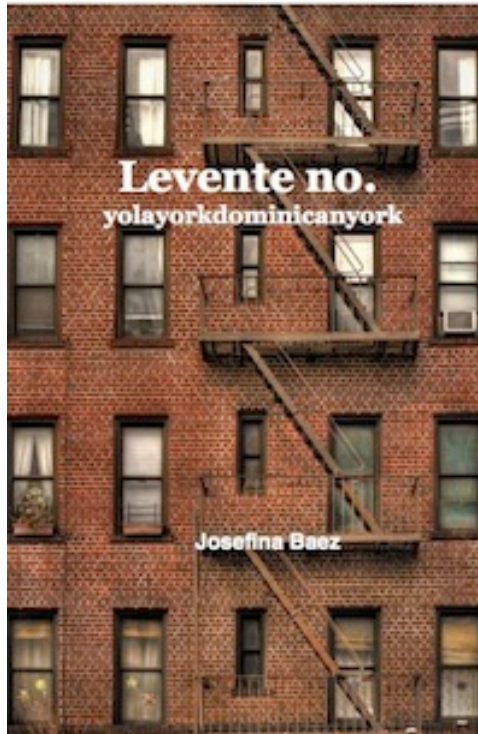


Figure 26 *Levente no. yolayorkdominicanyork* book cover

Michel de Certeau's famous opening to his essay "Walking the City," points out the difference between the knowledge one gets of New Yorks City from the top of a skyscraper like the former World Trade Center versus the knowledge one would get from walking its streets. In *Levente no*, Báez focuses on another layer of spatial knowledge of life in New York: the knowledge

gained from being inside one of its many apartment buildings and inside each individual apartment.

I would disagree with Henri Lefebvre when he states:

Everyone knows what is meant when we speak of a ‘room’ in an apartment, the ‘corner’ of the street, a ‘marketplace’, a shopping or cultural ‘centre’, a public ‘place’, and so on. These terms of everyday discourse serve to distinguish, but not to isolate, particular spaces, and in general to describe a social space. They correspond to a specific use of that space, and hence to a spatial practice that they express and constitute. (Lefebvre 16)

Who is everyone? I don’t think everyone knows what is meant when we speak of a room in an apartment, because I know first hand that not everyone knows what an apartment is — not everyone has been in one. I know that when I visited my family in the Dominican Republic in the 1970s, many had heard the word apartment but had never been in one so they did not know the full meaning, the same meaning as those of us who had lived in apartments all our lives. Just as those of us who lived in apartments in Dominican families from the countryside had heard the word *conuco* all our lives but did not know what that meant. Our families in the countryside in the Cibao might have said, like Lefebvre’s statement about the word room in an apartment, that everyone knows what a *conuco* is.

From the previous discussion above of the origins of *Dominicanish* in apartments and of how theater by African American women was often performed traditionally in apartments, somewhere in our consciousness that is part of the definition of a room in an apartment that not “everyone” will have.

Marta Moreno Vega’s allusions and discussions of apartments in New York provide a wonderful complement to Josefina Báez’s novel and point about apartments as spaces and places with particular and diverse and rich meanings. In her many talks available online via YouTube, Vega frequently makes the point that the inside of the buildings of the New York City Puerto Rican community she grew up in were nothing like the often drab outsides and nothing like the racist stereotypes and expectations that outsiders had of her people and of Nuyorican spaces. In

her book *The Altar of My Soul*, the word apartment appears frequently as in the following passages:⁵⁷

We lived in apartment number seven, and this is where my brother, sister, and I came of age. I can trace my first memories of Espiritismo and Santería to this building, my childhood home in El Barrio. I shared a

The few rooms in our apartment sparkled with the warm colors of the tropics and the brilliant portraits of Catholic saints. My mother took care that the blue on the walls was the same color as the Puerto Rican ocean. Too poor to purchase wallpaper, our family, like many others in East Harlem, used the technique of taking the pages of a newspaper, crushing them, dipping them in silver paint and using them to imprint the clouds that covered our walls. Our curtains were plastic and had bright floral patterns in reds, oranges, and greens. The living room sofa, decorated with a rainbow of flowers, was protected with transparent plastic covers that stuck to my bare legs.

On the wall above the living room sofa, a rectangular mirror with pink flamingos completed the decor. I knew that having a mirror with beveled edges and pink flamingos was a status symbol. Often, when she looked at the mirror, my mother would say proudly, "We are poor, but not so poor."

My *abuela's* apartment had a calm, peaceful feeling to it. The walls were painted in soft shades of white. The curtains were the deep blue of the ocean. There was a tranquil quality that radiated from my grandmother as well. Luisa Correa Pérez was a slightly built woman who was born in the town of Loíza Aldea, Puerto Rico, in 1884, eleven years after the abolition of slavery. She dressed in loose-fitting white

Abuela lived alone in her warm, inviting place filled with a lingering scent of Florida water, the poignant smell of her cigars, and the smoke of burning sandalwood incense. Abuela's apartment was special to me. Each time I walked through her door, I felt as if I were entering a curious, adventurous world that resembled the fantasy of the magnificent Egyptian movie I saw serialized every Saturday at the children's matinee. Since I was only seven years old, I could not explain what I felt. Still, I knew that Abuela's apartment was a distinct and unusual place.

Figure 27 Passages from book *The Altar of My Soul*

Why, in a study about the writing of Josefina Báez, do I quote so much and in this way from Marta Moreno Vega? Marta Moreno Vega articulates very well the experience of apartments and buildings in New York from a Latina perspective. You who are reading this may or may not have that perspective and I felt that need to make sure there was such a frame for the discussion of *El Ni'é*.

I do have to say that I now look at the photo of the Blurb version book cover for *Levente no*, with some distance as well. As much as Báez's image invokes home for me, so for the past 20 years, has this image, which is my current home from which I write at this moment:

⁵⁷ For politico-economic reasons, as a way to boycott Amazon, I use the Kobo ebook version of this book which alas does not allow for copying and pasting of text so I took screen shots of the text in the discussion.



Figure 28 My house in which I wrote this dissertation

Both of these images represent very North American experiences. One can stand in very well for the city of the American north — the other for the suburb of the American north. Both of these images are also very Dominican American experiences, although the second image may not be the stereotypical image of Dominicans in the USA. As we will see from the spaces from which Marianela Medrano, Aurora Arias, Yrenes Santos, Annecy Báez, and Nelly Rosario — and even Josefina Báez herself — write, spaces and places other than Washington Heights, aka Quisqueya Heights, are also Dominican and Dominican-American and even Dominican-York places. There are many spaces and places from which USA-based Dominican women writers can write and of which they can write about. Lefebvre asked, and answered and asserted:

To what extent may *a* space be read or decoded? ... the notions of message, code, information and so on cannot help us trace the genesis of a space; the fact remains, however, that an already produced space can be decoded, can be *read*. Such a space implies a process of signification. And even if there is no general code of space, inherent to language or to all languages, there may have existed specific codes, established at specific historical periods and varying in their effects. If so, interested 'subjects', as members of a particular society, would have acceded by this means at once to *their* space and to their status as 'subjects' acting within that space and (in the broadest sense of the word) comprehending it. (Lefebvre 17)

If there is a language of space and place, if the names or images or experience of being in a space has its own meaning, then Dominican American women writers and readers are multilingual in many ways, speaking as we do, the languages of many places.

The term “Dominican-American,” is of course problematic in many ways. From a Dominican or Latin American perspective, the term American encompasses us already. We’re already American so the term Dominican American is redundant. Perhaps the term USA Dominican would be better. Similarly, Josefina Báez has pointed out that the term Afro Dominican is redundant because most Dominicans are of African Descent — it is part of our national character (2005). According to this line of thinking, those Dominicans who do not have African heritage are in the overwhelming minority and perhaps are the ones who need a special term to describe them. Then there’s the decolonial critique of the very word American or America, which indigenous and decolonial writers and activists have replaced with *Abya Yala*. On the other hand, the words Dominican and Dominican Republic are also colonial and neo-colonial terms, which some are beginning to replace with *Quisqueyana/o/x* and *Quisqueya*, or as I write of late: *Kiskeyana* and *Kiskeya*.

And What Exactly Does “yolayorkdominicanyork” Mean?

Looking at the title again and how the invented word “yolayorkdominicanyork” is presented as a counterpoint to the word “levente,” what conclusions or inferences can we draw? I was familiar with the word *yola* from my own knowledge of Dominican experience and history, knowing about the many Dominicans who have left the the island of *Quisqueya/Ayiti* (also known as Dominican Republic) by sea, in *yolas*, for Puerto Rico (also called Borinquen), and often from there making it to the mainland of the USA, although often settling in Puerto Rico. *Yolayorks* are true heroes and sheroes of Dominican American history. The *yola* experience is explored in depth in Ana-Maurine Lara’s novel *Erzulie’s Skirt*. *Yola* is in this way a very Dominican word, so much so that I wasn’t sure if it was another dominicanism or if it was an established Spanish word so I looked it up in the dictionary of the Real Academia Española and did find it: “*yola*. Del fr. *yole*, y este de or. germánico. 1. f. Embarcación muy ligera movida a remo y con vela.” As another aid in this part of the analysis, I did a translation search from Spanish to English and found that the first translation of *yola* is the English word *yawl* — a word I

was not familiar with at all. Definition of yawl from Merriam—Webster “1: a ship's small boat: jolly boat. 2: a fore-and-aft rigged sailboat carrying a mainsail and one or more jibs with a mizzenmast far aft.” Had you presented me with the word yawl I don't think I ever would guess that its Spanish translation is yola. For those of you who didn't have a clue what yolayorkdominicanyork meant, I hope you now understand that if Dominican York is a Dominican who lives in New York (the Dominican version of Nuyoricán), then yolayorkdominicanyork would be a particular kind of Dominican York — one who arrived in the USA via a yola, often the poorest of the poor. The title of the book, then, is saying, I (she/he) am not this demeaning word that is used to mean trashy person (*levente no*), but I am that experience of hardship and migration, that includes being Dominican, that includes travel by yola, that includes winding up in New York (yolayorkdominicanyork), a particular kind of New Yorker as well.

Beyond and above all this language or within all this language, in the background of this language — permeating, holding all these manifestations of Dominicanish together is the very structure or syntax of the book itself — a Dominicanish narrative structure. Much like the structure of *Dominicanish*, but in some ways probably even more Dominicanish because it reflects the rich and complex nature of much of Dominican life and culture. Whereas *Dominicanish* has the flavor of multiple voices speaking through one person, in *Levente no. Yolayorkdominicanyork*, multiple voices and perspectives from the same community speak through many different people, personalities and characters. If *Dominicanish* is a choreopoem as mentioned above, perhaps *Levente no* could be called a choreonovel. There is a lot of movement of characters, stories and voices in the narrative, which at times reads as a series of overheard conversations. In that sense it parallels the shifting voices that one is exposed to in New York City, or to be more precise, that a person of Dominican heritage would be exposed to in New York, or to be more precise, that a person would be exposed to in an apartment building in New York comprised almost entirely of Dominican women and their families. Báez is explicit about this narrative strategy: “Salen los

secretos hechos y dichos a voces. Muchos dichos. Muchas voces. Demasiadas voces. Voces en exceso. No ficción. / Las voces crudas. Rotas. Vivas. Despojan lo escrito de cualquier género.”

⁵⁸(14) She alerts us to the many and excessive voices that simply do not fit any genre: they are and are not a novel, a poem, a performance.

At times there does not seem to be a main character nor a plot. Early on, we are introduced to Quisqueya Amada Taina Anaisa Altagracia Indiga, “you can call me Kay,” and follow her adventures and opinions both in the DR as well as in NYC. But in much of the book, the reader meets a multitude of other characters and names and apartment numbers, taking almost 30 pages to be introduced by name (33-65) and unique characteristics. So many you can get lost.

We all live in the same building. El Ni É. My mother, grandmother, la comadre — mi madrina, el ejemplo, la quiero a morir. Estela la Colorá del 3A, la Flaca del 6J... Josefa la del 3E... tenemos a Ramona, la que vende ropas de marca, pampers para muchachitos y viejos, y joyas de plata. Doña Altagracia la que cuida niños y los busca de la escuela. Miledis la que arregla uñas, hace tubi, rolos. Y pasa el blower... Dorca la convertía que hace cortinas y cubrecamas... Argentina lee taza, Bélgica traduce, llena formularios y los taxes. Minga que camina para que la vean... Asia da cantinas. Ada da consejos... Y Miguelina la del 3M se lo da al bodeguero. Ese que le dice ‘primo’ al barrio entero. Clara, la negra grande de Hato Mayor, ... su hija Nieves... la más fabulosa de todas... Tuti... Mirta “nos queda... Doña Francia... Mi madrina Gabriela y mi padrino Gabriel son la única pareja del edificio. Dulce la del 4D... la reina del benguei en el 6B... Mi vecina Belkis es la reina del karaoke. Kika, su compinche, la reina del bingo de la iglesia... [and many more!]⁵⁹

⁵⁸ The secrets come out. Many sayings. Many voices. Too many voices. Voices in excess. Non-fiction. The raw voices. Broken. Alive. They rob the written word of any genre.

⁵⁹ The comadre — my godmother, the example, I love her to death. Estela the Red from 3A, the Skinny one from 6J... Josefa from 3E... we have Ramona, the one who sells brand name clothes, pampers for little ones and old folks, and silver jewelry. Doña Altagracia, who babysits kids and picks them up at school. Miledis who does nails, tubi and curlers. And blow dries hair... Dorca the convert who makes curtains and bedspreads... Argentina reads cups, Bélgica translates, fills out forms and does taxes. Minga who walks so that she’ll be seen... Asia gives canteens. Ada gives advice... And Miguelina from 3M gives it to the bodega owner. The guy who calls everyone in the neighborhood ‘cousin.’ Clara, the big black woman from Hato Mayor, ... her daughter Nieves... the most fabulous, Tuti... Mirta from 3N... María la from the crossing... Janitzia is from México... Doña Petra. The only Cuban we have left... Doña Francia... My godmother Gabriela and my godfather Gabriel are the only couple in the building. Dulce from 4D... the queen of Bengay in 6B... [and many more!]

El Ni e', the Ni e', is the name of the apartment building they all live in and becomes in many ways a character in its own right. This puts her in alignment with other urban Latino writers. For example, it is reminiscent of the role of "El Building" in the writing of Judith Ortiz Cofer (Acosta-Belén 85). El Ni e' also becomes part of a conversation about the meaning of nationalism, transnationalism, migration and place — and it becomes a part of a conversation about what it is to be specifically Dominican, and specifically a Dominican woman, as the building is also called "Isla de mujeres," and most of the characters are women. Báez makes reference to nation in various places, starting with the preface. "Dios. La libertad y su patria. Su patria con patio particular." (9) She posits an equivalency between an apartment building and larger cultural and geographic units: "isla-pueblo-barrio-mundo-edificio" (5) and "patria-país-pueblo-edificio-apartamento." (10) Thus Báez demonstrates a beautiful artistry that is aware of what the academic discussions of the work, such as in this study, will center around and even what the vocabulary of that discussion will consist of. Her book enters those academic discussions directly and uses that vocabulary, as when she states:

Estas historias no son exclusivas de ellos/nosotros/yo, por nacionalidad. Hay muchos otros, que desde la misma clases social, géneros y condición migratoria o simplemente por este momento de ejercicio humano, hacen coro, con otros acentos, a las mismas vicisitudes y decisiones aquí plasmadas.⁶⁰

El Ni e' is also the title of the blog that Báez has been publishing since August 2008 at <http://www.leventeno.blogspot.com>. Many passages or versions of passages that would later appear in the book *Levente no* appeared first in the blog. For example, starting with the very first post in the blog, which is an all Spanish-language version of the bilingual preface discussed above. So that instead of "a poem with grajo," the blog post refers to "Un poema con grajo" and instead of "A commentary without visa neither a dream," the blog indicates "Un comentario sin visa, ni

⁶⁰ These stories are not exclusive to them/us/me, by nationality. There are many others, who, from the same social class, gender and migratory condition or simply due to this moment of human exercise, provide a chorus, with other accents, to the same vicissitudes and decisions embodied here.

ningún sueño.” (El Ni ‘e August 18, 2008) In that first post, Báez states her intention for the blog to be a collaborative space of dialogue where readers can interact with the text, the characters, the author and each other. In the second blog post, also dated August 18, 2008, she addresses the meaning of the name “Ni e” and attempts to define it. It is presented in Dominicanish in the sense that it is a Dominican way of pronouncing the phrase “Ni es,” which means “It’s not” or “It’s neither.”⁶¹ It is an in-between, a “space of transition”⁶²: “Ni e' vulva ni ano,/ni e' prostata ni ano tampoco” and “ni aquí ni allá.”⁶³ Readers are invited to provide their own definitions: “¿Que mas podria ser el Ni e'? Dime. dime desde tu aqui o desde tu allá.”⁶⁴ Two readers actually did respond. There is a beautiful circularity of space: in the blog, Báez talks about the novel; in the novel, she points to the blog, by providing the URL (203). As of this writing, February 6, 2018, she is still making updates.

Levente no contains numerous transnational narratives of the economic practices and economic spaces of everyday life for Dominican women. Sometimes they are so familiar and so heart-breaking, such as the story of Cornelia:

Cornelia no ha podido regresar. Su hijo se hizo hombre y su Mamá vieja. Ella le ha enviado buenas ropas, mochilas y hasta computadoras. Y a la mamá... las mejores batas, polvos, jabones, chancletas y muchas cajas de comidas con de todo lo que hay allá. Pobre, su familia está en su cabeza, en él hace mucho tiempo y en los muchos pedidos con lo que le cobran sus hermanos su ausencia. Tienen la cachaza de decirle, “ya déjate de mandar esos jaboncitos viejos y ven a atender a la vieja. Así si e' bueno e' “. Y esa infeliz sale de una factoría y se va a limpiar oficinas. No conoce un cine en esta ciudad. Su oración de siempre es decir que ella no vino para cambiar de ambiente, conocer a un país nuevo o visitar museos.⁶⁵ (Kindle Edition)

⁶¹ It must be noted that other Spanish-speaking regions not in the Dominican Republic also have this pronunciation of the words “ni es,” such as Puerto Rico and Cuba, portions of Colombia, etc.

⁶² “espacio de transición.”

⁶³ “It’s neither vulva nor anus,/ it’s neither prostrate nor anus either” and “neither here nor there.”

⁶⁴ What more could Ni ‘e be? Tell me. Tell me from your here or from your there.

⁶⁵ Cornelia has not been able to go back. Her son became a man and her mom an old woman. She has sent them good clothes, backpacks and even computers. And to her mom, the best frocks, powders, soaps, sandals and many boxes of food with the best that is over there. Poor thing, her family is in her head, it’s been a long time and in the many requests with which her family charges her for her absence They have the gall to tell her, “Stop sending those soaps and shit and

The Language of Analysis — What Language? What Theory?

As a Dominican reader who has had the probably typical Dominican experience of living in a community of many people, many relatives, many characters, the choppiness of *Levente no. Yolayorkdominicanyork* is very familiar and very Dominican. Very validating, especially as I wrote this very essay. As a Dominican American reader, who has been educated in the United States in English and read novels in both English and Spanish for almost 40 years, the choppiness of the book does go against the grain, against literary expectation. I must invoke a kind of literary double consciousness to borrow the phrase for W.E.B. Du Bois. Or do some literary “travelling” to use the ideas of María Lugones. (1987)

Working through this beautiful struggle to write about the work of Josefina Báez, I find it personally difficult and counter to my own sense of self to fully converse here with the current academic vocabulary. Another Dominican American literary critic, Danny Méndez, speaks that language well when he writes:

As a Dominican born woman residing in New York City, Josefina Báez’s body of work reflects her ever-evolving views of nationality, gender, race and ethnicity. Her work as a poet, performer, and actress accordingly reflects a social reality that goes beyond discourses of Dominicanity or “lo dominicano.” Her texts, *Dominicanish* (2000), *Comrade Bliss Ain’t Playing* (2008),(5) and *Levente no.yolayorkdominicanyork* (2011) each employ a unique assemblage of verse, prose, and movement, theatricalizing the experience of dominicanidad under the aspect of demystifying identities and setting them free. As Camilla Stevens indicates, this is a program that “... reject[s] territorial and essentialist nationalisms in favor of transnational subjectivities”(6) In this sense, Baez’s work is recognizably affiliated with the aesthetic worked out by a number of Dominican performers and playwrights since the 1990s to generate a theater of experiences that understood the polyvalence of Dominican identities from the vantage point of the diaspora.(7) (Méndez 2012)

Although not the only way to approach Báez’s work, Méndez and Stevens are on target in their descriptions of the “polyvalence” and “transnational subjectivity” of Dominican identity and Dominican writing. In addition to playwrights and performers, even the better known and better

come take care of your old lady. It’s so easy for you aint it?” and that unhappy woman leaves a factory to go clean offices. She does not know what a movie house is in that city. Her daily prayer is to say that she did not come to get a change of scenery, to know a new country or to visit museums.

studied fiction writers Julia Álvarez and Junot Díaz make clear that Dominican identity for many is not fixed in either geography or language. And the feminism in both those writers' works indicates a need to articulate issues beyond questions of Dominican identity. Likewise Junot Díaz, Josefina Báez and other Dominican American writers explore and expose issues of class as they expound a working class consciousness (vis-à-vis perhaps an upper class consciousness such as is found in Julia Álvarez's work) that cannot be contained in a simple discussion of what is Dominican. Lastly, even in a book that by its very title — *Dominicanish* — would have us be lulled into believing that the topic is dominicanness, that very Dominican identity is demystified and set free, as Méndez tell us, by such supposedly non-Dominican preoccupations as the knowledge of the importance of the Isley Brothers and of Indian Kuchipudi dance.

It's very important for the general reading public as well as the literary critical community to identify, name and understand this kind of "transnational subjectivity" because so many of us have transnational lives and worldviews. Yet there is so much more in Josefina Báez's work that a conversation about nationalism or transnationalism or Dominican identity or geography just does not address. Something about the way we are writing about literature today seems to get in the way. We seem to be in a moment in literary criticism when we are at least "allowed" or even encouraged to read Latina authors, and specifically Dominican women authors. The unwelcoming, hostile, irrational arguments of the 1980s against reading Latina authors (and many other non-white non-male authors who were being ostracized and belittled within the spaces of mainstream literature) do not have as much sway or air time today even though they have not died down, even though Latin authors are still not being read as much as they should be. That is of course one reason for this dissertation and the actions of this action research at this time. Resistance to an oppressive mainstream is everywhere addressed in *Levente no*. Yet to always look at this literature in terms of resistance misses a lot of what's also there, other reasons to read it. In the culture wars of the 1980s, many of the conservative right wing critics argued that the mainstream canon was "universal," and that "ethnic" writers were too particular. A quote I

shared earlier from *Levente no* indicates how the opposite may actually be the case, while it also challenges the way we are reading Dominican/Latin@/authors of color today:

Estas historias no son exclusivas de ellos/nosotros/yo, por nacionalidad. Hay muchos otros, que desde la misma clases social, géneros y condición migratoria o simplemente por este momento de ejercicio humano, hacen coro, con otros acentos, a las mismas vicisitudes y decisiones aquí plasmadas.⁶⁶

Here's one translation of that: these stories, this book, can speak to many groups and people who are going through similar situations in different places — this literature is “universal.”

Levente no challenges us to look for and listen to the wisdom that resides in places and people such as the apartment buildings and residents of Washington Heights. In the voice of one of the women of el Ni e': "...nunca le han preguntado a alguien que viva en el Ni e'. Esa es una historia viejísima que ya cambió hace ratón y queso. Pregúntame a mí. Yo estoy bien. Aquí, allá y en Peking."⁶⁷ (116) So we have here the voice of a woman who says that there is something even more basic than geography or the specifics of a national or cultural identity, something deeper — a deeper wisdom. Typical of Báez's writing style, she economically and efficiently says a so much in these 3 lines. First, the assertion that no one has asked anyone who lives in el Ni e', points to the politics of audiences and knowledge making. Who gets to speak? Who is an expert? Whose opinion counts? Whose knowledge counts? Who is assumed to have knowledge or to have answers? What are the spaces of knowledge and knowledge production and knowledge repository? Báez here makes the case for certain Dominican women's places and spaces, buildings like el Ni e' to be considered holders of knowledge and of wisdom for all — here, there and even in Beijing! By bringing in the place Peking, Báez performs a similar politics to the one she performed via Kuchipudi in *Dominicanish*.

⁶⁶ These stories are not exclusive to them/us/me, by nationality. There are many others, who, from the same social class, gender and migratory condition or simply due to this moment of human exercise, provide a chorus, with other accents, to the same vicissitudes and decisions embodied here.

⁶⁷ They've never asked anyone from el Ni e'. That's an old story that changed back in mouse and cheese time. Ask me. I'm fine. Here, there and in Beijing.

Writing and Living in Bliss: In and out of place in “Comrade Bliss Aint’ playing.”

I had originally meant to only discuss *Dominicanish* and *Levente no* in this chapter. Trying to make this project manageable, I set this limit. And one day, on a Sunday, a spiritual day (on May 31, 2015), it occurred to me that since I was making the point that there is a deeper wisdom to be gleaned from Báez, and other Dominican woman writers and from the characters and people represented in their writing (*especially* from the Dominican women characters and spirits), I really had to address her book *Comrade Bliss Aint’ Playing*. Because it thoroughly supports the point about spirituality and because leaving it out would be going against that very point. It is a book about deep universal truths as opposed to only specific cultural experiences (or subjectivities if you prefer that word) — a false dichotomy that this book breaks apart. In her work, Báez doesn’t negate her specific experience, but rather includes it, universalizing from that experience at the center. In *Comrade Bliss Aint’ Playing*, she states this in many ways, as in: “My world is this world. / My world has all galaxies.”

Like her other books, she has published different versions with different covers. This is the one I have and will cite from:

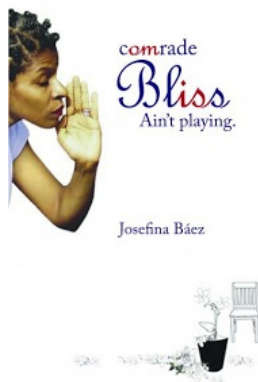


Figure 29 Cover of book *Comrade Bliss Ain't Playing*

This particular printing of the book has a similar aesthetic to *Dominicanish*; in addition to both having an image of Báez herself on the cover, there are charming illustrations in the bottom corners of many pages.

From the preface:

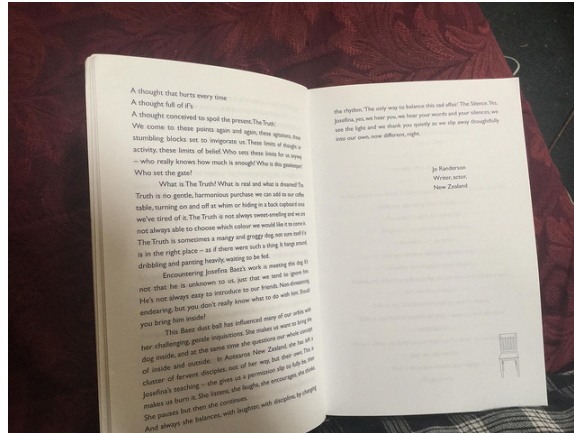


Figure 30 Illustration on book footer

In the interior:

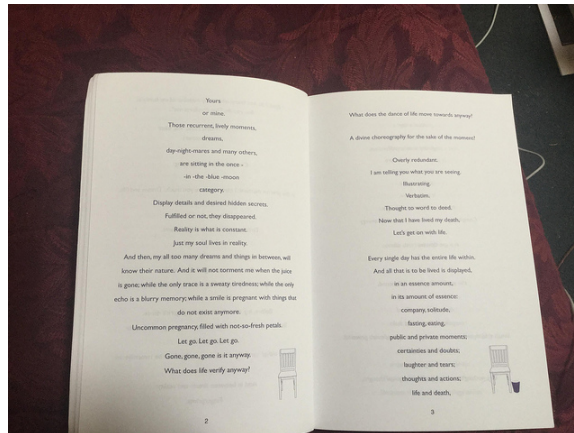


Figure 31 Illustrations in book footer

And also in the interior:

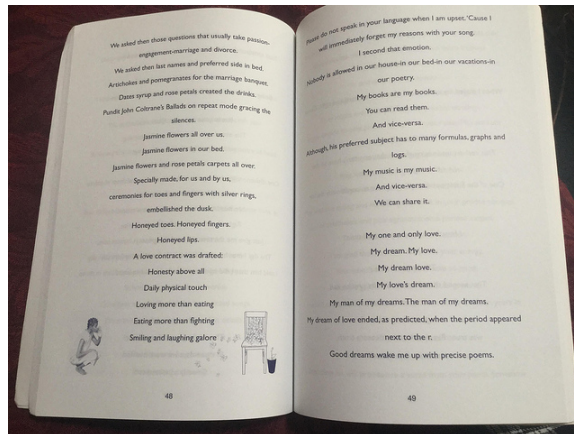


Figure 32 Illustrations in book footer

And this one, without the chair:

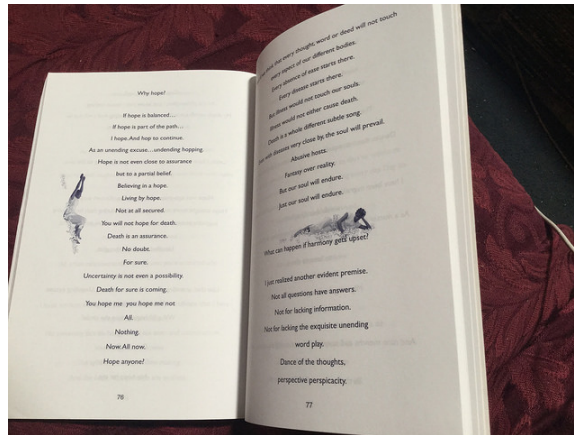


Figure 33 Illustrations in book

Báez is fully aware that in many people's aesthetics, these details and others may be considered cutesy or "cheesy." In the very first page of text she introduces the work as "Gramatically incorrect," "Simple. Simplistic," "Full of clichés," "Tacky," and "Cheesy." But she also introduces it as "Holy world," "Secular prayer," and "Heaven on earth under the sky."

Danny Méndez offers his questions about Comrade Bliss Aint playing:

[H]ow is positive affect a necessary foundation for a diasporic body? Is it possible to construct (or even recognize) a Dominican identity in the diaspora that can elicit simultaneously bliss and gloom? How does this same bliss tie to possibility, to change, mobility and creative control of the "I" that structures an identity?

He uses an approach to this book that I also fall into: one that sees is as primarily Dominican. I fell into that with the very title of this chapter: "Spaces of Dominican Diasporan Language: Writing and Living in Dominicanish and El Ni É and Bliss." I'm happy to have fallen into that — deliberately fell in! At the same time, I want to suggest that there is something in Dominican woman's writing, that comes before or after being Dominican, being a Dominican woman, being a woman. That is what words such as "Holy world," "Secular prayer," and "Heaven on earth under the sky" are getting at. In this realm, Méndez's questions about a diasporic body and Dominican identity can be set aside for a moment as Báez's concerns are actually planetary and even extra-terrestrial. Concerns that are beyond space and place and time. Yet human concerns nonetheless.

An interesting aspect of the book is that it is written entirely in English, and in standard English as Mendez points out. Mendez suggests that this signifies a surrender. “Here we seem to be immersed in another moment entirely, one in which the energy has gone out of resisting the colonial English presence inside the English tongue.” (“The Intricacies of Bliss in Diaspora.”) It’s interesting that he would see this as a draining of energy, when the book seems so full of energy. The way I read it is not as a giving up of Spanglish, Spanish, Dominicanish, but simply of choosing to speak English only, of choosing to speak that language or of somehow being taken over by that language. And that’s ok. Báez, like many of us, is multi-lingual. If standard English is one of her languages, why would it be surprising for her to write in it? Why expect of her to be language conformist and only write in Dominicanish? Which would be fine if that had been the case. But it’s not.

Edyta Oczkowics and Danny Méndez both smartly point out that even Báez’s mother, in the opening lines of the work, is speaking in English, when this is highly unlikely, especially given the actual message:

God, I do not know where any member of my family is.

But you do. That comforts me.

Maria Perez vda. Báez

(my mother).

Méndez agrees with Oczkowics’ assertion that “these words serve to eliminate the opposition of English as the ‘colonial language’ and Spanish as ‘mother tongue’ by making the mother’s tongue literally English.” One aspect of these lines that neither seems to address is the actual message and what that might mean for our reading of the book and experience of the performance. The mother states that she does not know where her family members are — they could be anywhere New York, New Zealand — who knows? But in stating that God knows, the mother is referring to a deeper reality that has nothing to do with place or diaspora or Dominicanness as we know it, even as the experience of being a mother who does not know

where here children are may be a particularly Dominican diasporic experience. By having these words come from her mother, Báez privileges her mother as a spiritual speaker and knower of truths. As a spiritual book, the word God right in the introduction, sets the tone for what is to come and for what this book is: a spiritual book. That anyone regardless of location or even language might benefit from — or might reject. One message is that God and Bliss — regardless of location is an important concern of this book.

Yet, contrary to Méndez and Oczkowics' point — this book is actually now available in a multitude of languages. So it is not at all limited to English. Báez reports that *Comrade Bliss Aint playing* has been translated into Swedish, Hindi, French, Portuguese, Spanish, and as of June 5, 2015, other translations are “in the making.” (personal communication Facebook 6/5/2015) By making it all in English, as opposed to Spanglish or Dominicanish, perhaps it is actually more translatable and more able to remove itself from English! The same effect could have been produced had the book been written primarily first in Spanish, but perhaps with fewer possibilities for translation given that Spanish is not as well known throughout the world as English is in this moment — does not have as much cultural currency. The different languages represent different places where she has readers and theater audiences. By being translated into the language of these

places, her writing in some ways becomes of these places. I asked her why all in English originally and we had a funny exchange:

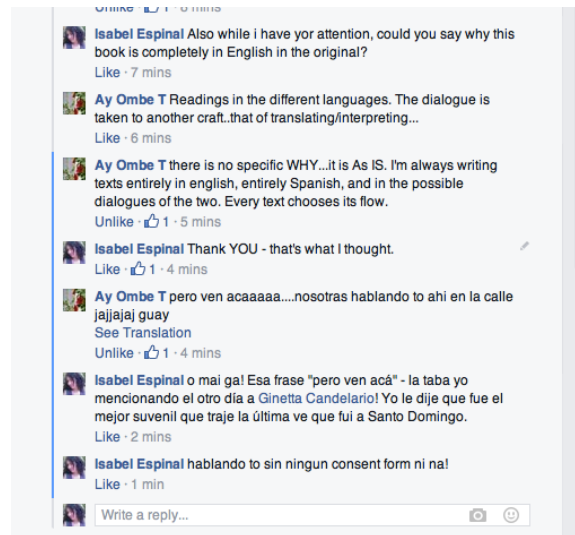


Figure 34 Funny exchange without consent form

That the book is so translatable gives it the weight of a spiritual guide, gives it a universalism akin to religious texts that circle the world. Nevertheless, *Comrade Bliss Ain't Playing* does not profess to give the last word. The book that followed it — *Levente no. Yolayorkdominicanyork* — is so very different — in language, in style, in characters. But moving along, the book that follows or at least was released at the same time as *Levente no. Yolayorkdominicanyork* — *Como la una Como una* — does go back and pick up on the style and to some extent character of *Comrade Bliss Ain't playing*. However, this time the wisdom comes not all in English but all in Spanish with a Portuguese translation. Similar to how *Levente no* makes reference to *Dominicanish* and also continues its themes, *Como la una Como una* makes reference to *Comrade Bliss Ain't Playing* — but is much more explicit and clear in its referencing. The preface to *Como la una* starts out with the statement identifying itself as: “Hermana gemela de ‘Comrade, Bliss ain’t playing’ (Canto de plenitude), Como la Una se viste del cando del alma.”⁶⁸ Instead of leaving you with a conclusion,

⁶⁸ Twin sister to “Comrade, Bliss ain’t playing,” (Song of Plenitude), Like the one is dressed in the soul’s song. [Note: The title for the Spanish version of Comrade Bliss ain’t playing is Canto de

I'd like to leave you with an introduction: I introduce this book to you and hope you find a way to read it.

Outlining Some Actions from/when Researching an Ever Moving and Transparent Artist – A Micro-Action Report

This study has had Participatory Action Research woven lightly in its fabric. The participatory part eluded me but action was more fruitful. Action may seem like a natural outcome in the field of education or sociology or political science, but possibly not so much in cultural studies. What actions can we take from cultural research when the focus is Josefina Báez? How to identify action items in this type of research? In the spirit of not imposing an agenda, one method is to simply listen for action items. I tried to listen for action items that emerged from within the very spaces that Báez chooses to speak in, from her own voice. There were many such moments, many comments over these years. I'm going to go very granular here, and detail many small actions, which is why I used the term micro-action in the heading of this section. "Action" is a vague term. Many times an action is composed of many seemingly small elements that all take effort and time.

Online spaces are the easiest for eavesdropping on what she considers important. Clearly, Josefina Báez indicates that the marketing and selling of her work is an important issue for academics to be concerned with in regards to their actions. This comes up again and again in her Facebook posts. Also, she would occasionally comment on how she used honoraria and fees from performances at universities and colleges as a source of personal income and the challenges around that when more was expected of her than she could accommodate, suggesting that at times she might have been exploited or taken advantage of by the host institutions.

Reading her posts and comments prompted me to try to think of possible actions that would help promote not only the use of her works but also the selling of her works. I could take

Plenitud, which translates to English as Song of Plenitude. "Como la una" translate to English as "Like the one."]

certain actions as a librarian, as an academic and also as a Dominican woman and a reader within a social network of readers. As a librarian, for example, I could write a review or article for library publications. As an academic working in a university that has been promoting community engagement and service learning, I could explore the ways in which this writer's works can be used in our local communities, particularly in the communities with a high concentration of Dominicans, such as Holyoke and Lawrence, but not also limit these types of actions to those communities. I could also simply book a gig for her at UMass in some capacity, using a cultural grant or looking for a department willing to host her.

I felt the need, as I considered all the possible actions, to be very careful about making commitments to any particular action or course of action, for personal reasons: a lot has been going on in my life, including the actual writing of this dissertation, and taking on the commitment to organize an event or marketing campaign could backfire. Over the years since starting this project, I found that action items often required a lot of time that made this particular project (the dissertation) ultimately take longer. A lot of my life was already filled with logistical challenges. As a full time librarian and mother of three children, I had been constantly managing a myriad of details on a daily basis. It may seem out of place to speak of the personal challenges of the research in the actual reporting of the research —and it feels awkward, even as I have written of my personal story in relation to the content and histories that relate to Josefina Báez's work. But for me it seems disingenuous to not discuss it. And here in the main body, rather than in a footnote tucked away. So over the years I kept the prospect and idea of organizing events featuring Báez or any other the other writers in the bigger project tucked away for a later date, a more convenient time.

In the fall of 2014, I finally decided to act on an opportunity to apply for a grant from my university's Center for Latin American Latino and Caribbean Studies. What really helped was the reaching out to a theater instructor and fellow doctoral student, Priscilla Page, to ask if she would be interested in collaborating, and the tremendous collaboration she actually gave as a result. We

applied for the grant together and Priscilla arranged for the logistics of transporting Báez from New York to Amherst, which is a bit complicated given the skimpy bus and train schedule. Priscilla provided a wonderful audience for by encouraging her students to attend. I booked the room, communicated with faculty and staff from other departments, and obtained extra funding, as did Priscilla. I also designed and printed the posters and the Facebook event page. The room was packed, thanks to Priscilla.

I'm so glad I decided to organize this event after all. It wound up giving me some personal extra energy for this project but it also gave me more evidence for some of the theorizing about Báez's writing, and conversations about it gave me more insight into her work. It was interesting to watch the audience reaction, like when certain people laughed out loud. I noticed after a few times, that it was during "Dominican" elements in her reading that certain audience members laughed and ascertained they must be Dominican. Meanwhile, everyone else was quiet and attentive. At other times, more people laughed or reacted. This performance and audience reaction corroborated what I stated before about the special appeal to a Dominican audience while also offering something to others who don't get the inside jokes. After the performance, Báez commented to me about how the presence and reactions of the Dominican students and the patience she sensed of the other audience members prompted her to change her performance and change what she had planned to read, and she seemed really happy about that, pleasantly surprised at everyone's reaction. It was exciting to do this for her and for those Dominican students. When reading Danny Méndez's essay on *Comrade Bliss Ain't Playing*, I was reminded of the importance of improvisation in Baez's work. Méndez writes:

As is the case for those works that are governed by the rules of improvisation that make every performance a variation, in **Comrade, Bliss Ain't Playing** the cultural condition of being Dominican is a practice or *ejercicio* that reacts differently depending on the peculiarities of the stage and its audience. ("The Intricacies of Bliss in Diaspora.")

I got to see this in action!

A little late into the planning of the event it occurred to me that it would be a good venue for selling her work. I spent \$150 of my own money to order 10 copies of *Levente no* and sold them at cost. A few of the students did not have money on them and I told them to go ahead and take a book and pay me if and when they could. This experience of selling the books actually taught me an interesting point about the text and Josefina's approach to the text. Since I ordered the books rather late, they came in a day before the event. I panicked when I noticed that the books that arrived had no page numbers, unlike the version that I had at home from a few years earlier. I contacted Josefina about this to ask if she thought it would be ok to sell them like that and she told me that it was on purpose that the page numbers were missing. On the day of the event I got a chance to ask her, in front of all the attendees, about that and she indicated that providing page numbers was something she found to be intimidating to readers who are not used to reading books and that not having them made the book seem more accessible to those readers.

And for the readers of this essay, I offer this experience as a gift that you might also emulate: you could be rewarded the way we were. No guarantees however! Of course, I will also share a Facebook post with you to encourage you:



Figure 35 Post about Josefina Báez event 2015

Because many of Josefina Báez’s statements that I read for possible actions are made within the space of a social network platform, there is of course also an immediate action that I and others can take: repost, comment, use the social network itself, which I did many times in the course of this dissertation. For example, with one of the Josefina’s posts above, which I reposted and was able to get an interesting conversation going.



Figure 36 Online conversation about the cost of books

Josefina Báez also often simply posts quotes from her books or links to the sites where people could buy them. She has done this pretty frequently over the years. For example, even as I

first wrote the first draft of this section of the chapter (on June 9, 2013), she posted on Facebook the same quote shared earlier that begins *Levente no*:⁶⁹

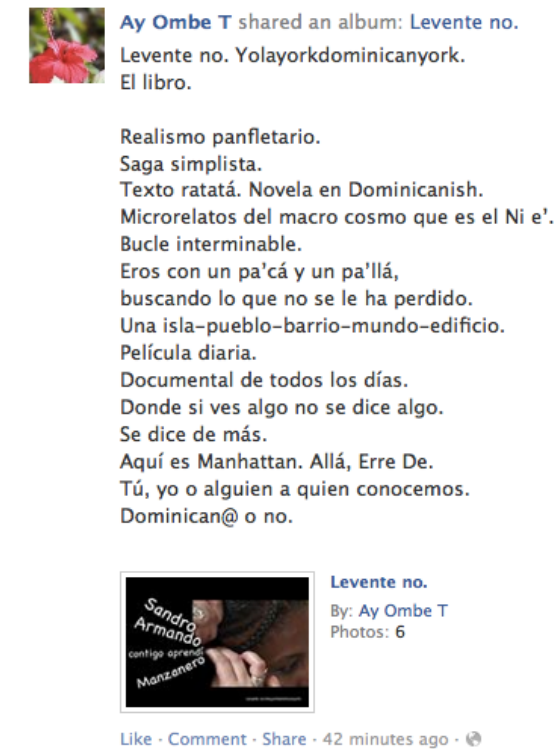


Figure 37 Josefina Báez post about *Levente no. Yolayorkdominicayork*

I once posted a link to the book on Amazon.com, the site Báez recommends for purchase with the intro translated to English. This caught the attention of a few people, including a professor of Spanish. I was touched by that particular like, which felt impactful in its small way, and by the friend who shared the post, and by the non-Latino friend who attempted to comment in Spanish with these grammatically incorrect words that I still understood: “Que fuerte, Isabel y que nuevo o nueva. Yo amolo o amola.”⁷⁰ This all feels so “retail” as opposed to “wholesale,” one

⁶⁹ Pamphletary realism. / Simplistic saga. / Ratata text. Novel in Dominicanish. / Microstories from the macro cosmos that is the Not even./ Never ending curl./ Eros with a here and there,/ looking for something that wasn't lost/ An island-town-neighborhood-world-building./ Daily movie./ Everyday documentary./ Where if you see something you don't say something. / You say too much./ Here is Manhattan. There is Dee Are./ You, me or someone we know. /Dominic@n or not.

⁷⁰ How strong Isabel and how new. I love it.

reader at a time. Maybe there is a value to that — like the slow food movement — the slow reading movement is in full force here and now in this age of social media.



Figure 38 Getting the word out about *Levente no* in a "slow reading" kind of way

With regards to *Dominicanish* specifically, since it's a performance piece, another possible action could be the promotion and advocacy for a performance of this piece by other performers. I would love to find a way to do that, to find Dominican or/and non-Dominican actors who would perform this piece. I asked her in 2005:

Question: Now that the performance is a text, in print, have others performed it?

Answer: Que yo sepa, no. En un momento se quizo hacer la pieza con cinco mujeres diferentes, y posiblemente un hombre. Pero no se hizo. Técnicamente difícil. Vivian en diferentes partes. No había el dinero.⁷¹

⁷¹ Not that I know of. At one time a group of five women and possible one man wanted to do the piece. But it didn't happen. Technically difficult. They lived in different places. There was no money.

That answer left me wanting, all these years to find a way to help make that happen. But if having her do a reading seemed logistically challenging, imagine how much more challenging it is for me to help organize someone else performing her piece theatrically. I have no background in theater or performance and don't know that world very well. And yet, I do have contacts, such as Priscilla Page mentioned above, and I may develop contacts with some of the theater specialists like Ramón Rivera-Servera, who also are familiar and appreciate her work and who might be able to collaborate with me on this kind of action. Or maybe just take the idea themselves and run with it. Or maybe *you* who are reading this will be the one to make it happen!

The list of actions could go on, but I will leave it at this and move onto the next writers. I know these types of actions happen all the time with academics who do criticism work of contemporary writers and communities. I'm sure many who have had the opportunity to invite a writer they were working on to their campus have done so. For example, in Josefina Báez's case, on his CV, Larry La Fountain, whose critical work I cited above, states that he:

Organized three-month residency, performance, and class visits of performing artist Josefina Báez, Ayombe Theatre, NY (Winter 2005; received Center for World Performance Studies grant of \$6,000; King Chávez Parks Visiting Professorship, \$1,500) Total Budget of over \$11,000. (La Fountain-Stokes 2015)

This was a great find — with the details about what he did, including the funding sources and the total budget. Something I will tuck away for possible future actions. I am grateful to La Fountain Stokes for this example. But why not be even more explicit about it? Or at least explicit in a different way — by including these actions in the published work we do? This way we can go beyond the spaces of contemporary literary criticism and help the writers as much as in in our limited powers. And also help readers. And those who might become readers.

CHAPTER 3

INTIMATE SPACES OF CULTURE MAKING AND CULTURE INTAKING: YRENE SANTOS, MARIANELA MEDRANO, AND AURORA ARIAS

There are whole communities of Dominican authors who live and write in the United States who don't write in English, but rather in Spanish and whose works travel not just in the United States and Dominican Republic but throughout the Spanish-speaking world — and beyond. I want to introduce you to three of these writers and take you to some of the spaces where they both produce and reflect Dominican culture in the United States beyond Washington Heights. Marianela Medrano, Yrene Santos, and Aurora Arias extend the boundaries not only of where Dominicans can write from or to but also the boundaries of the male-dominated Dominican literary spaces that did not always welcome women. We'll take a close look and hear stories of the spaces of production for Marianela Medrano and Yrene Santos, the spaces and places that appear in the texts they produce, as well as the spaces of their texts' publication and reception. That I am writing and you are reading this in English connects with another space we'll explore: the place of translation in Latina/o lives and in the spaces of contemporary literature. Following that, by interviewing and introducing you to Aurora Arias I will take you out of the USA and into the DR and follow some of the places that this writer explores literally as well as in her work. Aurora has been for a long time a seeker of experiences that she infuses in her writing. She now lives far away from the DR and from Washington Heights, in Michigan, where she laments a lifestyle of people who move through spaces in cars rather than by foot, noting that for all their comforts people there are missing crucial parts of life. (“Además te pierdes de muchas cosas, she says.”). Similarly, my goal in looking at these authors as a pedestrian rather than in a fast moving vehicle, meandering at times and stopping at some interesting spots, is to help you not lose out on Dominican women's knowledge.

Contemporaries to Josefina Báez, Yrene Santos, Marianela Medrano, and Aurora Arias have produced and distributed their work in the Dominican Republic and the United States, as

well as in other Latin American countries and Spain. Like Báez, and the community from which they come, they and their work are transnational. Also like Báez, they circulate and have audiences in various other countries. Much can be said about the crossing of nations and places and spaces in the production and reception of their work. I know this in an intimate way because since 1991, when I first met Marianela, continuing into the early 1990s when I met Yrene and Aurora through Marianela, I've had many conversations with them, covering personal as well as literary topics. Later I formalized these talks with structured interviews and an invitation to participate in a Participatory Action Research project that includes the blog venue *El fogón de las escritoras* (<http://el-fogon-de-escriptoras.blogspot.com>). In various spaces and places and via multiple methods, we've explored their work and their working lives in the context of poetry, genre, literary spaces, sex, social class and the tastes of American audiences and beyond. Throughout this process, I've thought about what it means that they are Dominican women writing solely or mostly in Spanish while living in the United States. All three are part of the "generación de los 80," a literary movement of the 1980s in the Dominican Republic. At that time all three of them were in their 20s. Over the decades they have maintained close literary and personal ties across the USA-Dominican Republic.

Marianela Medrano has mostly authored poetry, most of it in Spanish. Her first two books, *Oficio de vivir* (1986) and *Los alegres ojos de la tristeza* (1987), were written and published while she lived in the Dominican Republic. In the early 1990s Marianela moved to the United States, where she continued to write in Spanish, edited the literary section of a Spanish-language newspaper in New Haven, Connecticut, and published a book in New York, *Regando esencias/ The Scent of Waiting* (1998). In the United States, she wrote two subsequent books of poetry, *Curada de espantos* (2002) and *Diosas de la Yuca* (2011), but found a feminist publisher for them in Spain, Ediciones Terremozza. She also found a Spanish publisher for her children's story book, *Prietica* (2013). She published a poem in English, "El Corte," in a special issue of the journal *The Black Scholar* (2015) and a bilingual book of selected poems and translations of previously published and

unpublished work, *Rooting* (2017). She has published many other things in many other places — mostly essays and poems. In 2015, Marianela Medrano was one of the two honored writers of the Dominican Book Fair of New York (Feria del Libro Dominicano en Nueva York) (Comisionado).

Yrene Santos has made the United States her home since 1992. She began publishing in the Dominican Republic in the 1980s and has continued to write and publish since residing in the United States, joining a tradition of Dominican writers living in the United States, but who have been overlooked in literary histories and commentaries (Torres-Saillant; Molina). She also has performed her poetry in a multitude of venues throughout the Northeast. Her training as an actor combined with her distinctly Cibaeña⁷² lyrical intonations have given her oral readings an added dimension that cannot easily be transmitted on the written page. She has been a member of various writers circles, including the Tertulia de Escritoras Dominicanas en Estados Unidos and the prestigious Taller Literario César Vallejo in the Dominican Republic. Her first book of poetry, *Desnudez del silencio*, was written and published in the Dominican Republic in 1988, to critical acclaim. In 1998, she published an unbound small collection of poems inserted into an envelope, *Reencuentro*, under the atypical *Candelaria* series edited by Puerto Rican writer Lourdes Vázquez out of New York — atypical for being published in envelopes and not bound into books.

⁷² Cibaeña is Dominican Spanish word, an adjective meaning, from El Cibao, a region in the Dominican Republic with a distinct accent.

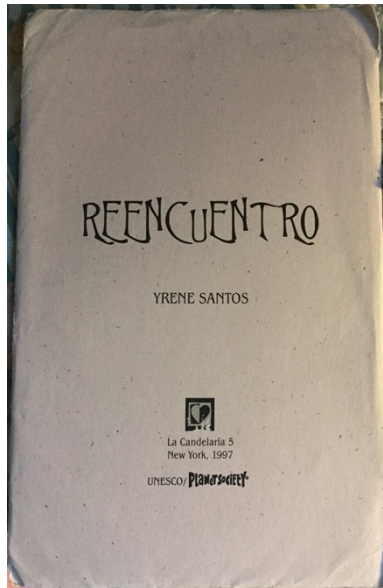


Figure 39 Cover of *Reencuentro*

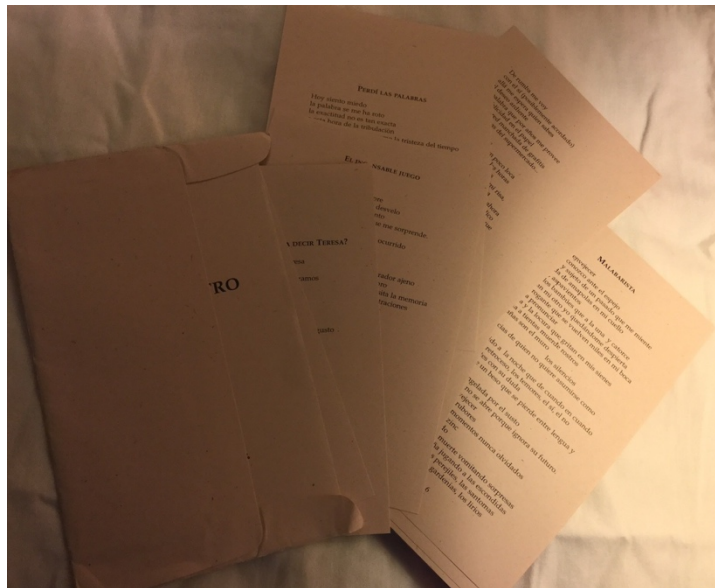


Figure 40 Interior of *Reencuentro*

Santos' second and third bound books, *El incansable juego* (2002) and *Después de la lluvia* (2009), were written in the United States, but published in the Dominican Republic, also to critical acclaim. In 2013, Artepoética Press in New York published *Me sorprendió geométrica (poemas reunidos)*, a compilation of her poetry with essays about her work by various literary critics. In 2016, Yrene Santos was one of the two honored writers of the Dominican Book Fair of New York (Feria del Libro Dominicano en Nueva York) (Sosa 2016); that honor included the publication of

her book *Septiembre Casi Termina* (2016) by the Dominican government's cultural ministry publishing house, Editora Nacional.

Aurora Arias started out as a poet along with Marianela Medrano and Yrene Santos, and later delved deeply into fiction with short story collections that have gotten much critical acclaim and have been the subject of various academic studies. "Considered one of the most important members of her poetic generation, 'the generation of the 80s,'" according to the online magazine *Words Without Borders* ("Aurora Arias"), she has published two books of poetry and one short story collection in Dominican Republic, *Vivienda de pajaros* (1986) and *Piano lila* (1994), and *Invi's Paradise y otros relatos* (1998) and in Puerto Rico *Fin de mundo y otros relatos* (2000), and *Emoticons* (2007)⁷³.

Although all three are of the Generación de los 80, they do not always get recognized for their participation and contributions within that literary movement — neither during that time nor today. The recognition is sometimes there and sometimes not. For example, a cover of a periodical from 1989 with the headline "Literatura de los ochenta," includes both Yrene and Aurora.

⁷³ *Emoticons* was subsequently republished in Argentina (2015).



Figure 41 Dominican magazine cover featuring Literature of the 80s

On the other hand, in his 2012 review of the poetic generations of the 80s and those beyond, Belliard Basilio does not once mention the important role of women and feminism. Not once. As documented by scholar Daisy Cocco de Filippis, the contemporary literary environment, both within as well as outside the Dominican Republic, has been hostile to Dominican women in various ways, including sexism, racism and Eurocentrism (Cocco De Filippis 1988). In numerous personal conversations in 1994 with Marianela Medrano, I learned that she, along with Yrene Santos, Aurora Arias, and other women of their generation, found the need to organize with

others as women poets in the 1980s in Santo Domingo because there were so few spaces where women writers were openly welcomed at that time. Years later, in the literary spaces of Dominican writers writing in Spanish in the New York area in the early 1990s, they also encountered rampant sexism, a transnational sexism—a sexism that works across the United States and Dominican Republic—which prompted Medrano to join with Cocco de Filippis and others to create the Tertulia de Escritoras Dominicanas. I was invited to this group and have many memories of it.

Tertulias are literary or intellectual get-togethers, with a long tradition in the Spanish-speaking world. The Dominican tertulias that were taking place in New York City in the early 1990s were not spaces where women writers felt welcomed as writers. Men’s voices dominated as did the reading of their works. When Marianela and Daisy decided to create an alternative space that would put at the center Dominican women writers, they did so in a very inclusionary way. Daisy generously opened up her home in Queens, New York and writers came from as far away as Boston, Massachusetts to attend. Sometimes there would be visitors from even further away such as the Dominican Republic, Cuba and Argentina. There was always lots of food. Although the focus was to give women writers a space and a place, men were not excluded, and although the focus was also Dominican women writers, writers and participants from other nationalities were included. It was at the tertulias, for example, that Puerto Rican writer, publisher and librarian Lourdes Vázquez, a regular tertuliente, came into contact with Yrene Santos and eventually published Yrene’s first collection of poem outside of the Dominican Republic, *Reencuentro*.

The very day I wrote this, I posted a photo on Facebook of the cover of *Reencuentro* and tagged Lourdes and Yrene, and a wonderful thing happened. Lourdes reposted it with this intro: “Se trabajaron 10 poetas en esta serie y se cocinaron en la estufa de mi casa; excepto el del Odette que lo hizo en México. Entre ellos: Yrene Santos, Odette Alonso, Isabel Espinal y Pedro López

Adorno.⁷⁴ (December 7, 2015). And Yrene commented: “Fue grandioso. Mi primera publicación después de *Desnudez del silencio*, 1988 y fuera de la República Dominicana. Me iba a tu casa, que me encantaba y hasta comíamos. Siempre te recuerdo Lourdes, amiga y te agradezco un montón por tenerme pendiente para ser parte de ese hermoso proyecto. Gracias por revivir esos momentos. Un abrazo grandote!”⁷⁵

The tertulias that took place in the home of Dr. Fillipis resulted in the production of a book including all the regular tertuliantes, along with writings by some men and some non-Dominican women as indicated in the title: *Tertuliano: dominicanas y amiga[os] / Hanging out: Dominican women and friends*. They also garnered some local New York media attention:

Some of today's most provocative and authentic Latin Caribbean literature is being created by Dominican, Cuban and Puerto Rican women writers in Flushing, 1,500 miles from the sun of their native islands. ... They have been doing it for three years in the living room of Prof. Daisy De Filippis' unpretentious home, where the group comes together one Sunday per month. She and Nunzio, her husband, cook for the group. On a recent day, the smell of spaghetti and shrimp was mouth-watering. ... The tertuliantes break all stereotypes. Mostly working women of color and of different ages, they do not fit pre-conceived notions about who writers are or how they look. More important, their works hardly fit their societies' definition of feminine literature. (Ruiz)

The tertulias were also places for the texts themselves to exist before and apart from their reception. “We are not a workshop but a mutual audience,” explained De Filippis. “We read to each other our works in progress and can count on honest feedback.” The feedback, encouraging or critical, is invariably well received because the women trust one another personally and artistically.” (Ruiz)

Yet even though the tertulias at Daisy’s house were an intimate space for the co creation of writing, most of the writers of course wrote alone somewhere before arriving at that place,

⁷⁴ “We worked with 10 poets in this series and they were cooked in the stove of my house, except Odette’s which she did in Mexico. Among them: Yrene Santos, Odette Alonso, Isabel Espinal y Pedro López Adorno.”

⁷⁵ “It was grand. My first publication after *Desnudez del silencio*, 1988 and outside of the Dominican Republic. I would go to your house, which I loved it and we even ate there. I always remember you Lourdes, friend and I am so grateful to you for keeping me in mind to be part of that lovely project. Thank you for reliving those moments. A big hug to you!”

outside the group meetings and then brought their creations to share. Where did they write back then? Where do they write now?

**Writing *El incansable juego* in Queens and *Prietica* in Connecticut:
The Spaces of Production for Marianela Medrano and Yrene Santos**

21 mayo 80

Dear mujeres de color, companions in writing —

I sit here naked in the sun, typewriter against my knee, trying to visualize you. Black woman huddles over a desk on the fifth floor of some New York tenement. Sitting on a porch in south Texas, a Chicana fanning away mosquitos and the hot air, trying to arouse the smoldering embers of writing. Indian woman walking to school or work lamenting the lack of time to weave writing into your life. Asian American, lesbian, single mother, tugged in all directions by children, lover or ex-husband, and the writing.

It is not easy writing this letter. It began as a poem, a long poem. I tried to turn it into an essay but the result was wooden, cold. I have not yet unlearned the esoteric bullshit and pseudo-intellectualizing that school brainwashed into my writing. (Anzaldúa, *This Bridge* 2002, 183)

This powerful seemingly simple beginning to a chapter in the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* serves in a way as an introduction or maybe invitation for this section. An invitation to explore the spaces and circumstances in which women of color write. An invitation to explore the conditions in which Marianela and Yrene have written at different points of their lives. In interviews, I asked them a series of questions about what the spaces were like where they began to write and where they write today. Medrano responded that she does not need a particular space in order to do her writing:

...in terms of space, physical space for writing, I can write in about any place, and I think that's linked to how I encountered writing in my life — that I first started writing in my head. Before I even knew how to read or write, I was already writing in my head and I used to do that in the open space, in the countryside. So the idea of having a physical space, of having an office — and you know Virginia Woolf said the room to write or whatever she called it — didn't really become a need until after I was in my early thirties. ... And even so, even now that I have my space I can write anywhere. ... Wherever I am that's where I write. So for me the space I need for writing is more an internal space. Once I find that interior internal place, I can be sitting on a needle and I can write!

She does however, have memories of particular spaces that nourished her writing in her life:

...now I am writing a lot about that open space of Copey where I was born and I'm writing a lot about the space I found, for instance, when I used to go to the lagoon, la laguna. And for instance, in talking about space, I just wrote a piece about the space, what was hidden in the spaces. You know when, *te lo voy a decir en español — la laguna cuando se secaba, la tierra se abría, cuando la tierra se agrieta?*⁷⁶ I've been playing with how I really think that I found poetry in those cracks and I've been writing pieces that take me back to those spaces, to those cracks, and how much was there and how I can say that I used to sort of file words there so I could go back to the same place and just go back to those words and play with them.

She has always found nature to be an important catalyst for writing, both in the Dominican Republic as well as the United States.

...because writing for me is a need. So that need was going to surface anyway, but I think being in the open space and also in communion with nature, because I really was connected to nature, that that really helped me open up the internal spaces that allowed me to become the writer. But I've been thinking a lot about that, how important that time in my life was and how I used to spend hours and hours there just playing and playing with ideas, making up things, choosing one word and just playing with it.

She says that even today the most productive spaces are those where she can be at peace and near nature and that that could simply mean being able to “see a tree, a piece of sky, or feel the breeze coming in.”

But the reality is that the best writing that I've done has been in parks, laying on the ground, and even riding trains. Or this — is a good thing — for many years because I was commuting to work [in Connecticut], I used to take a tape recorder so that moving space was where I wrote. ... A lot of the poems from *Curada de Espantos* happened like that. So that was “poetry in motion.”

Likewise, Santos has also done a good deal of writing while in motion, but in her case it is a subway train in New York City rather than a car in the highways of Connecticut.

Isabel Espinal:... la pregunta de dónde físicamente tú escribes. Y me estabas diciendo que tú escribes en el tren.

Yrene Santos: En el tren, sí.

Isabel Espinal: ¿Qué número de tren es?

Yrene Santos: En el tren A [laughter]

Isabel Espinal: ¿Entre qué parada y qué parada? [laughter]

⁷⁶ I will tell you in Spanish — the lagoon when the earth dries and opens up and cracks.

Yrene Santos: [laughter]⁷⁷

Medrano, in going to the open spaces, did contradict gender roles that were expected of her in her youth in the Dominican Republic. She describes her explorations in spaces outside the home as “doing what boys did,” whereas girls were supposed to be in the house, “learning how to become a woman.” Medrano recounts being punished for going to the lagoon and defying parental expectations of where she was supposed to be.

Related to this, Santos spoke of how family ties compete with the demands of writing, and how that is sometimes expressed in terms of spaces she should or should not be in, according to the expectations and desires she and others have of herself. And writing competes with things she equally enjoys. Being a single head of household already puts demands on her time and the spaces she must spend that time that are non-negotiable.

Yrene Santos: Por ejemplo yo estoy aquí, pero si yo se que arriba están en chercha, que arriba están en la cocina, están oyendo musiquita, yo quisiera estar allá. Pero mi responsabilidad hace que yo me quede aquí. Pero me da como un sufrimiento — ese querer estar y no estar. Yo quiero estar aquí pero quiero estar allá. Aquí de manera individual yo tengo cosas que hacer. Nadie puede hacer mi trabajo, nadie puede corregir un examen, nadie puede hacer un examen, nadie puede escribir un poema por mi. Un poquito de pesar, angustia porque no estoy participando. No estoy aprovechando ese tiempo que están vivos. Mis papás están de una edad. Se me entra una incertidumbre. Si pudiera estar mas tiempo con ellos. Pero la realidad es que no puedo estar todo mi tiempo con ellos. Ni con mis hijos tampoco. ¿Cómo puedo asumir las responsabilidades de los gastos, como cabeza de familia?⁷⁸

⁷⁷ [Isabel Espinal: . . . the question of where do you physically write. And you were telling me that you write on the train.

Yrene Santos: On the train, yes.

Isabel Espinal: What number train?

Yrene Santos: On the A train [laughter]

Isabel Espinal: Between which stops? [laughter]

Yrene Santos: [laughter]

⁷⁸ Yrene Santos: For example, I am here, but if I know that upstairs they are having fun, that they are in the kitchen, that they are listening to music, I would like to be there. But my responsibility makes me stay here. But I get a sort of suffering — that wanting to be and not be. I want to be here but I want to be there. Here I have to do individual things. No one can do my work, no one can correct the exams, no one can make up the exams, no one can write a poem for me. A bit of lament, anguish because I am not participating. I am not making the most of this time that they are alive. My parents are of an advanced age. I get a sense of uncertainty: if only I could spend

Like the Dominicans who have transplanted aspects of Dominican Republic to communities into the United States, both Medrano and Santos have transplanted aspects of Dominican spaces into their lives in North America and even into their writing.

Marianela Medrano: I write in Connecticut, I write from New Milford, but half of me is still in Dominican Republic. So ... sort of like I'm a turtle and I carry my home...with me ... the space of Copey where I was born is very vivid in my writing. ...the afternoons and even the sounds and the colors of the afternoons there, everything is so vivid and it's written from New Milford! Most of the time in winter time!

...escribí mucho en ese espacio de Nueva York pero yo creo que tenía mucho que ver con la gente. Por ejemplo, lo que Washington Heights significaba para mí. Y por ejemplo escribí mucho sobre el shock que me producía el cemento, los edificios, la falta de árboles.

Isabel Espinal: ¿Tú crees que tenía ese mismo efecto en otras personas que no eran escritores, otros dominicanos que estaban en esa situación?

Marianela Medrano: Probablemente. Yo creo que aunque Washington Heights es muy alegre, bullicioso, pero hay una nostalgia que está muy viva en la gente. Bueno por eso tocan la música alta y por eso cocinan todo el tiempo: para traer la isla.⁷⁹

In Santos' case, she and her family managed to transplant a whole way of organizing themselves physically into an apartment building in Queens:

Yrene Santos: Toda mi familia vive en el mismo edificio. Por eso yo digo que yo vivo como en una aldea. Eso es muy importante. Yo vivo como en una aldea porque yo vivo en el primer piso, un hermano vive en el tercer piso con su compañera y su hija (que yo soy la madrina, la madrina y tía) , y en el cuarto piso en un apartamento vive mi hermana con su hija y con mis papás. En otro apartamento, también en el cuarto piso, vive mi otra hermana con su familia...y con la única tía que tengo viva. Y tengo otro hermano que vive aquí en Queens pero por otro lado. Y mis dos hermanas que llegaron hace 8 o 9 meses, que se están quedando conmigo [en este apartamento].⁸⁰

more time with them. But the reality is that I cannot be with them all the time. Nor with my children. How would I then assume the financial responsibilities, as head of the household?

⁷⁹ ... I wrote a lot in that space of New York, but I think that had to do with the people. For example, what Washington Heights meant to me. And, for example, I wrote a lot about the shock that all that cement produced in me, the buildings, the lack of trees.

[Isabel Espinal: Do you think that the place had the same effect on other people, who were not writers, other Dominicans who were in that situation?]

Marianela Medrano: Probably. I think that even though Washington Heights is a very happy, boisterous place, there is a nostalgia that is very alive in the people. Well that is why they play so much music and cook all the time: to bring the island back.

⁸⁰ Yrene Santos; My whole family lives in the same building. That's why I say that I live in a village. That's very important. I live in a village because I live on the first floor, a brother lives on the third floor with his partner and daughter (I am her godmother, godmother and aunt), and on the fourth floor in an apartment lives my sister with her daughter and my parents. In another

Thus Santos corroborates the depiction of Dominicans by various academics, such as Glenn Hendricks, who wrote a book about Dominicans in New York, calling us “villagers in transition,” and Peggy Levitt who referred to us as “transnational villagers.” What these academics perhaps don’t corroborate is how these transplanted villages are places where Dominican writers live and literature is produced. For this understanding, an academic like Marta Moreno Vega is helpful. Moreno Vega writes in her book the *The Altar of My Soul*: “The few rooms in our apartment sparkled with the warm colors of the tropics ... My mother took care that the blue on the walls was the same color as the Puerto Rican ocean.” She said this not only as a transplanted woman of Caribbean heritage who brings the tropics to the urban environment of New York City, but also as a writer, an academic, an artist, a woman with a PhD. Not someone writing about underprivileged others, but someone writing of herself; not a literate person writing of non-literates, but a literate person who comes from a place thought to be the space of non-literates. Likewise, the work of Josefina Báez corroborates the experience of Yrene Santos. Santos explains one way that apartment buildings are culturally and socially organized in a Dominican way, while Báez writes of her own invented building in her book with this cover of a typical building in Washington Heights.

apartment, also on the fourth floor lives my other sister with her family... and the only aunt that I have still living. And I have another brother who lives here in Queens but in another part. And my two sisters who arrived 8 or 9 months ago, they are living with me [in this apartment].

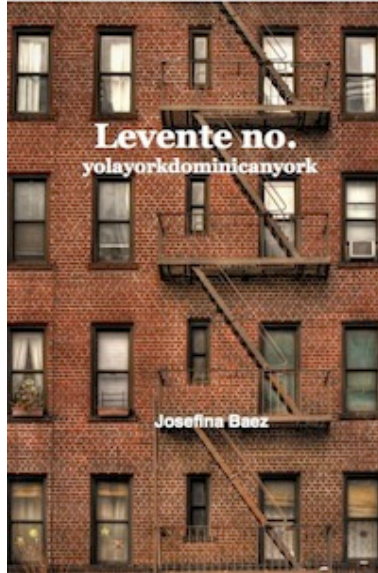


Figure 42 Book cover *Levente no. yolayorkdominicanyork*

Dominican and Non-Dominican Spaces

Although Washington Heights is closely associated with Dominican culture in the New York area, neither Medrano nor Santos nor Arias resides there. Medrano has resided in various towns in Connecticut, while Santos has resided in a neighborhood in Queens, New York that has more of a South Asian cultural identity rather than a Dominican or even Latino identity, and Arias has resided in Michigan. In Medrano's case, this is an intentional living situation. In an interview I conducted with her, Medrano explained that it's not that she wishes to be far away from a Dominican community, but rather that she does not find fulfillment away from nature and feels she cannot thrive in an urban environment. Medrano questions the extent to which to be Dominican-American has been defined in exclusively urban terms. (Medrano Personal interview)

Marianela Medrano: ...Ok me interesa Washington Heights porque tiene que ver con lo dominicano, pero no puedo vivir en Washington Heights porque hay mucho cemento, muchos edificios. Entonces ¿dónde he vivido? En espacios donde yo pueda tener un poquito de eso. Hasta el punto de preferir la soledad. Porque no ha sido fácil para mí. Lo fácil hubiera sido estar con mi familia. Estar donde me dieran — qué se yo — apoyo en lugar de pagar un baby-sitter. Pero el espacio físico para mí es importante. Alguien puede ir a Washington Heights y escribir una literatura urbana. Pero yo lo que siento es el deseo de volver hacia atrás. De volver a Copey, de volver a ese espacio que yo reconozco y escribir sobre Washington Heights desde ese espacio. Si tu piensas en la literatura que escribe Josefina es una literatura urbana. ¿Porqué? Porque Josefina es de ciudad. O Diógenes. Y si tú piensas, en cómo Yrene escribe — que es también de campo — ella se

va al campo. Tú encuentras flores, tú encuentras otras cosas del campo... Ángela Hernández — los cuentos son en el campo. Hay esa necesidad de recobrar ese espacio en el que uno se formó.⁸¹

The place that Marianela talks about might look like this picture of a house in the Cibao region of the Dominican Republic, from where she spent the second part of her childhood and where Yrene is also from, very different from the picture of the apartment building on the cover of Josefina Báez's book:



Figure 43 House in the Cibao countryside, Dominican Republic

These two images, of the apartment building in Washington Heights and the house in El Cibao, invoke —and help explain— the phenomenon of casitas in New York City. In turn, the

⁸¹ Marianela Medrano: OK, I'm interested in Washington Heights because it has to do with what is Dominican, but I cannot live in Washington Heights because there is too much cement, too many buildings. So where have I lived? In spaces where I can have a little of that. [access to nature] To the point of preferring solitude. Because it has not been easy for me. It would have been easier to be with family. To be where I would be given — I don't know — support instead of having to pay a baby-sitter. But the physical space is important for me. Someone can go to Washington Heights and write an urban literature. But what I feel is the desire to go back. To go back to Copey, to go back to that space that I recognize and I write about Washington Heights from that space. If you think about the literature that Josefina [Baez] writes, it's an urban literature. Why? Because Josefina is from the city. Or Diógenes [Abréu]. And if you think of how Yrene writes — who is also from the country — she goes to the country. You find flowers, you find other things. Ángela Hernández — her stories are from the country. There is a necessity to recuperate that space in which one was formed.

phenomenon of casitas help explain part of the mental condition of many Dominican in the USA, including Marianela Medrano and Yrene Santos, including myself. Look at these two images:



Figure 44 Casita in New York (Garfinkel 2014)



Figure 45 Casita in East Harlem (Cooper 2010)

They're like mashups of the previous two images, the apartment building in New York and the country house in El Cibao. Casitas are not normally mentioned within the context of Dominican writers or Dominican communities. Yet within Latino Studies more broadly, some people are familiar with this part of Nuyorican culture and history called casitas. Juan Flores has a chapter in his book *Bomba to Hip-hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* on casitas (Flores 2000). He wrote: "Wherever you go in the South Bronx and East Harlem (El Barrio) these days you're liable to

catch sight of a casita, in its design and atmosphere magically evocative of the rural Caribbean...” (Flores 2000, p. 66) In an online journal for “arts & culture workers,” Molly Garfinkel defines and reports on casitas in 2014, in an essay arguing for the casita called Rincón Criollo to be included in the National Register of Historic Places. “Literally ‘small houses,’ casitas are cabins, bungalows, or cottages surrounded by gardens that recall the look and feel of rural Puerto Rico ... New York City’s casitas are derived from balloon-frame vernacular housing of Puerto Rico’s countryside.” (Garfinkel) That vernacular housing seems to be the same for the Dominican countryside.

Casitas are not all that different from Dominican rural houses that form that mental geographic space that Medrano insists she and Santos write from. And that readers like myself read from — and yet many of us who’ve had the rural Caribbean experience as well as the urban New York experience have not had the opportunity to experience these physical casitas in our day to day life, since the casitas exists in certain New York neighborhoods and not others. The same ethos is there for us nevertheless, it’s in our way of moving in the world: a mental mashup of different styles that show up in so many things we do. However, Dominicans in the USA and Latinos more broadly are often thought as exclusively urban, without this rural element that we know exists in our psyches. I asked Marianela about this:

Isabel Espinal: Yo a veces pienso que quizás el estereotipo que hay ahora, o quizás no es estereotipo, quizás es lo normal es que los dominicanos somos ahora una gente urbana. Ese estereotipo que tienen los americanos cuando piensan “Dominican American” tiene que ser algo de una experiencia urbana. ¿Eso te ha perjudicado a ti o no? Que quizás esperan algo diferente de ti...

Marianela Medrano: No sé, en realidad no he tratado de penetrar el mercado americano, así que yo no sé como se puede recibir. Las pocas cosas que he escrito que han salido han sido más la escritura que te digo que ha sido acerca de mi época en el campo, de mi papá viviendo aquí en Estados Unidos, como yo ahora veo esos dos mundos. Y se han publicado. O sea, que les ha interesado a quienes lo han publicado. Pero tú tienes razón. Porque si vemos lo que ha escrito Junot, incluso el último libro que escribió es muy urbano. Yo no lo he leído pero tengo entendido que es muy urbano. Y su primer libro era ... Pero no sé, bueno no porque el de Julia Álvarez es un viaje regresivo también. Ese libro no es urbano. Ni ninguna de las cosas que ella escribe. Quizás un poquito *How The García Girls Lost Their Accents*. Pero que existen estereotipos, claro que sí, por eso es que no todo el mundo penetra el mercado americano. Porque ellos tienen algo muy concreto de lo que es la literatura latina. Una idea muy clara y tú te metes dentro la esquema que ellos quieren o no vas para ninguna parte.

Isabel Espinal: ¿Y qué es esa idea de qué es la literatura latina?

Marianela Medrano: Pues, lo mismo que tú estás diciendo: lo urbano, la lucha, la pobreza. La pobreza no solamente financiera, pero también hasta cierto punto emocional. Casi como una negación de cómo somos nosotros en realidad... lo de nosotros en realidad es más acerca de las relaciones, las conexiones. Pero sin embargo los libros que salen que se venden mucho son estas historias de madres que no quieren a sus hijos, o hijas que se han ido, que se desconectan de su familia. Y sin embargo nosotros somos una cultura de relaciones. We are relational as a culture.⁸²

In *This Bridge Called My Back*, Mitsuye Yamada refers to a “psychological place we now call Asian Pacific America.” (76) Is it possible that there are psychological spaces of being Dominican, that our ways of relating, of being relational as Marianela says, form the characteristics of that psychological place? That many of us live in invisible casitas dotted in different areas of the United States and elsewhere?

Invisible Casita: Photographing Some of the Production Spaces of Yrene Santos

The casitas phenomenon is very visually compelling, as this photographer found:

In 1988 ... I began to photograph the little houses that had sprung up in vacant lots all over New York City. We found around 75 casita-like structures in Brooklyn, the Bronx and on the Lower Eastside. Their architecture ranged from simple pavilions to perfect

⁸² Isabel Espinal: I sometimes think that perhaps the stereotype that exists now, and maybe it's not a stereotype but rather the norm, is that Dominicans are now an urban people. That's the stereotype that Americans have when they think of the phrase "Dominican American," that it will have something to do with an urban experience. Has that hurt you in any way? That perhaps they expect something different from you than what you are actually?

Marianela Medrano: I don't know, in reality I haven't tried to penetrate the American market, so I don't know how my work would be received. The few things that I have written that have been published have been the writing that has been about my time in the country, while my father lived here in the US, and how I now see those two worlds. And that work has been published, so it has interested those who have published it. But you are right, because if we look at what Junot has written, including his last book, which is very urban. I haven't read it but I heard it's very urban. And his first book was urban. But I don't know... I'm not sure because the books by Julia Alvarez there is a regressive voyage also. It is not urban. And none of the things she writes.

Perhaps *How The García Girls Lost Their Accents*. But of course stereotypes do exist and that is why not everyone penetrates the American market. Because they have a very concrete idea of what Latino literature is. And you need to fit within the mold that they want or you go nowhere.

Isabel Espinal: And what is that idea of what Latino literature is supposed to be?

Marianela Medrano: Well, exactly what you were saying: urban, struggle, poverty. Poverty not only financial but to some extent emotional. Almost like a negation of what we are in reality... our reality has more to do with relationships, connections. However, the books that come out, that sell, are those stories of mothers that do not love their children, or daughters who have left, who are disconnected from their families. And yet we are a culture of relationships. We are relational as a culture.

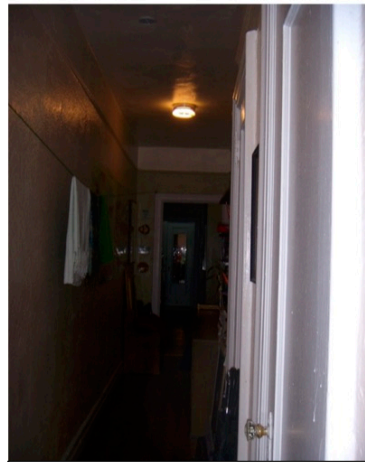
replicas of traditional Puerto Rican Houses. From 1988-1990 we watched as casitas were built, destroyed, rebuilt and abandoned. We attended pig roasts, Father's Day parties, music and dance classes, and Puerto Rican Day celebrations and marveled at the vibrant culture contained in spaces carved out among the ruins of former high rise apartment buildings. (Cooper 2010)

Flores wrote about how even the Smithsonian featured casitas in a 1991 exhibit at its Arts and Industries Building ("Salvación Casita" 63). Casitas are a very visible way to transplant Caribbean culture to New York. The photographs of these casitas are indeed striking. For those of us who have ties to similar Caribbean architecture, looking at these photos invokes a sense of home — even if and as we also call New York City home. However, even without these outside replicas, Dominicaness and Caribbeaness exist in the urban spaces of the USA, as Marta Moreno Vega writes. There must be thousands of such invisible casitas, some of them housing writers and all manner of artists, philosophers, strategists — many professions and identities not often associated with Dominicaness in the mainstream USA. I asked Yrene Santos if I could photograph the space she lived in with this thought in mind and with the thought that it might help in an understanding of the themes in her writing. Below are some photographs her home environment in 2007, a place where she did much of her writing. (For this session, we were not able to take pictures of the A train where she said she said she has also has done a significant amount of writing.) Some of these pictures also mirror the images found in her poetry (e.g. doors, hallways, bedrooms). Additionally, some of the images here were discussed neither in her poetry directly (as far as I can tell), nor in the interview with the writer. In particular I present images of houses on the street Santos lives on. These houses are presented here in order to give a context of the immediate surroundings of the immediate neighborhood spaces in which Santos lived and worked for many years beginning in 1992. The living conditions in these single and double family houses may likely be in sharp contrast to what is lived in the apartment buildings, yet these houses form part of the everyday walking spatial landscape of Yrene Santos' life and also lives in the realities and memories of some of her readers, myself included. It is my belief that a tension builds inside of people like myself who live in a "building" as opposed to a house. This tension often

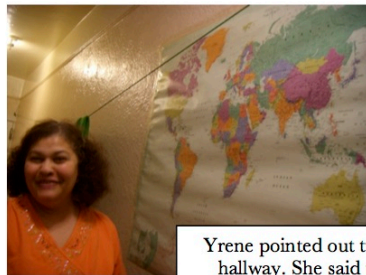
feeds the imagination — one may wonder what it must be like to live in a house. It may also feed an air of mystery as one wonders what is in those houses but one never goes inside. This approach is not unlike Certeau's influential assertions about the importance of "walking in the city" but it expands those ideas to the importance of walking inside the structures of the city and greeting and spending time in the spaces of those people's lives.



Yrene's cheerful greeting from the front door.



Entrance hallway within Yrene's apartment.



Yrene pointed out two maps that are prominent in her hallway. She said these were very important to her.



Yrene's living room. Visiting were the performance artist Josefina Báez (left) and the poet and director José de la Rosa. (right).



José de la Rosa, Yrene and her oldest son, Oscar.

Figure 46 Collage in Yrene's home, 2007, space of Dominican women's writing



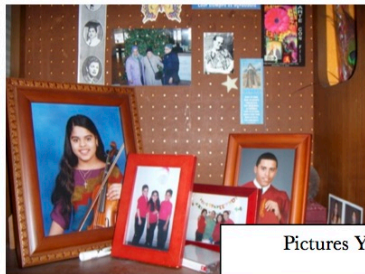
Yrene's home is a place of much laughter and affection.



Corner in living room where she did writing is done



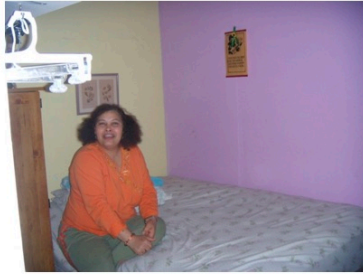
Bookcase she views from writing corner



Pictures Yrene considers important.



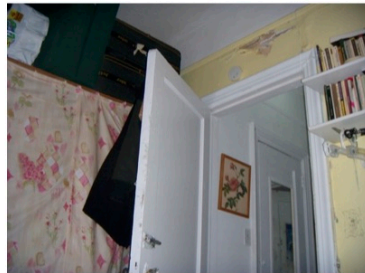
Figure 47 Touring a space of Dominican women's writing



Yrene in her small bedroom



What the Dominican writer saw from her bed



These suitcases! I had to take a picture of these maletas – such a Dominican in New York detail.

Figure 48 An intimate space of writing is also a Dominican maleta storage space



Building where Yrene lived in 2008. Very similar to the one on the cover of *Levente no. Yolayorkdominicanyork* by Josefina Báez.



Entrance to building where Yrene lived.



Street where Yrene lived. Her building was at the far end of block.



Street where Yrene lived.



Detail of house on Yrene's old street.

Figure 49 Walking the city of a Dominican woman writer



This relatively lavish looking house, on Yrene's street, contrasts strongly with the space of Santos' apartment.



More modest house on Yrene's street.



A renovated house on Santos' street, where the renovation extends into the public sidewalk with its brick pavement.



Sign on Yrene's street, with graffiti.

Figure 50 Scenes from the street where a Dominican writer once lived

What is probably most consistent in these images is Yrene's powerful smile. As in the first picture here of her opening the door to her apartment, it's the first thing you will consistently see and feel when in her presence. Is that smile itself a place and a space where her Dominican identity resides? For those of you who can and have seen this smile, does this or will this change the way you read her texts now that you know her smile? Yrene's smile reinforces what Marianela had said in an interview about Dominicans being relational — emphasizing this might also influence how we read literature by Dominicans.

There's something powerful about being let in on the lives of women who are battling sexist systems. I remember the fascination many in the USA, including myself had, with the book *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which recounts author Azar Nafisi's weekly gatherings of women in her home in Tehran to read and discuss works of Western literature that the Iran authorities had forbidden. The fascination resides in our being led into a secret world, one we in the United States don't get much of a chance to see. The intimate photographs and questions I pose about the spaces of writing for these Dominican women authors come from a similar fascination and knowledge that literary and cultural criticism doesn't take into account the question: where literally is Latina literature, Dominican women's literature — any feminist women's literature — produced? In 2013, Marianela published a children's book titled *Prietica*. Knowing that she'd been living in Connecticut for so many years and having already interviewed her years earlier about the question of place and where she did her writing, I would imagine her writing this book in Connecticut and thinking about Copey, infusing Copey into the book. It turns out that the book is about a little girl living in Copey, whose parents have to travel to New York to make a living and leave that little girl behind with her abuela. As much as I was fascinated with learning about the lives of Iranian women who dared to read books they were not allowed to, I found it even more thrilling to learn about Dominican women who dared to write books. And specifically the title of that USA bestseller did not sit well with many women I know: *Lolita* is not a liberatory text for us. Writing *Prietica in Connecticut* has a better ring all around. I hope this playful comparison does not

come off as facetious or flippant or tangential or irrelevant. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is an international bestseller so it can serve as an extreme point of comparison that would help focus what's important about knowing the inner spaces where Dominican women produce literature. If people across the world are fascinated by exploring places of women liberating themselves by reading the works of mostly white men, they could be also motivated to explore those places where women liberate themselves by writing the works of brown women. In the next section, having visited those places of production, you will visit the places and spaces that are produced — the texts themselves.

Space in the Texts of Yrene Santos and Marianela Medrano

Llegó la hora de la verdad

y no estamos solas
nos acompaña Ondina
para limpiar nuestra memoria

Las palabras serán precisas
como hemos deseado

No estamos solas
no
está Yemayá
Ochún
para hacernos beber su historia

Están los niños
creciendo con la dicha

Están los hombres
dándose la vuelta y apoyándonos

Están las ancianas recordando
con sus bocas desdentadas
y sus risas como ángeles
Están buscando sueños
En este espacio
que es de ellas
De nosotras para siempre

The hour of truth has arrived

and we women are not alone

Ondina's with us
to clean our memory

The words will be precise
as we have wished

We women are not alone
no
Yemayá's here
Ochún
to make us drink her history

The children are here
growing with luck and joy

The men are here
turning around and giving us support

The old women are here remembering
with their toothless mouths
and their laughs like angels
They're looking for dreams
in this space
that's theirs
ours forever.

I have always felt that this poem from Yrene Santos' *El incansable juego* creates, evokes, remembers, and reports on a special space of community and tranquility and camaraderie, a space and time in which women are at the center, valued. A space owned by women and blessed by female goddesses and elders, but not exclusive to women. It has a utopian feel and yet, sometimes it felt like the tertulias at Daisy's house were a lot like that. Like many of Yrene's poems, this is written in the present tense, suggesting that it is a space and time that exists for us now, neither a nostalgia, nor a futuristic dream.

And yes, Marianela was right: there is a lot of nature in the poetry of Yrene Santos. In "Aniversario," Yrene writes: "Mi madre y mi padre hicieron nuestros ombligos en la naturaleza viva... Exprimieron tomates en los montes. Sus cuerpos calientes buscaron el charco fresco

debajo de las amapolas y jabillas enormes del río...”⁸³ In “Empiezo a envejecer,” Santos writes that she finds herself looking back at her past, as a “malabarista de momentos nunca olvidados,”⁸⁴ in which she describes water on a roof similar to the house in the picture above: “El agua sobre el zinc.”⁸⁵ But it’s not just the type of house that she’s nostalgic for, or that she finds present in her consciousness and in her poetry: it is also all the parts of nature that are ever present in that environment, and also how they interact with her, “mis pies en el lodo.”⁸⁶ Things like: acacias, perejiles, santomas, yerbabuena, lirios⁸⁷. Her poem “Reencuentro” suggests that this is not just nostalgia for a past, but that nature is a way to live in eternity, and that it is intimately, erotically, linked with poetry and language, rather than apart from it. In this poem, supposedly written in New York in the apartment pictured above, a female voice starts out saying “Ayer fui al monte. Hablé con mariposas en su lenguaje de vuelo.” It all coexists in the same space and at the same time.

Nature is a constant space in Marianela’s poetry too. Yes, feminism and the ways it emerges within oppressive family, romantic and societal dynamics is a common theme in Marianela Medrano’s poetry and an important part of what garnered her publication via a feminist press in Spain. In her poems she reflects on the role of her mother, her father, her own role as mother and lover. But the imagery of nature is completely intertwined therein: nature and the voice of the poet are not separate entities, neither are the spaces and places outside separate from the interior spaces that reside inside a woman. In *Curada de espantos*, this elaboration begins with the very first poem: “Crecí silvestre con dos flores en el pecho / un volcán dormido entre las

⁸³ My mother and father made our bellybuttons in live nature... They squeezed tomatoes in the mountains. Their hot bodies looked for the fresh pool under the river’s hibiscuses and enormous jabillas...

⁸⁴ juggler of never forgotten moments

⁸⁵ the water on the zinc [roof]

⁸⁶ my feet in the mud

⁸⁷ parsley plants, santomas, mint, irises

piernas.”⁸⁸ As another example, in “La que vuelve,” the poetic speaker states: “Quiero extenderme dentro Madre/ Raíz invertida partiendo silencios/ Crecernos árboles de naturaleza fuerte.”⁸⁹ In “Un lugar favorito”⁹⁰:

Diviso un bosque de complicados laberintos
Hay grama verde dejando su olor en el frasco del tiempo
Arboles milenarios de corteza dura donde van a dar mis alas
Rosales plenos de hermosura y espinas
Abriendo espacios donde vienen a pasearse todas mis yo
Esternón adentro mi lugar favorito⁹¹

The domestic space is prominent in the work of Yrene Santos, although often in a transgressive or transcendent mode, where either there is some transgression or transcendence away from the domestic sphere or where the domestic sphere transgresses or transcends its usual mundane meaning. However, in Santos’ poetry, there is often also fulfillment in the domestic space, oftentimes, but not always linked to sexual fulfillment.

The epigraph for *El incansable juego*, a quote of the 16th century Spanish mystic poet San Juan de la Cruz, brings in the idea of the home as a space to transgress and escape in order to find fulfillment of desire: “En una noche oscura, / con ansias en amores inflamada, / ¡oh dichosa ventura!) / salí sin ser notada, / estando ya mi casa sosegada.”⁹² However, in Santos’ poetry, the fulfillment often happens in that domestic space. Her poem “Llegó la hora de la verdad” presents a space where various types of people are present, including men, children, and goddesses (Yemayá, Ondina, Ochún) who accompany the speakers of the poem, who are women, or at least female as indicated in the word “nosotras”. The word space is specifically mentioned: “Están las

⁸⁸ I grew up wild with two flowers on my chest / a sleeping volcano between my legs.

⁸⁹ I want to stretch inside Mother/ Inverted root birthing silences/We growing as trees of strong nature

⁹⁰ A favorite place

⁹¹ I make out a forest of complicated labyrinths /There is green grass leaving its scent in the glass of time/ Millenary hard bark trees where my wings wind up/ Rose bushes full of loveliness and thorns/ Opening spaces where all my I’s come to take a stroll / Inward sternum my favorite place

⁹² In a dark night / burning with desire / (oh happy luck!) / I left without being noticed / while my house was very quiet” (translation mine)

ancianas recordando / con sus bocas desdentadas/ y sus risas como ángeles / Están buscando sueños / en este espacio/ que es de ellas / de nosotras para siempre.”⁹³ Space here is a place to find dreams. It is also important that the space belongs to these old women and also to “us” — “nosotras”— again, an “us” that is feminine in gender. The idea that there is a space that belongs to these women and to us women comes off as unusual because this statement ends the poem, and our ownership of this space suggests that there are other spaces that clearly don’t belong to us. Perhaps there is a suggestion that women don’t usually own spaces. Or at least the women implied in this poem — who may be (or not) Caribbean as suggested by the Santería deities Yemayá and Ochún — aren’t usually owners of spaces.

Space is sometimes implied in Santos’ poetry without many specific references. For example, in the poem “Desde aquí,”⁹⁴ which repeats the idea of “here” and sets up a relationship of here and another place. This other place is far away from “infancia” (childhood). Here or “from here” is a place where the poet divides herself in “mil maneras” (a thousand ways) in order to distribute her self among “all”.

Santos’ poem “Por si alguien llega” (“In case someone comes”) echoes the classical Indian mystic poet Mirabai where she prepares the bedroom for her lover Krishna: “Come to my bedroom / I’ve scattered fresh buds on the couch.” (Mīrābāī 39”) Lines from Santos’ poem (“tendré preparadas las sábanas / donde comulgarán los sueños / limpiaré las ventanas... / llenaré de flores el cuarto”⁹⁵ suggests a similar role for the female speaker. In both the Mīrābāī and the Santos poems it is woman who prepares the space so love-making can occur.

Medrano’s poetry texts also deal with issues of space at a domestic level, but additionally she deals with issues of space at a community and transnational level. In her book *Curada de*

⁹³ The old women are here remembering / with their toothless mouths / and their laughs like angels / They’re looking for dreams / in this space / that’s theirs / ours forever.

⁹⁴ “From here”

⁹⁵ “I’ll have the sheets ready / where dreams will take communion / I’ll wash the windows... / fill the room with flowers.”

espantos, she has poems that refer to the Dominican community in Washington Heights as well as the Dominican Republic. For example, the poem “Caeiro: Bastante Metafísica Hay en no suicidarse,”⁹⁶ (p.35), there are the verses: “Llamar a Marcela que se me muere/ volvió a la isla y no puede con la nostalgia / ahora que la tiene frente a ella.”⁹⁷ That poem also refers to Washington Heights: “Comienzo a pintar protestas en las paredes del barrio/.../ Washington Heights me recibe”⁹⁸.

Within their texts, there is much on healing, on healing spaces and the wounds that must be healed. For example, the poem “Cara Sucia” includes verses to the effect that “la abuela no quería otra niña morena...” “con pelo crespo ... sediente de vaselina”⁹⁹. It has various poems that deal with suicide, such as “Que no es tiempo” and “Caeiro: Bastante metafísica hay en no suicidarse”¹⁰⁰. There’s the poem “Consulta” (“Consultation”) that speaks of an abused girl from the perspective of her therapist. There is also the poem “Poesía para ellas”¹⁰¹ that presents the voice of a teacher or facilitator of poetry who finds herself in the dangerous place of confronting the anger of those who do not want their girls to find their poetic voices.

We started out looking at the spaces before the texts existed, or rather while the texts were coming into existence: the spaces and places from which Marianela Medrano and Yrene Santos write. We then looked at what they produced to explore spaces and places that appear within the texts. In the next section, we’ll look at spaces and places that come next in these writer’s processes: the spaces where they and their works are published and received.

⁹⁶ “Caeiro: There’s plenty of metaphysics in not killing yourself”

⁹⁷ “Call Marcela, who’s dying on me / she returned to the island and can’t take the nostalgia / now that she has it right in front of her”

⁹⁸ I start to pain protests on the walls of the barrio/ ... / Washington Heights receives me

⁹⁹ “the grandmother did not want another dark girl...” “with kinky hair... thirsty for vaseline..’

¹⁰⁰ “It’s not the right time” and “Caeiro: There’s plenty of metaphysics in not killing yourself”

¹⁰¹ “Poetry for them’ [the girls or women]

The Spaces of Publication and Reception of the Work of Marianela Medrano and Yrene Santos

I asked Medrano and Santos about the spaces and places where their books and writings were published and received. The economics of book publishing is another invisible element in cultural and literary studies, that isn't often addressed and that should be addressed more directly. Why take it for granted that books can even get published, let alone written? Why do we talk about them as if the spaces, places, economic standing and identities of those who publish don't matter?

Medrano was able to get a book published by a feminist publishing house in Spain, without having to pay her own money for the publication, as is the custom in Dominican Republic. But the experience taught her and us something about the dangers of publishing across geography and race — what it means for a Dominican woman feminist to publish with Spanish women feminists. This is illustrated in the cover of the two books published by this press. Marianela was surprised and disappointed to see the image of a European-looking woman on the cover of her book — perhaps not so much because it didn't represent the reader she was trying to reach or the spirit of woman that was speaking through her poems. Her reader could be any reader and her subject could be a universal subject so, yes, that would include those represented in such an image. But the actual use of this image continues a tradition of erasing others and this erasure is something that Marianela speaks out against in her poetry. One of her most powerful poems in that book, “Cara Sucia,”¹⁰² is about a girl who is born with a very different face from the one that dons the book's cover, who finds out that due to her skin color, she is not wanted in the world, not even by her own grandmother: “La abuela no quería una niña morena” and “El

¹⁰² Dirty Face

mundo no quería otra niña morena/ otra piel cantando salves en los montes del Cibao”¹⁰³. And it would seem that the world did not want a brown face on a book cover.



Figure 51 Book cover *Curada de espantos*

Having learned her lesson, for her second book with this press Marianela made sure to have a say in its cover. She arranged for the work of Nuyorican feminist artist Tanya Torres to be the image on the cover.

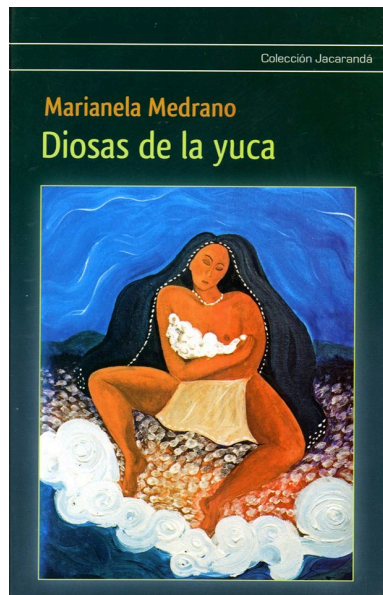


Figure 52 Book cover *Diosas de la yuca*

¹⁰³ “The grandmother did not want another brown girl” and “The world did not want another brown girl/ another skin singing salves in the mountains of El Cibao.”

Publishing her book via a Spanish publisher also caused another difficulty for Medrano. Although economically it was a step up from her publishing experiences in the Dominican Republic, which required her as an author to contribute all or at best part of the publishing costs, it was with a small press that did not have the resources to market the book that large presses do, not even to have the author travel to Spain to launch the book or do readings. Her appreciation for this press was very deep and she obviously trusted them and they her enough to publish a second book together, but the economics resulted in an alienating experience due to the distance between the spaces of production, publication and reception. Marianela describes this in intimate terms:

Marianela Medrano: ... el libro se fue yo sentí como que mandaba un niño para España, y que lo mandaba solito. ... Como un hijo. Yo sentí que mis poemas se iban solitos. ¿Por qué no me llevan a mi también?¹⁰⁴

I asked Yrene about how she imagined her readers, even where did she imagine them reading.

Yrene Santos: Casi nunca he pensado en eso. Quizás nunca he pensado en eso pero... pienso por ejemplo aquí en Nueva York, pienso que la gente que le gusta leer sobre todo lo hacen en el tren. Creo que la gente aquí lee mucho en el tren. Ya hablando así de gente en general. Ya si nosotros somos lectores, pues entonces lo hacemos por ejemplo en casa, en la oficina, en horas libres. La gente que nos gusta leer siempre andamos con un libro, con un par de libros. Para cualquier momento que tengamos, lo podemos aprovechar.

Isabel Espinal: ¿y tu piensas en lectores en quizás diferentes países? ¿Tu has sabido de algún lector en otro país?

Yrene Santos: Alguien me dijo que fue a un evento en Francia y alguien leyó un poema representante de República Dominicana y era yo. Y yo sé que mi amiga chilena ... a través de ella me imagino que lo ha compartido mi trabajo en Chile.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ ... the book left and I felt as if I were sending a child to Spain, and that I was sending him alone... Like a son. I felt that my poems traveled alone. Why couldn't I go too?

¹⁰⁵ Yrene Santos: I have almost never thought of that. I perhaps have never thought of that. I think that perhaps, here in New York, people like to read, and above all they do it on the subway. I think people here read a lot on the train. Speaking of people in general. But if we are readers, well we do it for example at home, in the office, during our free time. Those of us who like to read go everywhere with a book, with a couple of books. So that any moment that we may have [available to read], we can take advantage of it.

So Yrene didn't imagine that readers would be very different from herself. She imagined them reading in spaces similar to the ones she herself read and wrote in. Reading and writing happen in the same kinds of spaces and under similar circumstances — in little bits of time. That Spanish word she uses, *aprovechar*, is so apt — it can be literally translated as “to take advantage of,” but it doesn't have the connotation of exploitation that that phrase has in English; rather, it has the sense of being alert and acting on an opportunity. An opportunity to read or an opportunity to write —very similar.

In this literary world that Marianela, Yrene and Daisy invited me into and included me in, the space between readers and writers seems so much smaller than what I'd experienced before, and what I'd been taught in schools and universities and in the media I grew up with. Economics has so much to do with this. Living this life close up you really see it — see and feel the role that capitalism has had on what we deem as culture in our contemporary world. We live in a world where culture is property — as in the concept intellectual property, where books are commodities that can be bought and sold and through whose sales writers hope to “earn a living” (a strange English phrase: doesn't everyone already have a living by simply being alive? How do you *earn* something you already have?) In order to live from your writings, you have to have a certain number of sales, a large number, which suggests a large number of readers as well. Like commercial agriculture, commercial writing separates the producer from the ingester.¹⁰⁶ But not so with Marianela and Yrene. Oftentimes, they are reading their works to other writers, oftentimes, due to the economics of writing and publishing, due to the sexism, due to the racism, that seems as far as they can reach. In contemporary dominant literary circles, this is portrayed as

Isabel Espinal: And do you think of readers in other countries? Have you known of any particular reader in another country?

Yrene Santos: Someone told me that they went to an event in France and at the event someone else read a poem that was supposed to represent the Dominican Republic and it was me. And I know that my Chilean friend... through her I imagine that she has shared my work in Chile.

¹⁰⁶ The word *ingerter* does not appear in any dictionary I consulted but it seems most appropriate to mean: one who ingests. We ingest food and we ingest literature.

somehow pathological or sad or a joke. This intimacy between authors and readers is considered unnatural, wrong, like a type of unhealthy inbreeding — writers writing for each other and reading to each other. But I have learned firsthand that this is not so. It's not inherently sad or pathological or funny that writers would be reading and writing mostly for other writers. It could actually be a very beautiful thing. An intimate thing, yes. Experienced in intimate spaces.

So let's look at one of those intimate spaces of reception. These photographs were taken at a place called the Ambarroom in New York, in the spring of 2008, around the time I conducted the interviews. The occasion was the Feria del Libro de Escritoras Dominicanas en Nueva York, coordinated by the Centro de Desarrollo de la Mujer Dominicana.¹⁰⁷ Both Yrene and Marianela participated in this event and it is an example of the many varied spaces where they have read their work. The space exhibited cultural hybridity in details such as the huge European-style painting behind the bar and the statue of Buddha with a Dominican flag draped around it. It is also a space that was used for dancing but that in this instance was transformed into a book vending and poetry reading space. This kind of hybridity in the space of reception mirrors the hybridity of Dominican life in the United States — it is not a binary hybridity, it cannot be contained in the world “transnational” — it's a hybridity beyond borders and outside of borders of nations. It reflects a meeting of cultures from different layers of history.

¹⁰⁷ Dominican Women's Book Fair of New York coordinated by the Dominican Women's Development Center



Figure 53 2008 Photos from Feria del Libro de Escritoras Dominicanas en Nueva York

The photos from the Ambarroom, as well as the photos taken in Yrene's apartment, were taken right before social media, in particular Facebook, and the ubiquity of personal cameras on smartphones really took off for most people. Maybe today, methodologically, this way of understanding an author or anyone for that matter, is not so interesting or necessary. Back in 2008, I had to go out of my way to experience the intimacy I've been writing about. Today, in 2015, ubiquitous visual intimacy is experienced by millions all over the world, thanks to Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and so forth and the Internet is full of articles about social media and intimacy.

Social media also has given us access to people's travels. By following them on Facebook, we can see clearly that Yrene and Marianela have been received well in various countries. The spaces of reception for their works are not just transnational but multinational also. So although these authors may not have huge sales, they definitely have a wide geographic reach, across a large expanse of space and in many places. Over the years, I have seen via Facebook that they have had their work received in different places, including El Salvador, Chile, India, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Mexico, Ecuador. For example, in February 2015, Yrene represented the Dominican Republic in a Festival of Latin American Literature in Minería, Mexico, and was tagged in the flyer below. It's not that social media is making the connections, however — at least not all the time. The coordinator of that Festival was another author who had been published by Lourdes Vazquez, of the Queens, NY tertulias, in the late 1990s. At least one of the other participants in Minería, Margarita Drago, representing Argentina, was a frequent tertuliente in the tertulias in Queens.

ESCRITORAS LATINOAMERICANAS EN MINERÍA
(coordinadora: Odette Alonso)

Jueves 19 de febrero, 17:00 horas:
Diálogos entre escritoras latinoamericanas:
Margarita Drago (Argentina) y Juana M. Ramos (El Salvador).
Modera: Odette Alonso. Salón Filomeno Mata.



Jueves 19 de febrero, 19:00 horas:
Charla "Escritoras latinoamericanas en Nueva York".
Con Margarita Drago (Argentina), Gema Santamaría
(Nicaragua), Jacqueline Herranz Brooks (Cuba),
Yrene Santos (República Dominicana), Mariela Dreyfus
(Perú) y Juana M. Ramos (El Salvador).
Modera: Odette Alonso. Salón de Firmas.



Viernes 20 de febrero de 17:00 horas:
Diálogos entre escritoras latinoamericanas:
Gema Santamaría (Nicaragua)
y Jacqueline Herranz Brooks (Cuba).
Modera: Odette Alonso. Auditorio Sotero Prieto.



Viernes 20 de febrero de 19:00 horas:
Lectura de narradoras latinoamericanas:
Margarita Drago (Argentina)
y Jacqueline Herranz Brooks (Cuba).
Modera: Odette Alonso. Salón Filomeno Mata.



Sábado 21 de febrero de 13:00 horas:
Charla "Poesía visual en Nueva York",
con Jacqueline Herranz Brooks (Cuba)
y Mariela Dreyfus (Perú).
Modera: Odette Alonso. Auditorio Cinco.



Sábado 21 de febrero de 16:00 horas:
Diálogos entre escritoras latinoamericanas: Yrene Santos
(República Dominicana) y Mariela Dreyfus (Perú).
Modera: Odette Alonso. Salón Filomeno Mata.

Domingo 22 de febrero de 16:00 horas:
Lectura de poetas latinoamericanas:
Margarita Drago (Argentina), Juana M. Ramos (El Salvador),
Mariela Dreyfus (Perú) e Yrene Santos
(República Dominicana).
Modera: Odette Alonso. Salón Manuel Tolsá.



Figure 54 Flyer for Latin American women's poetry festival (Herranz 2015)

The different connections in these literary circuits continue in other venues today. Another one of the participants in the multinational festival at Minería, Jacqueline Herranz-Brooks, had participated in a multinational poetry festival that Yrene co-coordinated, the Americas Poetry Festival of New York of 2014. Yrene invited me to be part of that festival. It was also a festival where different authors were representing their countries. I was identified as representing the United States and the Dominican Republic. In 2015 I got a repeat invitation. Here is the bio I sent for 2015, in which the issue of space and place really came to the fore:

Isabel Espinal was born in New York of parents from the Cibao region of the Dominican Republic. She grew up in Sunset Park Brooklyn, a short subway ride away from the main venue of the Americas Poetry Festival of New York. Her father had worked as a busboy at Windows on The World, decades before it came down on September 11. That day in 2001, her sister stood on the ground looking up, mesmerized by the flames and watching the second plane hit the Towers. Isabel had worked at the Statue of Liberty when she was in high school, taking the ferry from Battery Park. She'd had her college interview for MIT in that part of Manhattan as well. So when she first came to the Americas Poetry Festival in 2014, she reconnected with the spirits that she and her family members had left behind over the years.

This bio focused on where in New York City the festival took place, at 25 Broadway, Manhattan, across the street from the iconic charging bull statue that represents the Wall street area. Somehow, I could not *not* talk about the fact that the location was in that area of New York — so loaded it was/is. The space that held the readings was actually a nondescript auditorium within the Center for Worker education, not very poetic, with its beige walls and harsh florescent lights. But it was a magical space, in part because it was a transnational space. Most of the countries that were represented were Latin American, but not all. Other countries such as Slovenia, Iran, and Spain were also represented. In 2015, one of the most interesting participants for me was from Egypt: Abeer-Abdel Hafez, the translator from Arabic to Spanish of Egyptian poet Ahmad Al Shahawy. Because of her participation and the participation of other translators, in a poetry festival of the Americas, we actually had poetry from countries such as Egypt. In that way, via translation, the Americas thus came to encompass even the Middle East. My excitement at meeting this translator in that venue points to another hidden aspect of the spaces of

Dominican and many other cultures' literatures today. Translators have a special place in literature and life and yet we are so common in these multilingual places and spaces of our planet, so many of us have this often unspoken identity. Many of us in the USA and throughout the earth and history live and have lived in translation. And we are often so thrilled to meet our paisan@s¹⁰⁸. Translation itself is a space, both intimate and public.

The Place of Translation in Latina/o Lives and in the Spaces of Contemporary Literature

The Untiring Game is my translation into English of Yrene Santos' book, *El incansable juego*, a collection of poetry written in Spanish in the United States but published in the Dominican Republic. The context of the book's production, the factors surrounding its translation, and the reception of both, point to the tenuous position of Dominican women in a transnational and transcultural literary marketplace. Paradoxically, critical analysis of Santos' work, tracing themes and aesthetics back to her first book, *Desnudez del silencio*, reveals affinities with some of the strongest and most enduring poetry in world literature. In particular, I like to compare Santos to Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi, generally considered as Persia's — and one of the world's — greatest poets and recently the most popular poet, through Coleman Barks' translations, published in the United States (Barber). Comparing and contrasting Yrene Santos with Rumi is admittedly a very provocative analytical move. An anonymous reviewer of an essay I published about this once questioned this comparison. "Why go there?" s/he seemed to ask. She got me thinking: was it grandiose to bring Rumi in? But why not? Santos does have a bit of a worldwide following with readers in various countries and she, yes, sometimes travels to Latin American countries as a representative of Dominican poetry and of simply poetry. A reviewer for one of these international literary encounters even wrote: "Sin duda María Yrene Santos es una de las poetas

¹⁰⁸ Fellow/sister countryman/woman, compatriot

vivas más importantes en lengua española.”¹⁰⁹ (Aguasaco 2010) That is a pretty big statement. Combining a textual with a contextual analysis highlights the strength of Santos’ poetry and begs questions about her *reception* in the contemporary United States as well as the global literary market. The intertextual study suggests that it is not the texts themselves that would account for the immense differences in reception of these translated poems in these markets.

Both Yrene’s and Rumi’s poetry can be accessed by the USA general literary market via translation into English. The difference between how *El incansable juego* stands up and out or not in English versus the popularity of Rumi’s translated poetry is a differential, to use Chela Sandoval’s term, embedded in literary Latina political struggle, even as Santos’ poetry generally eschews political themes per se. Following Sandoval’s Third World Feminist Theory (1991, 2002), we can say that both Santos and I work from a “differential consciousness” and that writing and translating for us are both a matter of politics and an act of faith. Just as Sandoval finds the European postmodern theories lacking for an understanding of Latina lives, so too are the Eurocentric translation theories (Gentzler 2001; Bandia) insufficient to understand the position of a Dominican York woman translating the Spanish language poems of another Dominican York woman. A Latina translation theory can be created from the intersection of translation theory and Latina studies, à la recent calls for interdisciplinary approaches to translation (Gentzler 2003). In that vein, my analysis follows scholars of Latino literature who have specifically addressed translation theory vis-à-vis Latino literature and life (Alarcón; Foster; Flores and Yúdice). I hope to explore the possibility that we write — and translate - differentially. Sandoval defines and describes differential consciousness as operating

like the clutch of an automobile: the mechanism that permits the driver to select, engage, and disengage gears in a system for the transmission of power. Differential consciousness represents the variant, emerging out of correlations, intensities, junctures, crises. What is differential functions through hierarchy, location, and value — enacting the recovery, revenge, or reparation; its processes produce justice. (Sandoval 1991, 14)

¹⁰⁹ “Without doubt, María Yrene Santos is one of the most important living poets of the Spanish language.”

Thus, writing and translation as tactics can be differentially employed — at times highly engaged, at times not engaged at all.

To critically assess *El incansable juego*, it helps to look at the production context both of the original text and of the translation, to address the motivation for translation, the social position of the translator as well as questions of audience. To and for whom does the translator translate? Who does Santos reach by having her poems translated? Does she address different audiences? And if so, what are the differences? Who are her readers — supposed, imagined and otherwise? — and how does that figure into her work? It is illuminating to see how Santos is presented and/or marketed. What are the social, political and economic conditions of cultural production for the Spanish version versus the English version of her work? Additionally, how do changes in the lived experience affect her writing, including its style, genre, and themes? Also, does Latina/o identity and Dominican identity as such figure into Santos' writing and its context?

Translation itself, of course, is a theme used for understanding of both Latina-o literature and Latina-o lives, and it is not confined to literary spaces. Juliana de Zavalia asserts that for Latina-os, “translation is a way of life, a strategy for survival in the north.” (Zavalia 199) For Latina-os living in the United States, translation itself is an untiring game, which comes to define our lives as Latina-os. As new waves of Latina-os follow us, the longer we are in the United States, we take on the role of cultural brokers for the incoming groups.

Additionally, for many Latina-os such as myself, born in the United States or immigrating as children with parents who are not English speaking, translation starts practically in infancy. More and more attention is being placed in the political arena to the burden on Latina-o children who must literally as well as figuratively work as interpreters and brokers between the world of their Spanish speaking parents and the English speaking world of teachers and school administrators, the welfare bureaucracy, the medical system, utility companies, etc. In particular, the use of child interpreters in medical settings has garnered enough attention to promote legislation in places such as California that would bar the use of child interpreters and force

medical practitioners to hire professional interpreters. Many dramatic and traumatic situations are occurring, where Latina-o children get caught in the middle, as in New York, where it was reported that a Latina immigrants' rights advocate,

overheard doctors at St. Vincent's telling a construction worker, through his 7-year-old cousin, that the worker needed an amputation. "The child said, 'I'm not sure if they said foot or said toe,'" Ms. Archila recalled. "This worker, he was about to cry." (Bernstein B1)

The Latina-o child translator appears with frequency in Latina-o literature as well, as in the case of Esmeralda Santiago, author of the acclaimed memoir *When I Was Puerto Rican*. Santiago serves as her family's interpreter in New York. At times this is liberating, as when she is able to negotiate herself back up to 8th grade after the school principal had decided she would be sent to 7th. Yet at other times, being a child interpreter is a scary burden, as in the following passages. "When Mami was laid off, we had to go on welfare. She took me with her because she needed someone to translate.... I was always afraid that if I said something wrong... the social workers would say no, and we might be evicted from our apartment..." (249). "Often I would be asked to translate for other women at the welfare office, since Mami told everyone I spoke good English" (250). "I didn't know what to do. To tell the interviewer that I knew the woman was lying seemed worse than translating what the woman said as accurately as I could and letting the interviewer figure it out." (250) "I never knew if my translations helped, but once an old jíbara took my hands and kissed them, which made me feel like the best person in the world" (251).

I came into translation under circumstances similar to Santiago's, as a "natural" part of growing up in a city whose institutions did not speak the language of my parents and extended family. Likewise, my experience as translator was and is both scary and very rewarding. Like Santiago, and the many Latina-o children who are translating sensitive as well as mundane topics every day across the United States, I did not receive any formal training in the matter.

Although it often defines the Latina-o experience in the United States, translation is of course not unique to Latina-os. Translation constitutes a cultural practice that crosses

linguistic/cultural borders and that brings up the increased mobility that migration brings to translating practices and to questions of identity in a globalized shifting world. As Nigel Hall points out, worldwide, the “vast majority of translation and interpreting events ... are mediated by non-professionals as part of their everyday family and community experience. By and large, it is the volunteers, friends, relatives and children who simply get on with the task of interpreting for those who need it” (Hall 286). Yet Hall also states that translation theory and research has neglected the role of these “natural” translators, particularly the children. No doubt many a professional or academic translator started out as a child interpreter or translator, but this coming into translation through childhood has not been explored or theorized adequately within translation studies, although it has made its way into the social sciences, the field of education, and in the popular press. Studies such as Hall’s, which explored Pakistani children translating for adults in England, point to the international aspect of this phenomenon. Many of these articles focus on issue of power—the enormous power that is placed in the hands (or mouths) of many Latina-o and other bilingual children in the United States, especially vis-à-vis their parents, teachers, and other adults in authority positions. Yet there is also a powerlessness in how children are put in this vulnerable position—at times coerced into translation by the socio-political context.

Translation is an intimate part of my own identity. I realized this when I found myself writing poetry about translation:

Translator-diplomat
Catching the words
as they
j
u
m
p
e
d
out of her mouth
Saving them from crashing
on the hard surfaces
of their faces
Saving their faces
from the hard surfaces

of her words
Saving the words
for later. (1994)

Don't translate this!
Don't say these words in English
Teach them
Whisper them
Shout them
Learn them
Breath them in
Put your lips on his and blow them into his mind
Catch them back on your tongue
As they bubble out of his mouth (2002)

The second poem underscores the extent to which even as we've learned to "live in translation," as Latina-os we often refuse to translate and prefer to let the English and Spanish come out of our mouths or sit on the same page without translation. It can simply become tedious and we become hartos of this role. The translation refusal may even come out of a deep-seated resentment that we've been thrust into the role prematurely and without our full consent, that as translators we've been repeatedly exploited and perhaps even robbed of part of our childhood. Or we may refuse on other political grounds. Dominican American writer Junot Díaz once said that he intentionally does not take on the role of a "native informant" who explains Dominican cultural experience to white audiences (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant, 900). Specifically, with regards to the appearance of Spanish in his texts, he, like other Latina-o writers, consciously does not set off the Spanish in italics nor does he provide translations for the Spanish phrases. This line of thinking and writing has a rich tradition within Latina-o literature, as epitomized and theorized in Gloria Anzaldúa's foundational *Borderlands — La Frontera* and in books such *Yo-yo Boing!* By Giannini Braschi (which has been called the first novel written entirely in Spanglish). Even the gumption it takes to include these poems in an academic essay, I owe to Anzaldúa. Presenting poetry in theory and theory in poetry, as Sandoval pointed out, was a differential move by U.S. Third World Feminists, a move whose theoretical implications were repressed by hegemonic

academic communities, both North American and European, male and female (Sandoval 1991, 5).

Additionally, there is a history for Chicanos specifically, and I would argue for Latina-os in the United States more generally, to see the translator also as a possible betrayer of or traitor to the community to the extent that translation is used by dominant groups as a method to control the subordinate and subaltern linguistic “others.” In her iconic essay, “Tradduttora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism,” (1989) Norma Alarcón traces in detail the historical figure of the indigenous woman Malintzin Tenepal, also known as Doña Marina and La Malinche, and her mythological incarnations throughout Mexican and Chicana/o history, and the many writers who have taken up her symbolism, including Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, Rosario Castellanos, Elena Poniatowska, José Emilio Pacheco, Adelaida R. del Castillo, Adaljiza Sosa Riddell, Carmen Tafolla, Sylvia González, Alma Villanueva, Cherríe Moraga, and others. Alarcón wrote that Malintzin “not only translated for Cortes and his men, she bore his children. Thus, a combination of Malintzin-translator and Malintzin-procreator becomes the main feature of her subsequently ascribed treacherous nature.” Whatever her reasons for becoming a translator, she came to be blamed for the fall of the indigenous people to the Europeans, regardless of what she could have done to prevent it; her skills and role as translator often equated with her legend as traitor. So, like the young Esmeralda Santiago, when translating, we often ask ourselves, should we or shouldn’t we translate, who benefits from our translation? We are also aware that an “honest” translation may not always be an ethical one in the final analysis. We are thus very aware of how our translations are received and of the power dynamics within and between our intended audiences. For this reason, we translate differentially. Thus, translation as a tactic can be differentially employed — at times highly engaged, at times not engaged at all, when the ultimate goal is social justice for Latina-os.

In “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin asserts that it is not fruitful to consider the receiver of a work of art since “no poem is intended for the reader” (69). This was published many

years before the heyday of Reader Response criticism and of reading ethnographies such as Janice Radway's (1984, 1997) and Jacqueline Bobo's (1995), that specifically concerned themselves with the receivers of literature in order to better understand the phenomenon of literature. He goes on to say that "if the original does not exist for the reader's sake, how could the translation be understood on the basis of this premise?" (70). He's partially correct. If he were completely correct, why translate at all? Why publish writing at all? As a translator, writer and critic, I'm very interested in audience; I do want to see readers taking an interest in Santos' work via my translations. I do want to hear that someone, who did not know Spanish to read it in the original, has found Santos' poetry moving and beautiful via translation. I also want to hear from bilingual readers, as I have at a few public readings, that my translations are good. Yet, even without any of this, I still am drawn to translate, ultimately the task of translation is something I do for myself, because there is no guarantee of any connection with any reader. So, yes, in this sense, Benjamin is correct—when it comes to translating literature, even the translation does not need to be overly preoccupied with the reader, because "the reader" always is an element of the unknown. Translation is also something I do for the writer, for Yrene Santos and for her text, my homage to her as a reader of her poetry, an act of appreciation and thanksgiving. It is a risky act and a risky relationship that requires trust on her part, the trust that I will do right by her work. I am fully aware of the risk of losing Yrene Santos altogether, as Maryse Condé states about translations that have been made of her writing:

In translation, the play of languages is destroyed. Of course, I recognize that my works have to be translated, but they are really not me. Only the original really counts for me. Some people say that translation adds to the original. For me, it is another work, perhaps an interesting one, but very distant from the original. (as cited in Apter 2001 *Crossover Texts*, 92)

Part of my work as a translator is also to become an advocate for Santos, an advocate for her as a writer but also an advocate for my reading of her and my judgment of her. With translation comes the need to justify—why translate this? Why translate her? My immediate response to these questions is that I translated because Yrene Santos asked me to translate her

book. But that response begs the question of how she came to know that she could ask me and how I came to translate literature. I first began to translate Dominican women's poetry after I had written some poetry myself, inspired by a community of Latina-o writers that was meeting in New Haven, Connecticut at the time (early 1990s). That one of the leaders of this group was a Dominican woman writer who made an enormous impact on me: Marianela Medrano. Marianela encouraged me by example and in various conversations to seriously think of myself as a writer and to get my work read and heard by others. After some initial small successes—winning first prize in a city poetry contest and getting some poems published in various venues—I had the confidence to take on someone else's writings in Spanish and convert them into English. Without my own small accomplishments and recognitions, I may not have felt I could trust myself to do well by them, just as Esmeralda Santiago may not have had the gumption to translate had she also not had some success negotiating with and negotiating in English (getting herself back up to 8th grade). Had I not had the example of Latina-o writers and theorists who are comfortable in Latina-o English, I might not have felt that my version of English, that my final translation product was adequate. Indeed, I have learned to be comfortable with an English that may somehow still sound like the Spanish that it is not supposed to be. At the same time, keeping in mind the realities of Latina-os and translation, I know that the stakes will not be as high as for example, those of the seven-year-old who wasn't sure if it was a foot or a toe that the doctor wanted to amputate.

For the most part, Santos poetry was not difficult for me to translate. Reading her poetry, I couldn't help but translate it. Santos plays with images, concepts and psychology in ways that seem as timeless and as compelling as Rumi. I feel I am saying something as I translate and make the translations as public as I can, like I'm saying: "Look at Yrene Santos' poetry! It's a lot like Rumi's, isn't it? An y'all like Rumi, so you should love her!" Santos words translate effortlessly and beautifully. For example, "los espejos ya no cuentan/.../se romperán para dejarme sin forma/ sin ojos repetidos/ sin sombra a que atenerme" (17) which I translated as "the mirrors no

longer count/.../they'll break to leave me without form/ without repeated eyes/ without a shadow to hang onto." I found I had to do very little as a translator. Sure, I could have used "don't count anymore" instead of "no longer count," but either way would have been fine. Occasionally, there are word plays in *El incansable juego* that are impossible to translate fully, as in the phrase "le dolía el dolor" (18) which can be translated as either "pain pained her" or "pain hurt her." Although pain pained her uses a similar word play as in the original, it is not as colloquial a phrase in English because the verb to pain is not as common as the verb to hurt. Another similar example is a short poem that uses a lot of l's and ll's: "Llanto en el llano de la luna llena/ llega/ llora/... / lluvia/llueve" (54) There was no way to translate the word play and the meaning intact. This is one I would have loved, as Latina-os often do, to have simply refused to translate! But as Latina-os also often do, I went ahead with what I knew was not a perfect translation, but that had at least a little word-playfulness to it: "Weeping in the full moon's plain / arrives / cries/ ... / rain / rains."

Rudolf Pannwitz's ideas about translation is very close to what Latina-os in the United States do every day to the English and to the Spanish languages as we translate from one to the other.

Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. ... the basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue (Pannwitz as quoted in Benjamin 1923, 80-81).

However, for many Latina-os, such as myself, it is not always just one side that is "our own" language. For many of us, neither language is really foreign, yet Pannwitz's precept still applies. Since Latina-os most definitely allow each of these languages to be affected by the other, ours is not a translation of preservation but rather, as Juan Flores (1993) points out with the use of the term "trans-creation," ours is a translation of constant re-creation.

I cannot move on without saying something about where (and when) I translated Yrene's book. I cannot remember the exact year (2002 or 2003), but I do remember very well the season

and the location where I did most of the translations. It was summertime. It was at the community pool in the town of Amherst, Massachusetts. I would sit in the heat and the sun with Yrene's book while my three young children had swimming lessons. It was after a long day of work, and before a busy evening of cooking and running around with the kids. It felt like a respite, a refreshing space. The translating didn't feel like work, it felt like I was being nourished by reading the words and engaging with them. Sometimes people have asked me: how did I have time to translate with everything else I had going on? And where, since with three children there could be little quite space. This is how: in short doses of twenty-five minutes, which was the time the swimming lessons lasted, and on a pool deck taking in the sun or sitting in the shade. 25 minutes was probably enough time to do a good first draft of a poem translation. I cannot think of translation without remembering that space. Later, during a tour of Emily Dickinson's home, also in Amherst, I learned of how Emily had lots of chores to do so her time for poetry also was limited, but how she would keep a pencil and scraps of paper in her pocket, to write things down with as she went about her daily chores. I could really relate to that and also relate the role of scraps of time and resources in Emily Dickinson's life to the life and spaces of Yrene Santos.

Aurora Arias — Documenting Places and Spaces

Like Emily Dickinson, Aurora Arias also has a story about writing on scraps of paper — we'll get to that story in a bit. I learned about Aurora through Marianela and have included her with Medrano and Santos for various reasons. In addition to being part of the same generation of writers who came of age in the 1980s in Santo Domingo and having participated in the same literary circles, like Medrano and Santos, she also writes predominantly, if not exclusively in Spanish. Also like them, she began as a poet. Yet unlike them, Arias has created a substantial body of narrative work as well, with many anthologized short stories as well as three short story collections. Also unlike Medrano and Santos, Arias has written most of her work in the Dominican Republic. It wasn't until 2008 that Arias joined the identity group of "Dominican women immigrant writers," upon moving to Michigan from the Dominican Republic. This

difference forms an interesting point of contrast from which to ask questions: having arrived in the United States not as an emerging writer — as Medrano and Santos did — but as an established writer, what has the effect of place been on Arias' writing? This is just one of many questions I explored with her in interviews.

As for her scraps story: Aurora told me of how one time in her life, before she had published any fiction, she would go all over Santo Domingo on public buses in order to get to know the city. She would take different lines from one end to the other and write scraps of narrative and characters on pieces of paper inspired by what she was seeing and hearing on the buses. When she arrived at her house she would put them in a kind of flower pot outside her house, not knowing what to do with the writing, feeling like it wasn't her place to be writing fiction, but at the same time not wanting to throw away what she'd written since she felt so connected to it. One day she decided to try to piece the papers together into a novel or short story collection but sadly she found that the pieces of paper had all disintegrated and were completely unreadable. Years later, of course, she did publish fiction, so she was able to tell this story with a sense of triumph as well as loss — who knows what was lost in those scraps? This story is so emblematic of Aurora: she is one who explores her spaces and the people of her country and is inspired by them, and who also is very honest even about her own vulnerabilities and weaknesses.

When I first met her in person, she had not published any fiction. I was living in Norwalk Connecticut, Marianela was living in my house and I was working at the Ferguson Library in Stamford, Connecticut. Marianela suggested her when I was looking for authors to invite to the library for our Latino Heritage month programs. Aurora did read some fiction in progress at that event. It was exciting to see her break into fiction, to see one of us poets doing that. Fiction has a cachet in our contemporary literary world that poetry doesn't have. Not that it is inherently better, but today it represents a barrier that many writers don't manage to get through. Over the years I've thought a lot about why — why does fiction have this prestige over poetry, and why

does it even matter? What does it mean and what does it take to become a fiction writer? What it takes to become a fiction writer is partly about what it requires within a person and partly what it requires of that person's surroundings. I learned some things about Aurora Arias that confirms this, although I cannot share them all here now. It takes a sense of daring from within a person, daring that Aurora displays most of her life — her bus-writing story shows when she lacked daring — but the daring is not only in what one does within writing but how one manages to write, how one manages to make the space and the time for it. It's much harder to build fiction working only from scraps of paper and scraps of time. Aurora recounts how when she did get more serious about writing fiction, she had a busy life as a cultural worker in a feminist NGO, a wife, and a mother, and that in order to make space and time to write, she would go to work two hours early, at 7 am instead of 9 am, to get at least two hours of writing each day.

Arias carries an appreciation of places and spaces with her all the time and always there is sense of respect for the people in those places and their stories. There is a nice body of criticism already about her stories and about the role of place in her stories (Castellanos 2012, Ferly 2005, De Maeseneer 2013, Maguire 2012, McGrath 2012, Morris 2015, Pérez 2003, Rodríguez 2012, Valerio-Holguín 2009, Valerio-Holguín 2012). I won't add much to that here and now, but instead I will focus more on some stories she told me about the spaces, places and people of her life, past and present.

We walked around the Zona Colonial area of Santo Domingo, where Aurora lived when very young.



Figure 55 Street in Santo Domingo where Aurora Arias lived as a very young child

She pointed out the house her family lived in when she was born. So much like the nuyorican casitas:



Figure 56 Home where Aurora Arias lived when she was born

She told me that her family moved out of that house during the uprisings associated with the 1965 revolution. There was so much chaos on that street back then that her father feared for his young family's life, so they moved to another part of the city. She was born in a time of great hope following the end of Trujillo's dictatorship, the rise of socially conscious movements — her parents were caught up in that fervor and even the middle name they gave her reflects that: Aurora Libertad.

Aurora spoke of the changes in the neighborhood where she eventually grew up. She doesn't just bemoan its new crowded ugliness as it affects her, but she also sees the effects that urbanization has on the lives of those who lived a different way of life. For example, this

conversation I had with her in 2013, in which she told me about a man, a gardener for hire, who she knows from her neighborhood:

Aurora: Lo ví el otro día, viceeejo. Porque qué pena que tú no puedas tener, un buen día poder decir: ya, no trabajo más, conseguí mi casita, conseguí esto, tengo apoyo estatal, porque he trabajado toda la vida. Pero tú sabes lo que es no tener la más mínima garantía de nada? Entonces, por donde yo vivo han tumbado todas las casas y las casas son las que tienen jardines. Y ahora lo que hay es edificios, donde no hay jardines. Y entonces él no tiene nada que hacer. Y todos los días lo he visto arrastrando la máquina de podar, así, mirando como... Y yo le pregunté y le dije “ Pero, no hay jardines ya.” Y me dijo “Yo sé pero siempre salgo con la esperanza de que alguien todavía...” Me dio una pena. Entonces me puse hablar con él y me hizo tantas historias interesantes!

Isabel: Eso fue ahora esta semana?

Aurora: Sí. Y al final le dí 200 pesos. Se le brillaron los ojos así. Sí porque tampoco me voy poner hacerle perder su tiempo acribillándole de preguntas y después dizque adiós. Por lo menos le arreglo un poco el día, tú sabes. ¹¹⁰

But of course the nostalgia for a past when Dominican spaces were different needs to be taken critically. A past in which people had gardens that needed gardeners may indicate an economy in which some get to have much household help while others are in the service of making the space of that other class livable and pleasant yet do not get to benefit from the pleasures of their own garden spaces. I did not get to question Aurora about this, perhaps in a future conversation. The economy of domestic spaces and of private pleasures is very much a part of the thematics of Aurora’s art and life.

We also spoke of spaces where she has been received and how she has used technology and Skype to reach readers in different places. We also spoke about what life is like in Michigan,

¹¹⁰ Aurora: I saw him the other day, veery old. Because what a shame that you cannot have, that one fine day you can’t say: ok, I’m not working anymore, I got my house, I got this, I got state support, because I’ve worked all my life. But do you know what it’s like to not have the tiniest guarantee of anything? Then, where I live, they knocked down all the houses and it’s the houses that have gardens. Now what there is are buildings, which don’t have gardens. And then he has nothing to do. And every day I see him dragging his pruning tools, looking around, like... And I asked him, I said, “But there are no more gardens.” And he said, “I know but I also go out with the hope that someone still...” I felt so sorry for him. And I stated to talk with him and he told me so many interesting stories!

Isabel: That was now this past week?

Aurora: Yes. In the end I gave him 200 pesos. His eyes lit up. Yes, because I’m not going to make him waste his time, shooting him up with questions and then be like so long. At least I helped him out that day, you know.

where everyone needs to get in a car to go anywhere, unlike Santo Domingo, where she does a lot of walking. She mentions the over consumption in the USA, families with 3 and 4 cars in the driveway who in the USA are considered middle class but would be considered rich in the Dominican Republic. I wondered how all that might play out in her writing and commented: A mí me interesaría saber si algún día eso saldrá en tu escritura. She responded: A mí me interesaría también!¹¹¹ Aurora emphasized various times that her method of writing involved being in places where real people live, that she could not just be a writer who shows up to tertulias and does not engage with the day to day world of a variety of people: “No me interesa ser una escritora de salón. Ni tampoco una escritora metida en su habitación propia sin pasar por el cedazo de la vida. Hay que pasar por ese colador...”¹¹² Part of her methodology has involved interviewing people on the street and she asks them to take her to the spaces of their lives rather than only see people as they appear in the spaces of her life:

Yo tengo muchos canales, muchos contactos. Yo soy una escritora muy curiosa. O sea, a mí no me interesa ser escritora de salón ni de tertulias finas ni nada. Yo siempre vengo husmeando como *under*. Y como yo logro eso? A través, por ejemplo, de una trabajadora doméstica que yo conozca, que yo me pongo a hablar con ella. Yo le digo llévame a tu barrio. A mí me gusta **saber**. ... Me gusta saber a través de los libros pero sobre todo me gusta saber a través de la propia experiencia y contacto con la gente. Yo le hago entrevistas a los guachimanes. Yo le hago entrevistas a los vigilantes haitianos...¹¹³

Because it is filled with so many characters and interesting places, the fictional work that results from this process could easily lend itself to cinematic treatment and I asked her about that. Isabel: Sería interesante si alguien hiciera cine de tus cuentos... Eso lo has pensado? Aurora: Te

¹¹¹ Isabel: I'd be interested in knowing if someday that will come out in your writing. Aurora: I'd be interested too!

¹¹² “I'm not interested in being a salon writer. Nor a writer who's always in a room of her own without passing through the sieve of life. You have to go through that colander...”

¹¹³ I have many channels, many contacts. I'm a very unusual writer. That is, I'm not interested in being a salon writer nor a writer of fine tertulias or anything like that. I always go poking around and sniffing the under. And how do I do that? For example, sometimes via a domestic worker, who I might start talking to. I would tell her: take me to your neighborhood. I like to know. I like to know through books but I also like to know through my own experience and contact with people. I interview security guards, I interview Haitian watchmen...

confieso algo? Yo fantaseo con eso. Y yo veo todo — toda la producción yo la veo.¹¹⁴ I remember always something that Junot Díaz said in an interview “Fiction is the poor man’s cinema,”

I wrote screenplays for the first half of the time I was in college. I didn't write any stories. I began to write stories when I realized there was no way I was going to get into a film program. For a film program you must have money. They give almost no financial aid. (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 903)

I made a YouTube video with an excerpt from one of the interviews. I hope you love it. I do. Oh but you have to understand Spanish. Aurora’s Spanish is very beautiful and very Dominican:

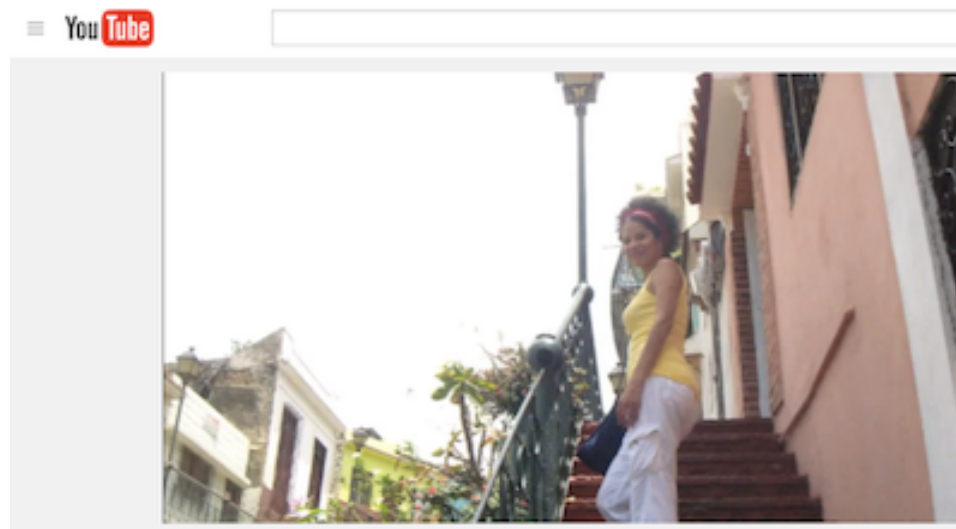


Figure 57 Excerpt from an interview with Aurora Arias (isabeldelrosario)

“Además te pierdes de muchas cosas”: Don’t Lose Out on Dominican Women’s Knowledge

Aurora confirmed in one of the interviews that it wasn’t until she arrived in the USA that finding time to write was not a problem. She had many good things to say about her writing life in the USA. But she also articulated criticisms. However, these criticisms were not necessarily restricted to moments of encountering racism or being treated as less. She thought of Michigan as home to the extent that at one point, when she referred to the place “donde yo vivo,” and I asked

¹¹⁴ Isabel: It would be interesting if someone were to make cinema from your stories. Have you thought about that? Aurora: Can I confess something to you? I fantasize about that. And I see everything — the whole production: I see it.

her to clarify, she said she was speaking of Michigan. She brought it up to point out how animals are treated better in this new place in her life than many children she had encountered in the Dominican Republic.

Niños que no van a pediatra... Eso es salir de la barriga de sus mamas. Animalitos — Es más ni animalitos porque yo veo los perros por donde yo vivo — que da miedo — están más cuidados que cualquier ser humano... Yo vivo en el típico suburbio gringo, clase media. Claro, es una clase media que aquí pasaría por rico: porque en cada case hay 4 carros. Uno pa' la mamá, otro pa'l papá, otro pa'l hijo, otro — ¡Ay Dios mío! — esas son todas las cosas que yo todavía sigo asimilando. ¿Tu entiendes? ...Yo veo la diferencia. Yo llegué aquí [Santo Domingo] y yo he **caminado** y he resuelto todo lo que tengo que hacer. Pero allá eso es montar en un carro todo el tiempo. Tú lo sabes... Porque eso afecta la menta también si tú estás en ese sedentarismo todo el tiempo, además te pierdes de muchas cosas por andar montada...¹¹⁵

So even though she highlights the privileges of the suburban neighbors in her new place of residence, Aurora also clearly sees the disadvantages and poverty of their life experiences, how they “lose out” on many things that are common in the Dominican Republic. She speaks from a place of higher wisdom, not a place of complaint or of trying to gain entry or even trying to decolonize anything, as important as the decolonization project is. Aurora, like Josefina Baez, is in many respects already there — as she says: “he resuelto todo lo que tengo que hacer.” Look closely and carefully and you will see that Marianela Medrano and Yrene Santos are also there as well. But this is often not what is expected of them in the spaces of contemporary literature — too often, that is not considered to be their place.

Marianela Medrano, Yrene Santos and Aurora Arias all have special knowledge they are not expected to have, and it shows up in different places, specifically sometimes because they are Dominican women. It is a little bit hard to unpack this, maybe because it so often seems obvious

¹¹⁵ Children who do not go to a pediatrician. They come out of their mom's bellies...like little animals. Not even animals because I see that where I live dogs — it's scary — get better treatment than any human... I live in the typical gringo suburb, middle class. Of course, it's a middle class that here would be considered rich: because in every house there are 4 cars: one for the mom, one for the dad, one for the son, one for — oh my God, these are the things that I'm still processing. You see? ... I see the difference. I arrived here [Santo Domingo] and I've **walked** and I've gotten done everything I needed to. But back there you have to get in a car for everything. You know that. ... Because that affects the mind also. If you live in that sedentarism all the time, you also lose out on a lot by being in a car all the time.

that certain expectations or lack of expectations are there — and at the same time it's like we have to scream it: yes, Dominican women writers also do x y or z! Why do we have to even say this? Maybe it comes from the many exclusions on the part of all different kinds of literary gatekeepers — from those who make lists, for example. Based on our exclusion from lists of nature writers, it seems that Dominican women are not expected to be experts about nature, to be nature writers. Based on our exclusion from lists of Native American writers, we can infer that Dominican women are not expected to be experts on indigenous matters. Based on our exclusion from lists of mystical writers, we sense that Dominican women are not expected to be the gurus or mystics that modern people should follow. Dominican women are expected to be urban, but are not expected to have knowledge or expertise about modern cities. And so on and so on. I will now take on a few of these misconceptions — or misexpectations — in more depth.

Nature as the space of Dominican women's expertise comes through loud and clear from conversations with Dominican women writers such as Marianela Medrano and Yrene Santos, as well as from reading their works. Yet, in the spaces of contemporary USA literary criticism, they are not thought of that way. Just like African Americans are not thought to be experts about nature, and are too often seen as writing exclusively from and about urban spaces. In her essay, "The Nature of African American Poetry," Camille Dungy writes,

For years, poets and critics have called for a broader inclusiveness in conversations about ecocriticism and ecopoetics, one that acknowledges other voices and a wider range of cultural and ethnic concerns. African Americans, specifically, are fundamental to the natural fabric of this nation but have been noticeably absent from tables of contents. To bring more voices into conversations about human interactions with the natural world, we must change the parameters of the conversation. (Dungy xxi)

Thus, the problem both in the case of Dominican women and of African Americans, lies not in the writings of these people, but in the reading, lack of readings of those who organize the dominant contemporary literary spaces in the USA and beyond.

In her book *Diosas de La Yuca*, Medrano explores Taíno heritage within Dominican culture and its feminist implications. This is also not something that Dominican women are

expected to do. Or Dominicans in general, for that matter. On the one hand, as Ginetta Candelario so carefully details in her book *Black Behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops*, Dominicans often over romanticize our Indian past and even use the word Indian to denote a skin color. I personally grew up hearing this word used all the time in the 70s and 80s in my family in reference to our different shades of brown. A Dominican woman told Candelario in an interview: “We declare that we are Indians so as not to recognize ourselves as mulattos, to deny the black we have behind the ears, in our aspiration to whiten the race.” (Candelario 1) On the other hand, the use of Indian as an identity is generally very vague, with not much thought to what that really or specifically means for us culturally and often with the idea that Indian culture died out many years ago. Silvio Torres Saillant has noted that

...in the United States, busy as they have been fending off charges of aberrant Negrophobia by other Latino groups and by African Americans, Dominicans have not shown great interest in recovering their ancestral homeland’s Taíno past. The overwhelming majority of scholarly and literary works authored by US—Dominicans reveals an engagement with blackness and a critique of Negrophobia. (“The Indian in the Latino,” 593)

Nevertheless, it was in the USA, while canoeing on the Naugatuck River in Connecticut, that Marianela had the inspiration to write about Taína spirituality, another instance in her life in which nature was a place of creation. She had been struggling with a topic for her dissertation in psychology, originally proposing to study cultural identity and how it psychologically affects Latina adolescents. But while out on the river, she was overtaken by a feeling of connection to her indigenous roots and started to sing the name of Anacaona, an important woman in the history of Taínos on the island that is now Dominican Republic and Haiti. When Marianela went home from canoeing, she started to write a series of poems inspired by her indigenous heritage and she began to see what her dissertation topic was going to be. Her dissertation and her emerging poetry book became very intertwined, as she told one interviewer:

Una experiencia cumbre como decía Maslow. ... El tema de la disertación... Me dí cuenta... Anacaona me encontró ya... Resultó que el tema fue: el acercamiento a las diosas en la cultura taína. Cómo, el acercarse, si yo traía un grupo de mujeres a que se acercara a la diosa en la cosmogonía taína, ¿qué impacto iba eso a tener en la percepción

de ellas mismas? ... Cada día iba procesando, iba escribiendo poemas, y así resultó *Diosas de la Yuca*... es una conversación con lo que contaban los cronistas... un enfoque que trata de, vamos a decir, restaurar muchas de las cosas que se quedaron perdidas en la manera como ellos contaban. Por ejemplo, la cuestión del acercamiento a la divinidad femenina dentro de esa cosmogonía taína fue algo que se dijo y se quedó ahí. Entonces si tú al dominicano común, vamos a decir, o a cualquiera, yo pienso, hasta el dominicano más letrado, puede muy bien no poder mencionar ningunas de las diosas, quizás Atabeira o Atabey que es la diosa madre, que es la que más se ha conocido. Entonces lo que yo creo que viene a hacer *Diosas de la yuca* es traer esas cosas, esos elementos que se quedaron en los pliegos —¿no?— de la historia oficial.¹¹⁶ (*Yola Yelou*)

But Taíno culture is not a just an academic pursuit for Marianela and she would like all Dominicans to also consider how Taíno culture is with us all the time and can be a source of psychological empowerment. In the same interview she speaks about her early childhood in the countryside in the northwest of the Dominican Republic and how even in everyday play, she and her playmates would come across Taíno artifacts in the dirt. She also says she grew up hearing Taíno stories such as the stories of La Ciguapa. Marianela emphasizes the importance of Taíno knowledge in-and-of-itself — without need for reference to colonization or decolonization. Obviously, the way she has set up many of the poems as conversations or corrections to what the colonial writers have left us is a decolonial move. But ultimately, the reason to restore these stories is about restoring valuable knowledge for what it can do to our spiritual health and growth.

This message is for everyone everywhere. And yes, it is for Dominicans both here in the USA and in the Dominican Republic and elsewhere. *Diosas de la Yuca* wound up being a groundbreaking poetic work that has had an impact in the Dominican Republic, where she had

¹¹⁶ It was a peak experience, as Maslow would say... The topic of the dissertation... I realized... Anacanona found me... It turned out that the topic was: the encounter with the goddesses of Taíno culture. How, by drawing near, if I brought a group of women to get close to the goddess in the Taíno cosmology, what impact would that have on their perceptions of themselves? ... Every day I would process, I would write poems and that's how *Diosas de la Yuca* came to be. ... It is a conversation with what the colonial Chroniclers told ... a focus that tries to, let's say, restore many of the things that had been lost in the way they had been told. For example, the question of the approach to the divine feminine within that Taíno cosmology was something that was said but simply left there. Therefore, if you ask the typical Dominican, let's say, or anyone, I think even the most lettered might very well be unable to name any of the goddesses, maybe Atabeira or Atabey, who is the mother goddess, who is the most well-known. So what I think *Diosas de la Yuca* has come to do is to bring those things, those elements that had been left behind in the folders — no? — of official history.

various interviews in the local media. So as universal as it is, it also functions differentially, as Chela Sandoval says of Latina feminism, in the very specific context of this specific nation-state and cultural milieu that is the so-called Dominican Republic. This puts Marianela in the company of other Dominican transnational political actors that scholars have been studying. For example, Ana Aparicio discusses transnational Dominican politics and how clubs were formed in New York, specifically in Washington Heights, by exiled Dominicans in order to make democratic changes back home. In the words of one political organizer: “We had a role in helping to democratize the island. We were here, but our hopes for revolutionary change in the Dominican Republic could not die.” (Aparicio 258) Medrano is essentially engaging in this kind of transnational, transglocal political process, except that her politics are on a cultural and spiritual front. Christopher McGrath asserts that:

Dominican poet Marianela Medrano, in her most recent collection of poems *Diosas de la Yuca*, goes beyond any utopian project or attempt at building a national myth to explore Taina spirituality, rooting it in the immediacy of individual Dominican experience. More than a mere literary trope, the indigenous in Medrano’s poetry is proposed as a living force and a key cultural element by which the Dominican can shape his or her subjectivity and thus resist and overcome the divisions and erasures caused by the original trauma of the Spanish conquest and the current experience of living simultaneously in the here and there of diaspora. (McGrath 2011)

It is not just Dominicans who have had the habit of not thinking of ourselves as indigenous, Native American. We don’t usually get invited into those spaces. In the spaces of contemporary dominant literature, and often even in the spaces of indigenous literature, a Native American writer is not thought to include Dominican. Perhaps now and then, due to the explicitness of Marianela’s book *Diosas de la Yuca*, she will find herself with that label. Of course, even that label, if used alone, will be limiting.

Labels can be limiting, but labels can also expand the ways in which a writer is seen and placed. A few years back, after I’d translated Yrene Santos’ book, I took the opportunity to look at the labels that had been used to categorize Yrene, how she had been placed. The context of audiences is so important. USA American audiences have a historical love of mystical poetry,

which I will give evidence of later on. So Yrene is very well poised to be loved by these particular American reading audiences. Will she stand a chance? She has expert knowledge of mystical truths. Will that knowledge be recognized?

One way to explore Santos in the context of audience is by looking at the language that is used in describing not just her texts but also the public performances and workshops in which she is involved. In the Dominican Republic and other Latin American contexts, she is often identified as a “woman writer” even though her writing deals with “universal” themes (see Cepeda 1987; Taveras Hernández 1987; Rosario Candelier 1988; Martínez-Márquez n.d.; Aguasaco 2004; “Este mes [...]” 2001; and “Los Más Leídos” 2002). Her poetry is said to explore the “mundo interior y complejo de la mujer”¹¹⁷ not the mundo del ser humano, which might give her a broader audience of identification. A Dominican critic wrote of her first book; “Como se siente mujer y sabe poeta, doble condición que se conjugan armoniosamente en Yrene Santos, en: “Créeme” anhela “un poema comulgando en nuestra cama”.¹¹⁸ (Rosario Candelier 1988, 5)

This particular example, however, does not contain in it anything exclusively female since the idea of a poem taking communion in bed can apply to a male voice as well as a female one. The sexuality and eroticism of Santo’s poetry rather than seen in a broader light, as has been done, for example with poets ranging from Rumi to Pablo Neruda, becomes, rather, a reflection of her womanhood or femaleness; Rumi and Neruda aren’t discussed in terms of their maleness. And this phenomenon does not limit itself to the Dominican Republic. In a seemingly very favorable review, a Latino critic writing in New York also frames Santos almost exclusively as a woman poet (and the reader as a male) when he writes: “Si usted se pregunta: ¿Qué siente el alma

¹¹⁷ The interior world of woman

¹¹⁸ “As she feels herself woman and knows herself poet, a double condition that congregate themselves harmoniously in Yrene Santos, in “Believe me,” she craves “a poem taking communion in our bed.”

femenina después de hacer el amor? *El incansable juego* le dará una respuesta.”¹¹⁹ (Aguasaco 2004).

A woman-centered identification is not one that Santos totally rejects; on the contrary, she is aware and enters into a literary political battleground even as politics is not worked out extensively as a theme in the poetry; the politics comes from the context. The dedication to her 1988 book frames this political vision: “A la mujer:/ porque ella también puede y debe manifestar sus deseos, sus pasiones, su ternura; sin esperar, ni dejar que siempre sea el hombre quien se exprese verbal y emocionalmente.”¹²⁰ (*Desnudez*, 4) However, neither of her books is limited to a female vision or aesthetics. Thus, Yrene is part of a tradition of women writers in the Dominican Republic who have fought sexism in poetry and through poetry.

Years ago, Santos participated in the Writer’s Workshop Series of the William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consciousness at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, putting her in the company of such writers as Marjorie Agosín, Daisy Zamora, Rosario Ferré, Claribel Alegria, Martín Espada, Naomi Ayala, Tino Villanueva, Jack Agüeros, Leroy Quintana, and Raoul Ybarra. In this context, Yrene represents a Dominican writer within the identity of “Latino” or “Hispanic,” but also within a global identity of people “from places torn by war, conflict, and violence:”

One primary goal of the workshops is to encourage Latino students to become comfortable and equally fluent in both languages, English and Spanish. Most writers who lead workshops come from places torn by war, conflict, and violence... These are writers who have confronted experiences of war; terror or violence, and, in the classroom, work well with inner city students who have all too often been witnesses to or victims of violence. They are writers who offer students alternative and fresh ways of understanding and reacting to their experiences and can speak convincingly of the importance of language in expressing feelings and emotions and the power of the written word to communicate to others the important issues facing individuals and entire communities. Writers often come to serve as role models, committed individuals dedicated to the discipline that writing requires, writers who have learned the value of finding one's own

¹¹⁹ “If you ask yourself: What does the feminine soul feel after making love? *El incansable juego* will give you the answer.

¹²⁰To women,/ because they can and also should manifest their desires, their passions and their tenderness; without expecting or always allowing that it be men who express themselves verbally and emotionally.

voice and describing one's own history as a way of defusing and resolving conflicts, both internal and external. (Writer's Workshop Model n.d.)

Thus, by moving to the United States, Santos somehow ceased to be merely a woman poet and takes on some dimension of universality but still within new boxed categories: that of Latino and of coming "from places torn by war, conflict and violence" (see also Suárez-Boulangger n.d.). She comes to be paradoxically a universal Latina-o, a universal "other" for a North American white audience. Thus, in these other contexts, the identity of Santos and of her supposed readers is presented differently, shifting with her migration in the context of other migrants to the United States, from other parts of the world. Yet there has been no place, neither the Dominican Republic, nor Latin America more broadly, nor the United States, where the range of the view of her writing and her readership has not somehow been curtailed by the narrowness of the categories into which she's she's been inserted.

It is certainly not Santos' poetry that is limited, for it works on many levels. Perhaps the most striking and most basic is the spiritual and philosophical. In her poems, there is a yearning and reaching for the divine and for a vision of the divine that is not dogmatic, that is embracing, pleasurable, sensual and loving of the earth. In this vein, she joins a long line of spiritual, ecstatic poets going back centuries and across continents, such as San Juan de la Cruz, whom she cites in the book's epigraph; her style and themes have particular affinity to the poetry of Jelaluddin Rumi and Laldyada or Lalla. Like these poets' works, Santos' is concerned with questions of infinity, wandering, faith, emptiness, nakedness, and paradox as both style and substance. By reading her poems, in both Spanish and in English translation, alongside the translations by Coleman Barks of the mystical poets Rumi and Lalla, we begin to see Santos in a different category that she has not fully been "marketed" as: mystical poet.

In 1956, the journal *Comparative Literature* published an essay that attempted to define mystical poetry:

As a working definition, then, we may say that mystical poetry is supernatural, not necessarily pantheistic, animistic, or, in the strict sense, religious; and, furthermore, that it

concerns union in some way with the single and transcendent supernatural. In this way we can distinguish it from special creeds and yet insist that it deals in its particular way with the supernatural. Here it may be objected that that is what mystical has always meant—descriptive of union with the divine. (Nelson 1956, 324)

More recently, Makarand Paranjape asserts that:

Mysticism is best defined as a concern with the nature of the ultimate reality; it is not a specific set of dogmas. However, at the core of most mystical traditions is a belief in the possibility of an intuitive, direct and transforming experience of this ultimate reality. Mysticism recognizes the validity of supra-sensual experience. (Paranjape 2005)

Yrene's poetry certainly fits these definitions. Many of these mystical concerns and tropes were begun in her first book, *Desnudez del silencio*, as indicated by the very title of the book and by lines such as these from the poem "el sexo se derrama": "cesa el sexo después de media hora/desvestidas sus almas/ los dos se han besado"¹²¹ (*Desnudez* 53). The theme of nakedness puts Santos in the same company as the book *Naked Song* and the poem by Lalla: "Dance, Lalla, with nothing on/ but air. Sing, Lalla,/ wearing the sky./ Look at this glowing day! What clothes/ could be so beautiful, or/ more sacred?" (Laldyada). Both Santos and Lalla use nakedness politically to the extent that both poets function in societies where the exposure and behavior of a woman's body is rigidly controlled, although also often exposed and sexualized at the behest of male domination. But nakedness takes on other dimensions also as metaphor for honesty and divinity.

Santos continues the mystical and ecstatic thematics in *El incansable juego*. In order to appreciate the range of her concerns and techniques, I will quote liberally from her poetry, with occasional comparison to other mystic poets. For example, her poem "Dibujé," ["I drew"] "Creo en tí/ en las maniobras de tu cuerpo/envolviéndonos/ todo mucho nada / porque somos uno sin habernos tocado"¹²² Her poem "Andando/ conocimos otro lado de la vida/.../la tormentosa

¹²¹ "Sex ceases after half an hour/ their souls disrobed/ the two have kissed"

¹²² "I believe in you/ in your body's maneuvers /wrapping us/ all much nothing/ because we are one without having touched"

idea de lo vacío”.¹²³ She thus parallels Rumi’s poem “There’s nothing ahead:” “Lovers think they’re looking for each other,/ but there’s only one search; wandering/” (Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī 205) Her poem “Cuando tocas mi lengua/ soy vacío/ plenitud/ herida a gusto”¹²⁴ In the poem “La falta entre los muebles,”

tiemblo
ojos oídos labios
ducha de infinita palabras
tú
yo
nosotros
círculo de acción y vuelo
vuelo y paz
paz y silencio
creo que lo tengo todo
Ssss... 125

In the poem “Reencuentro,” “Ya nada me asusta. La vida continúa caiga quien caiga... ¿Será que estoy soñando? Estoy vuelta espuma. Ya soy sombra frenética que danza, sonrío y río a carcajadas; que llora y no es porque le duela esta altura”¹²⁶... In

Si estoy sola

...seguiré recorriendo caminos sin rumbo fijo
donde me lleve el viento
donde se detengan mis pasos

¹²³ “Wandering/ we met another side of life/ .../the turbulent idea of the void”

¹²⁴ “When you touch my tongue/ I am emptiness/ plentitude/ gladly wounded.”

¹²⁵ “The absence in the furniture” I tremble

eyes ears lips
a shower of infinite words
you
me
us
circle of action and flight
flight and peace
peace and silence
I think I have it all
Ssss...

¹²⁶ “Now nothing scares me. Life goes on fall who will... Is it that I'm dreaming? I've become foam. Now I'm a frenetic shadow that dances, smiles and laughs loudly; that cries and not because she's hurt by this height”

donde estén las manos extendidas hacia el infinito
implorando ayuda
y dando GRACIAS¹²⁷

Like San Juan de la Cruz, Rumi and Lalla, Santos' philosophy and religious ideas are infused with sensuality and eroticism, at times to the point that it is the eroticism that is worshipped as divine, as in the poem "Estás aquí/ allá/ en todas partes/ violando reglamentos antiquísimos/"¹²⁸ Thus it critiques a dogmatic and bureaucratic version of religion, a theme common in mystical poetry. "nos embriagamos de besos/ reprimidos tantos años/.../ Estás aquí/ allá/ en todas partes/ y no eres Dios"¹²⁹. What's interesting here is that unlike the mystical poetry tradition where the lover or beloved is traditionally interpreted to be God, this poem specifically says You're omnipresent, but you are not God. This poem thus negates the monotheistic belief in God by suggesting that it is Eros that is everywhere, either instead of God or in addition to God. Unlike San Juan de la Cruz, Santos makes sure to not leave the question of the lover's equivalence with God up to interpretation. In the case of San Juan, academics are still fiercely debating, hundreds of years later, if the lover can or should be interpreted as having an identity outside of God (Durán 1991). Santos' religious ethos is eclectic, hybrid, as is Dominican culture, with elements of Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions as well as Afro-Caribbean, as in the poem "Llegó la hora de la verdad" "y no estamos solas/ nos acompaña Ondina/ para limpiar

¹²⁷ If I'm alone

...I'll keep wandering paths going nowhere in particular
where the wind would take me
where my steps would linger
where my hands would extend towards the infinite
begging for help
and giving THANKS

¹²⁸ "You're here/ there/ every where/ violating ancient regulations"

¹²⁹ "we get drunk on kisses/ repressed for so many years/.../ You're here/ there/ everywhere/
and you're not God"

nuestra memoria/.../ está Yemayá/ Ochún/ para hacernos beber su historia”¹³⁰ Again, there are echoes of Rumi as translated by Barks, as in the Rumi poem “This we have now,” (Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī 261) also written in the third person and in “A Community of the Spirit” (Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī 3), fusing the community, the singular with the communal with the divine, that focuses on a moment of being together. Yet again there are important differences: Santos is very specific about the Afro-Caribbean deities who are present and Santos’ collective subjectivity is decidedly female and womanist as communicated with the use of the word “solas” which I chose to translate as “we women”. Men are not absent, but they are not the “we”: “Están los hombres/ dándose la vuelta y apoyándonos”.¹³¹

At other times in *El incansable juego*, the poetic voice takes on a god/goddess-like quality itself as in “Desde aquí/ me divido en mil maneras/ busco el camino de repartirme entre todos”¹³² which echoes the story of Jesus and the multiplying of the loaves of bread and fish to feed a multitude of thousands. It also resonates with Rumi’s frequent fusion of the poetic voice with the divine as in the poem “Say who I am”:

I am all orders of being, the circling galaxy,
the evolutionary intelligence, the lift,

and the falling away. What is
and what isn’t. You who know

Jelaluddin, you the one
in all, say who

I am. Say I
am you.
(Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī 276)

¹³⁰ “The hour of truth has arrived/ and we women are not alone/ Ondina's with us/ to clean our memory/.../ Yemayá's here/ Ochún/ to make us drink her history”

¹³¹ “The men are here/ turning around and helping us”.

¹³² “From here/ I divide in a thousand ways/ look for the path to distribute myself among everyone”

However, Santos' poem also echoes the lived experiences of many women such as Santos (and myself) who have three children, a large extended family, a community of writers and artists to respond to, and the need to make a living. Sociologists have recently taken notice of the many work shifts in a modern woman's life. So this poem can also be read in a feminist vein as well as a religious one, and indeed the two interpretations come together to suggest the divine nature of a woman who, like God, can divide herself a thousand ways and is "sin forma," "without form." The feminist/womanist presence permeates the book, beginning with the opening poem "Quiero ser mujer no fragmentada"¹³³ which speaks from the place of desire, desire to not have to fragment herself so much to meet everyone's needs.

Santos' concern with matters spiritual do not make her unique in Latina-o literature, as it also fits into U.S. Latina-o poetic traditions, for example the Chicano foundational poem "I am Joaquín":

And now!
 I must choose
 between
 the paradox of
 victory of the spirit,
 despite physical hunger,
 or
 to exist in the grasp
 of American social neurosis,
 sterilization of the soul
 and a full stomach.
 (Gonzales 1972)

Although it may seem that "I am Joaquín" is a different poetics, for me, as a particular reader and a particular translator, it is not. There is a Latina-o tradition of spiritual poetry which includes both Santos and Gonzales. They are simply not recognized for that in the dominant contemporary literary spaces. They are not given that label. In his review of mystical Indian poetry written in English, Makarand Paranjape suggests that there is much more of an abundance of this poetry in India than in the Commonwealth, asserting that "Though mystical writings are

¹³³ "I want to be a non fragmented woman"

found in all literatures of the world, there are differences in both emphasis and prevalence.” (Paranjape 2005) It is actually possible that there is **more** spirituality in Latino poetry, more mystical poetry, than in the dominant poetry by white North American males. But when white North American reading audiences want spiritual poetry, they seem to prefer to go to poets of long ago and far away rather than to say, a poet who is living now, and writes in Spanish in the subways of New York, or in her sofa in an apartment in Queens. And yet, these mostly white audiences do seem to hunger for mystical poetry.

The appetite for the mystical in poetry has a history in the USA. Given that this project grew from an American Studies academic program, I'd like to introduce, in the context of understanding Yrene's place within the space of USA literature, another interesting poet within American history: Omar Khayyam. Although he was not American, and lived hundreds of years before the concept of America even existed, Janet Davis, professor of American Studies, points out that Khayyam's poetry via the book the *Rubaiyat*, became wildly popular in the United States in the late 1880s and early 1900s (maybe as popular as Rumi is today), and that he is important for understanding American culture. For USA Americans, he was the Rumi of that time.

A text that starts out as a kind of high cultural product becomes quickly massified. ... In some ways it has become indivisible from a broader American way of life and thinking. There is a tendency to forget history in the ways in which contemporary geopolitical problems have overshadowed our cultural memory of a Persian astronomer, poet and mathematician who was the product of an incredibly cosmopolitan medieval Persian world that Americans today in a kind of polarity of Islam and Christianity as an inevitable clash have simply forgotten. (*The Genius of Omar Kayyam* 2010)

Like Khayyam, Yrene Santos is part of a cosmopolitan world, a cosmopolitan contemporary world. Her poetics is very much in the vein of Omar Khayyam and Rumi. She is not unique in this, but rather one of many contemporary poets in this vein. Yet by looking at her and her poetry and her translations — and even her translator and publishers — in this kind of detail as we did here, and comparing and contrasting with Khayyam and Rumi and their poetry and their translators and their publishers, we can learn about USA American poetry audiences

and the spaces of poetry in contemporary USA and the world. And about the places and spaces of poetry over time.

Edward Fitzgerald, Khayyam's translator, came from a wealthy family and led an idle life in England, where he translated the Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*, centuries and many miles from where it was originally written. Fitzgerald paid his own money to have it published, but these factors did not guarantee an audience, let alone popularity. Tony Briggs, of Bristol University recounts:

These books lay in the bookseller's shop. Nobody bought a single one. They cost a certain amount. He reduced them to one shilling — small amount. Nobody bought them. He reduced them to one penny, the smallest coin of the realm. And he put them in a box outside his shop and nobody bought them. Now I am certainly surprised that nobody had enough perception to read these poems to see how good they were. But since everyone else had failed to notice that, I am astonished that one man did — a man called Whitley Stokes, who was an editor, stopped outside the shop, looked through this penny box, took out a copy of *The Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam, read it and said 'My stars, this is good poetry!' This is good poetry!' And he walked into the shop bought some more copies, sent them to his friends. And that was the beginning — the rocket went up! (*The Genius of Omar Kayyam* 2010)

This is the role that Carlos Aguasaco, a scholar, professor, publisher and arts organizer of Colombian origin, has taken on with regards to Yrene Santos and many other poets. Although there is not a rocket that has shot up as in the cases of Khayyam and Rumi, Carlos has lit many sparks and fires. He is the one who wrote that Yrene "is one of the most important living poets of the Spanish language." (Aguasaco 2011) At the same time, he has published a number of Latino and non-Latino writers in the USA and brought poets from Latin America and other parts of the world to New York for the New York Poetry Festival of the Americas. Thus, although a poet like Santos, her publisher Aguasaco, and her translator Espinal, may not become part of the focus of an American studies scholar such as Janet Davis, they/we do define, in our own powerful and important ways, an "American way of life and thinking," to use Professor Davis' words.

And there are elements to this that go beyond the USA American context and beyond American Studies. Let's remember now that there have been many erasures of women's spiritual voices in history. Scholars like Elaine Pagels have pointed out that there are female voices, for example, in the writings that could have been part of today's Christian gospels, but that political

decisions are made to exclude them (Pagels 63-69). In that spirit, I include an excerpt of one of those powerful historical omissions, “a marvelous, strange poem” of uncertain authorship, discovered among the gnostic manuscripts at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, that “speaks in the voice of a feminine divine power, but one that unites all opposites.” (Pagels as cited in *The Thunder, Perfect Mind*.)

You who are waiting for me, take me to yourselves.
And do not banish me from your sight.
And do not make your voice hate me, nor your hearing.
Do not be ignorant of me anywhere or any time. Be on your guard!
Do not be ignorant of me.
For I am the first and the last.
I am the honored one and the scorned one.
I am the whore and the holy one.
I am the wife and the virgin.
I am <the mother> and the daughter.
I am the members of my mother.
I am the barren one
and many are her sons.
I am she whose wedding is great,
and I have not taken a husband.
I am the midwife and she who does not bear.
I am the solace of my labor pains. (*The Thunder, Perfect Mind*)

But we don't need to just dig up ancient scrolls — we DO need to be digging them up, but that's not all — to find women's godly wisdom in poetry or prayer. We have Marianela Medrano, right here, right now, speaking with a similar powerful and unconquerable voice and spirit:

Así nacen las Taínas

Me zafo del corpiño y quedo pendiendo en el aire
péndulo ahora nadie me toca
ya sé el secreto...

Dicen que he muerto y vienen a mi funeral
de alas me escapo
por entre las piernas las cabezas
me escapo volando
doy a luz a una nueva luz

Se han equivocado
A mí nadie me mata ni me encierra ni me atrapa
Zafada — como dicen ellos—

me celebro en la que soy
en la que seré en el instante próximo

Canto con la misma voz que antes
dijeran no tener música
soy la música en esencia
A que no se atreven a vivir en el espíritu
zafada de la vida me doy a la vida misma

Péndulo sigo anclada a la raíz —es mi secreto—
me escapo volando por entre las piernas las cabezas
me doy a luz en pleno vuelo
pegada a la raíz pendo

Vienen a mi funeral
ignorando que es el nacimiento
Liberada del corpiño
zafada de la raíz jamás.¹³⁴

To paraphrase voice of *The Thunder, Perfect Mind*, let us not be ignorant of Dominican women's wisdom, of Taina women's wisdom, of Afro Latina women's wisdom - and the wisdom of women who are all of these identities. Let us look for wisdom in women - in *all* women - in *all* men. But it's not enough to say *all* if we can't also say Dominican. Writing this in the era of Black Lives Matter, I am tempted to write that Dominican Women's Wisdom Matters, Dominican Women's Writing Matters, Taína Writing Matters — there are all manner of ways to take this activist moment of clarity and apply it even in matters of literature. The writing, reading, and translating of literature are also spaces of action, as I hope I've shown and will continue to show.

¹³⁴ This is how Taínas are born. I break out of the corset and wind up hanging in midair / a pendulum now no one touches me / I know the secret...//They say I've died and they come to my funeral / winged I escape / through legs and heads / I escape flying / I give birth to a new birth // They're wrong / no one can kill me or lock me up or trap me / Unhinged —as they say— / I celebrate myself in the she that I am / in the one I will be in the next instant // I sing with the same voice as before / they said we didn't have music / I am music in essence / I bet they don't dare live in spirit / unhinged from life I give myself to life itself // As pendulum I'm still anchored to the root — that's my secret— / I escape flying though legs and heads / I give birth to myself in midair / glued to the root I hang // They come to my funeral / not knowing that it's my birth / Freed from the corset / unhinged from the root never.

Acting Out of Place: Outlining Some Actions from This Research

Marianela and Yrene's poems show how sometimes there is a fine line between poetry and prayer, poetry and spirituality, poetry and healing, poetry and action. Marianela has made this an explicit focus in her life and work. In addition to earning a PhD in Psychology, the dissertation of which was intertwined with a book of poetry, she has certification in Poetry Therapy. She doesn't shy away from poetry as something useful and active.

I had wondered about the usefulness of Aurora's fiction, given that she is so concerned with the social lives of the real people that inspire her characters. If it made a difference to any of her readers, that she knew of, maybe inspired them to some action to correct injustice. But when I asked her about it, she told she told a surprising story:

Isabel: Tú piensas que mediante la escritura eso tiene algún efecto? ... ¿Qué efecto piensas tú que tiene o que tú has visto?

Aurora: Es una buenísima pregunta. Mira, yo no sé si tiene algún efecto. ... A veces una se cree Dios o Diosa en el sentido de que si yo escribo sobre eso las cosas pueden cambiar. Y no, no hay garantía de eso y no tiene porqué ser así. Pero yo me siento peor si ... lo que toca mi sensibilidad no lo canalizo a través del único instrumento que yo tengo, que es la palabra.

Isabel: Tú has visto que las personas, si te hablan de tu libro o de los cuentos, ellos empatizan con estos temas? La injusticia...

Aurora: Me molestan también las incoherencias sociales... No es que yo me alzo como la jueza y empiece a moralizar... Yo lo retrato y dejo que el lector o lectora saque sus propias conclusiones. Una vez un tipo me dijo que un cuento mío le había estimulado para él curiosear en el mundo de turismo sexual. Y eso .. o sea... me dejo como ... pero yo no ando queriendo estimular eso.

Isabel: Como que él no vio algunas cosas que tú estabas...

Aurora: Yo creo que lo vio y que no le importa. ... El escritor escribe lo que escribe pero tu pierdes el control... Ese cuento por ejemplo "Novia del Atlántico" mío que habla del turismo sexual y los llamados "adult resorts" que hay por ejemplo en el norte, que no son más que prostíbulos... Los propietarios son extranjeros... Se maneja por internet. Y tienen catálogo... por ejemplo, tú eres un simple hombre de los suburbios de Ohio. Entrás en internet, ves un catálogo de chicas dominicanas, y tú puedes pedir que cuando tú vayas de vacaciones esa chica te esté esperando desnuda en la cama. No importa que sea menor de edad. Esos es lo de menos.

Isabel: ... un muchacho leyó ese cuento... y dijo: Ah! Él no sabía que existía ese servicio. Y ahora el lo quería usar!... Y ese muchacho era de donde?

Aurora: De Jacksonville, Florida... Yo lo conocí a través de un amiguísimo mío que le prestó el libro.¹³⁵

In the interview she and I had to laugh at the absurdity. “Qué lío cuando en realidad yo lo que quería era lo contrario.” Part of what made it absurd for us is we were perhaps laughing at ourselves as believers in the power of literature. In this case the joke is on us.

All the laughter notwithstanding, we had serious discussions about actions emanating from her experiences as a writer. I discussed with Aurora Arias the ethos of Participatory Action Research and addressed the action part of this methodology. Our interviews, as is the style of both of us in speaking and moving through the world, were all over the place, but the trajectories made perfect sense. The question of action led us to a place that might not have been predicted, and to beneficiaries you might not have thought would be part of this project. Their pictures:

¹³⁵ Isabel: Do you feel that through writing, that it has an effect? What effect do you think it has or that you have had?

Aurora: That’s a great question. Look, I don’t know if it’s had any effect. ... sometimes you think of yourself as God or Goddess in the sense that if I write about that, things can change. And no, there is no guarantee of that and there is no reason for there to be. But I feel worse ... if I don’t channel what touches my sensibility through the only instrument that I have, which is the word.

Isabel: Have you seen that people if they speak about your book or your stories, do they empathize with those themes? The injustice...

Aurora: I’m also bothered by social incoherences... It’s not that I put myself up as the judge and start moralizing. I depict what I see and I let the reader come to his or her own conclusions. Once a guy told me that one of my stories had motivated him to explore the world of sex tourism. And that, well, that left me.. but that’s not what I wanted to motivate!

Isabel: Seems he didn’t see some of the things you were...

Aurora: I think he saw it and didn’t care. ... The writer writes what they write but you lose control. .. That story for example, “Novia del Atlántico” of mine that discusses sex tourism and the so called “adult resorts” that exists for example in the northern coast, that are nothing more than brothels. The owners are foreign. Everything gets handled via internet. And they have catalogs... for example you are a simple man from the suburbs of Ohio. You go online see a catalog of Dominican girls and you can request that when you go on vacation that girl will be waiting for you in bed naked. It doesn’t matter if she’s underage. That’s not a problem at all.

Isabel: a young guy read your story and said: Ah! He didn’t know such a service existed and now he wanted to use it! And this guy — he was from where?

Aurora: From Jacksonville, Florida. ... I met him though a very good friend who had lent him the book.



Figure 58 Dominican girls reading a book



Figure 59 Dominican boys reading books and having a discussion

How this came about was in a discussion about the Feria Internacional del Libro in Santo Domingo. I asked Aurora about her participation in that book fair and about whether she thought it was an event that really reached people. She told me that she felt that there was a lot of waste but also a lot of good work happening. She herself had given writing workshops to young school children at the fair a few years prior. She said this was good work but also heartbreaking because there were always some children who were not paying attention, who seemed to be

almost falling asleep they were so weak, and she could tell it was because they had had nothing to eat and lacked enough food in their lives. So there was no way that the book fair could have an impact if these kids' most basic needs for nutrition weren't being met. I asked if she thought it made sense, since my methodology called for action, to make nutrition of children attending the book fair programs a focal point of action from the research I was doing with her. And she said yes, even though it wasn't clear what could be done. I thought we could perhaps raise funds or find a way to get the resources to provide at least food during the workshops. And that we could possibly make this a bigger focus of the writers, organizers, vendors and other participants in the book fairs in the future — draw attention to the food problem, the lack of nutrition and collectively try to address it. Aurora urged me speak with the woman who had invited her to do those workshops, Dulce Elvira, and gave me her contact information at the National Children's library. I set up a meeting with Dulce Elvira but it turns out that she no longer coordinated the Children's programs at the book fair. She then said she did work with many kids at the children's library who were similarly poor as the ones Aurora described but that the need she saw was specifically for books rather than food as that did not come up in her work at the library (or at least it didn't come to mind for her — I might revisit the question later with her). We started to go down a different action path.

Dulce had earlier received a large donation of books from the French embassy, not for the lending collection, but to give away to children who visited the library. Dulce saw that, because of poverty, most of the children they served were not used to having books and did not have their own books at home. Through the French Embassy gift, she was able to give a book to each child who visited the library. But they had so many children visit that soon the books ran out and they wanted more to give away. They were receiving smaller donations and were inviting any and all to donate books for this purpose. I took that information in and told her I would think about it and see what I could do. Later that year, in the Fall semester at the university, I had the opportunity to apply for an internationalization grant. I got the idea to ask for money to continue

the collaboration with librarians in Dominican Republic and specifically, for \$2000 to buy books to donate for the Children's library. I also proposed that I would try to find a way to do ongoing fundraising and get students from my university involved as a way to globalize their own education. The money was to be used in the 2014-2015 academic year and I went to the book fair that year to buy books to donate. It was a bit complicated but we did it! We bought 508 books and the pictures above are actual children with their books. Many interesting things happened. We went to various kiosks to look for appropriate books. The overwhelming whiteness of children's books in Spanish was a very real problem. I searched for copies of Marianela Medrano's *Prietica* and did not find one copy! There was one book about ballet that featured beautiful illustrations of a brown skinned girl with black hair, albeit light brown skin (in the photo above). It was one of the few books among hundreds we looked at that had anyone resembling a "typical" Dominican. It was like living the heartbreak Marianela had over her own book cover over and over as we sifted through books to purchase. It was the same heartbreak.



Figure 60 Book cover for *Prietica* by Marianela Medrano

Two lingering questions for me as possible follow up: is there a need for nutritional assistance to the children who received the books we donated? Is there still a need and a way to

provide nutritional assistance to the children who attend the book fair and coordinate that with whomever is in charge of the children's programs now? I don't want to lose sight of this part of the conversations with Aurora Arias. I also don't want to lose sight of other possible action items that came from our conversations. For example, what action can we take to benefit the gardener Aurora told me about? And another action: how can we advocate for a movie to be made out of Aurora's fiction?

I do think of translation as action as well, in regards to all three writers since they write mostly in Spanish. (Although recently Marianela did publish a poem in English, that she has also read publicly various times, titled "El Corte," about the massacre of Haitians and black Dominicans during the Trujillo dictatorship (Medrano 2015).) I can keep translating. And advocate to have these poems translate into other languages: having met Abeer-Abdel Hafez, the translator from Arabic to Spanish, I wonder of the possibilities of her or someone like her or with her, translating from Spanish to Arabic. After the conversations with Marianela and Yrene in 2008, I also had in mind to try to get them to Spain. I did take some small actions around that by bring up the subject when I as a librarian was invited to speak at professional library meetings in Spain some years ago. I can follow up on this as well.

This dissertation also is action. It was pointed out to me to be careful about calling the dissertation in-and-of itself a form of action, as the goals of Participatory Action Research as social change can get muddled. Which is why I've made the attempt to take some action within the course of this writing, such as the book fair donation project — something inspired by writing this chapter but that also happened outside of the writing. And yet it does also bear pointing out that the choice of topic and even the choice of methodology can be very active and activist processes, or they can be passive in their acceptance of safe or status quo material. So yes, a dissertation, even without using Participatory Action Research as inspiration or methodology, can be action.

Presenting poems like the one below by Marianela, from her book *Diosas de la Yuca*, is also action, which I will do here without commentary, as a way to give closure to all we have travelled in this chapter.

En cualquier momento despertamos

Mi gente viene de las piedras y el salitre
del barro y del agua
Pájaros metálicos y antisépticos
se alzan altaneros sobre el azul
tirándonos con fiereza
La tierra removida descubre sepulcros sagrados
Soterrados pedazos nuestros esparcidos

Relámpagos contra el aire gradualmente nos apagamos

Hay un pueblo extendido
a todo lo largo del cielo.

At any moment we wake up

My people come from rocks and lingering sea salt
from clay and from water
Metallic and antiseptic birds
rise up haughty above the blue
throwing us with ferocity
The turned soil discovers sacred tombs
Buried pieces of ours scattered

Lightening against the air gradually we dim out

There is a people stretched out
against the entire length of the sky.

CHAPTER 4

EGUN HEALING IN DOMINICAN WOMEN'S REAL AND FICTIONAL SPACES:

NELLY ROSARIO, ANNECY BÁEZ, AND ANA MAURINE LARA

Behind Walls and Storefronts: Afro Syncretic Religious Traditions

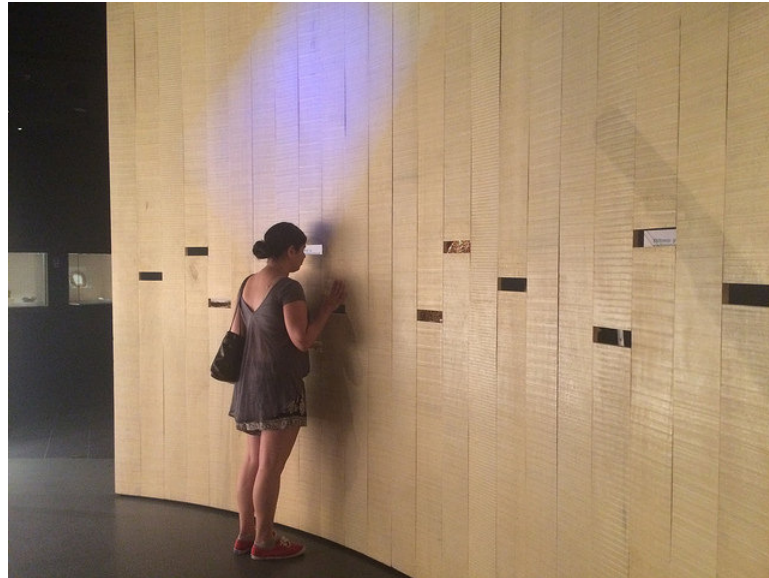


Figure 61 At the Centro León museum

This is my daughter Sabina in 2016 when I took her to a museum dedicated to Dominican culture, the Centro León Museum in Santiago, Dominican Republic. The wall pictured here figuratively and literally separates us from knowledge of our African ancestry. It's part of a permanent exhibit called "Signos de Identidad," which showcases the important aspects of Dominican heritage, both today and in the past. But the part dedicated to the "influencia africana," unlike the other parts such as the section on Taino culture, is only viewable via rectangular slits, like peepholes, in a wall that spreads across the entirety of the section. A plaque states:



Figure 62 At the Centro León museum¹³⁶

It's only when you get closer to the slits, that you begin to see a glimpse of the objects exhibited:



Figure 63 At the Centro León museum

¹³⁶ **African influence.** African words: mandongo, ñáñara, candongo, bembe, mangú, manicongo, gayumba, fufú, bongo, sarandunga, timba, malanga, guangá, ñango, ñame. The objects presented form part of the Dominican mestizo tradition of African influence. For comparison, West African contemporary objects are presented. One of the greatest expressions of African influence is music, which generally is linked to certain syncretic religious rituals.

But you have to get much closer to really see what's inside. Finally, when your eyes are level with the peephole, you see the walled-off treasures. This is just one example of what's on display:



Figure 64 At the Centro León museum

The Centro León opened in 2003. In 2005, when the Dominican Republic was host to the conference of the Caribbean Studies Association, a busload of academics and intellectuals from throughout the Caribbean and beyond took a trip from the Capital, Santo Domingo, where the conference was held, to this museum in Santiago. The group consisted of mostly Afro-descended people from various islands in the region. I was on that bus and eleven years later as I write this, I cannot shake the feeling of outrage that many of the CSA participants had to this particular exhibit. They were angry that African heritage was kept behind a wall. Yes, they got the point that the museum was trying to make: the African heritage is something that Dominicans try to hide — that's what the wall represents. But nowhere does the museum exhibit bring these elements of Dominican culture out in the open. They can be seen but only behind the wall.

That wall exists throughout Dominican culture and life. And it has created suffocated spirits within us, a dis-ease that needs healing. It's like our ancestors are trapped behind it.

Recently many Dominicans have tried to break the wall down — one way is through literature that acknowledges and engages our African ancestors.

Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints*, Annecy Báez's *My Daughter's Eyes*, and Ana Maurine Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt* all deal with ancestors in one way or another. All three books of fiction are infused with egun and with the past, with characters and spirits from the past whose presence is felt in the present. They also concern themselves with movement across spaces and places. Egun is a concept from Caribbean Santería that has to do with ancestors, but also consequently with space and spaces and with character and personality and history. Egun offers a point of entry into these books that might not leave us feeling so colonized even as we try hard to decolonize, might not leave us feeling so "patriarchized" even as we try to "depatriarchize." Well, I don't know about you, so I'll speak for myself: I really need such a point of entry. Egun and healing in transnational, trans-generational Dominican women's spaces offers both an expansive system of feeling and thinking that can be called to confront colonization, and reflects important contributions in these specific works. None of the three books mentions egun per se, but they all work with that concept.

Before delving more into egun and what it means, let's go to another site of Dominican culture; let's take a tour of Afro-diasporic religions. Some of you have already been on such a tour, or are living in that place and can give a tour yourselves. Humor me because I will also take you on a specific path through specific places that led me as your writer and guide to egun as a core concept to look at these works. There is value in going down that path. We'll get back to egun, where this path will take us. We'll start at Santería.

Santería has often been used loosely in the United States to denote religious traditions of African origin that developed in the Spanish speaking Caribbean and that actually have varying names and histories and practices, sometimes overlapping, sometimes not, such as: Santería, la Regla de Ocha, la religión Lucumí, El monte, Shango, Arará, Gagá, espiritismo, Voodoo, Vodun, Vodú, Vudú, las 21 Divisiones and brujería. (Stinchcomb 4) In Cuba, I even noticed

that some people simply refer to it as *la religión* or just religion. *Santería* has also been part of the cultural landscape for both African American and Latino communities in the USA as well as for that group of us that straddles both — the Afro Latinos, including of course Dominican Yorkers. *Santería* is everywhere in our contemporary lives. Yet in the Dominican context, there are other, related but different traditions also of African origin that are not as commonly known within contemporary USA Latinx culture: *Las 21 Divisiones* (sometimes referred to as *Los Misterios*, *Dominican Misterios* or *Dominican Vudu*¹³⁷), and Haitian Vodou. According to one writer and practitioner, the 21 *Divisiones* “blends influences from Catholicism, religious practices of the Kongo, Benin and Yoruba (Nigeria), Haitian Vodou and Taino Indian religious practices,” incorporates many more Catholic folk rituals such as *horas santas*, *rosarios*, and prayers, and does not have as many rules and structure as Haitian Vodou. (Salva “*Las 21 Divisiones Overview.*”)

There are major differences between *Santería*, *Dominican Misterios* and Haitian Vodoun, as well as differences within and even in some cases very distinctive “types” of each, and they have different geographical origins. “*La regla de Ocha es el elemento principal para el surgimiento en Cuba de la Santería, creencia yorubá modificada, que incluye elementos religiosos de otros cultos africanos y del Catolicismo impuesto por los europeos.*”¹³⁸ (Vadillo 33) Although developed for a few hundred years separately, the Yoruba culture in west Africa and in Cuba still bear many similarities as I saw for myself when a Nigerian scholar made a presentation in Cuba about his culture and some Cuban women who practiced *Santería* went up to him and started singing their versions of similar songs.

¹³⁷ There are variant spellings and pronunciations: Vodoun, Vudú, Vodú, Vodou, etc..

¹³⁸ “The rule of Ocha is the principal element for the rise in Cuba of *Santería*, a modified Yoruba faith that includes elements from other African religions and from the Catholicism imposed by the Europeans.”



Figure 65 Two Cuban women singers and a Nigerian author

Alicia Vadillo asserts out that Vodú does not have the same kind of coherence that Santería does, that the Regla de Ocha, as Santería is also often called, is the result of a religious lineage from a very specific culture and place, the Yoruba culture, while Vodú has had a hybrid history from the very beginning, being from the start a mix of of the faiths and practices of different African peoples from varied locations (41): “animismo dahomeyano, congolés, sudanés y demás... tribus diseminadas desde la Guinea septentrional hasta Cabo López, comprendiendo las costas de las especies, de Marfil, de Oro, el reino de los Achantis, del Dahomey, etc. ...y yendo de la zona costera en el hinterland a la meseta.”¹³⁹ (Jean-Price Mars as cited in Vadillo 42) Vadillo also maintains that Santería continues today to be comparatively rigid and closed off in the way it is practiced and in its deities, even as it had taken on some of the iconography of christianity and other religions; on the other hand, Vadillo argues that Vodú is constantly taking on both new practices as well as new deities. (41)

¹³⁹ Vodou is par excellence a syncretism of beliefs, a meeting of Dahomeyan animism, Congolese, Sudanese and others... scattered tribes from northern Guinea to Cape Lopez, encompassing the coasts of spices, ivory , Gold , the kingdom of Ashanti , Dahomey, etc. ... and going from the coastal area to the hinterland of the plateau...

Knowledge about these histories help us when we read literature that includes elements of Afro-diasporic spirituality, so that we take care not to lump the different traditions together, even as sometimes the authors and communities themselves do that. Yet despite differences, there are also commonalities: Santería, Haitian Vodú, and the Dominican Misterios tradition all place a huge value on honoring ancestors. One Dominican Misterios spiritual leader suggests to practitioners: “pray to your ancestors, call the names of those you know and for those you don’t know say ‘To all those ancestors that I know and do not know, to all of those for whom I prayed and didn’t pray, to all those I greeted and did not greet.’ (Salva “Ancestors.”) These traditions promote the recognition of ancestor spirits living among us and their ability to speak to us and us to them, as well as the recognition that that world is infused with all kinds of spirits. This they also share in common with other spiritual traditions of the African diaspora in the Caribbean.

Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert use the phrase “Caribbean Creole religions” to refer to these religions and other similar African heritage spiritual traditions that developed in different regions of the Caribbean, emphasizing the importance of creolization in Caribbean religious history, and defining creolization as: “the malleability and mutability of various beliefs and practices as they adapt to new understandings of class, race, gender, power, labor, and sexuality.” (4) According to these two scholars, even given their distinct historical trajectories and modern practices, Caribbean Creole religions have many specific characteristics in common. Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert identify eleven commonalities (12-13); of these, six have some relation so spaces in relation to spirit, as in the assertion that all Creole religions are “linked by a cult of dead ancestors and/or deceased members of the religious community who watch over and influence events from beyond.” Other aspects address how spirits move through spaces, and how spaces contains spirits, as in: “Creole religions share a belief in an active, supernatural, mysterious power that can be invested in objects (mineral, vegetable, animal, human), a force not intrinsic to the objects themselves.” Spirits can also be found in animals and in nature: “Plants and trees, for example, have a will and a soul, as do all things under the sun.”

Contacts between humans and the spirit world are often mediated via objects that serve as "a central symbol or focus ... These and other consecrated objects are not merely the symbols of the gods but are the material receptacles of divine power." Although most Caribbean Creole religions are decentralized, the role of religious leaders is paramount and often one of their important functions is the care of religious spaces and objects that are meaningful to the community. Lastly, the common experience of spirit possession by practitioners in Caribbean Creole religions is another tie to egun and to how spaces work with egun energy — the deities take possession of a practitioner, take over the body of a believer and to the point of this discussion, the believer becomes in effect a "real live altar," a space not only for the deity to live through and be experienced by the believers, but a space " in which Black historic, psychological, ethnic, and cosmic life is renewed." (Dos Santos and Dos Santos as cited in Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 13)

A further creolization occurs in the context of Caribbean emigration to places such as the USA, where people of Creole cultures meet and further meld. Thus, aspects of Santería meld with aspects of Vodú and even with traditions of other immigrant peoples in the USA such as Buddhism and Hinduism. This is the space from which I have personally encountered these spiritual traditions of African heritage.

I found in Afro-diasporic religions a rich system of concepts that could be evoked and used in the discussion of the very literature that in turn makes use of and even performs the healing spiritual work of the traditions. Although santería and vodou have traditionally been thought of in USA academic circles as limited to religion and spirituality, they can also be considered as thought systems or theoretical frameworks in their own right. As I researched this project, I was pleased to come across a few scholars who are writing and thinking along similar lines — and I am grateful to them for helping me feel not so alone in this approach and these ideas. For example, in his 2008 article, "Transcorporeality in Vodou," Roberto Strongman wrote that African-heritage philosophers have suggested "the need to investigate Afro-diasporic religion

as a repository of philosophical information that can overcome the imposition of Western philosophical discourses on colonized peoples.” (9) Specifically he pointed out, “Unlike the Western idea of a unitary self that is fixed within the body, the African diasporic philosophical-religious tradition conceives the body as a concavity upholding a self that is removable, external and multiple.” (27) Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley similarly, in her 2011 article “Songs for Ezili: Vodou Epistemologies of (Trans) gender,” made a case for “the ways of knowing gender, sexuality, and personhood enunciated in the epistemologies of Afro-Caribbean religions, ... that could be engaged in ways not easily recuperated by global Northern voyeurisms.” (418) Tinsley, asserts that “a variety of engagements with [the Haitian lwa] Ezili—songs, stories, spirit possessions, dream interpretations—perform black feminist intellectual work: the work of theorizing Caribbean genders ... the kind of theorizing that Barbara Christian asked us to take seriously when she reminded feminist scholars that ‘people of color have always theorized.’” (419)

In listening to and singing back to this theorizing, I look to situate a discussion of Caribbean gender and sexual complexity not primarily through queer or transgender studies but within a lineage of woman of color feminisms: a lineage that pushes me to ask what it would sound like if scholars were to speak of Ezili the way we often speak, say, of Judith Butler—if we gave the centuries-old corpus of texts engaging this lwa a similar explanatory power in understanding gender and sexuality. (419)

While Tinsley accomplishes this alternate theorizing by way of the deity Ezili, who is a prominent element in Ana Maurine Lara’s *Erzulie’s Skirt* as we will explore later, there are many other avenues to a theorizing using Afro-diasporic religion. Here, with Tinsley and Strongman’s writings giving me a blessing and intellectual companionship, I have chosen egun as a theorizing focus, recognizing and making use of egun’s immense explanatory power.

Egun: Concept of Space, Place and History

Egun is generally thought of as ancestor veneration. Speaking of Santería, Marta Moreno Vega writes: “My religion celebrates the aché in nature, and the power of our ancestor spirits, called eguns, and we perceive them everywhere in the world around us.” (*The Altar*) This is really important in the fiction works we will explore. The presence and power of ancestors comes up

again and again in these works and again and again in discussions of Afro-diasporic religions.

Moreno Vega describes how ancestor devotion works for her personally and for those in her religious community:

We believe our ancestors live among us and must be honored daily before our altars. These spirits can communicate with us through dreams, intuitions, visions, and metaphysical intervention. In ceremonies, misas, and rituals, we call down our ancestor spirits, though they surround us every day, comforting, protecting, and illuminating our spirits. The omnipresence of ancestral spirits helps guide our daily lives, allowing the ancestors to share their wisdom with us.

My loved ones who have joined the spirit world may not be with me physically, yet I know their spiritual essence continues to encircle me with their love and their power. I know them through my intuition and my spirit, through the voice that warns of imminent danger or offers a hint of great surprises. The religion of Santería provides an understanding of these special feelings and occurrences—not as extraordinary mysterious episodes, but as part of living a normal balanced life within the worlds of aye, heaven, and orun, earth. (Vega, *The Altar*)

Egun often inhabit the space of an individual's very body. Anthropologist and theologian Aisha Beliso-De Jesús has coined the term co-presence to indicate how “Orisha (divinities), various spirits, and familial ancestors are recognized as being on, around, and within practitioners' bodies.” (504) Roberto Strongman, in reflecting on vodou, similarly writes of the “transcorporeality” in that system of experiencing the world, reality and history.

The relation of egun to physical space often typically involves remembering ancestors by creating sacred spaces in a person's home that contain physical reminders of specific ancestors. These become spaces of meditation and prayer. (Hamilton "Egun wole!") The quote above also indicates that eguns take up all kinds of everyday spaces (“we perceive them everywhere in the world around us,” “our ancestors live among us”). However, there is another concept of egun that helps in an understanding of spaces and places. I learned of this aspect from a conversation many years ago with one of my dissertation committee members and it helped me in choosing space and place as a focus for the bigger project. Agustín explained that egun refers also to how spaces take on the spirits of those who inhabit them and how people carry with them the spirits of the places and spaces they have been in. That in Yoruba cosmology, spaces and places co-penetrate the beings and people who inhabit them. Whenever a person is in a place they take elements and

spirits of that place with them for the rest of their lives. Likewise, the spaces and places they have been in retain spirits of those beings who have ever inhabited those spaces. Another way to put all this: places are IN people and people are IN places. Ancestors are also in people, as are divinities. This conversation sent chills down my spine. This explanation of egun, in a dialogue whose date neither of us remembers, is more powerful than any I have found in academic sources.

I'm focusing on the word egun and the concepts behind it in order to use it to talk of the healing work of the three books of fiction by three Dominican women writers. And as I mentioned, it's not a word that per se appears in the novels themselves — it refers to a concept from Afro-diasporic religious traditions. It's also not a word that is used in all the Afro-diasporic religious traditions, in particular the Vodou tradition which is featured prominently in one of the books. However, the idea of egun, the concept of egun is thoroughly present in all three books.¹⁴⁰

These labels. Post colonial, for example; decolonial for another example. So much of what moves me in academic literature these days is about decolonizing, about how to best do decolonial work. But sometimes I wonder: is that all there is to do? Is that all there is? To decolonize? What happens after we decolonize or before we're colonized (or before we colonized)? Not asking these questions to be dismissive of the importance of decolonizing. What I love about egun and other concepts or ways to take on Afro-diasporic religions as theory is that it offers solutions to decolonization but doesn't stop there. Concepts like egun are pre-colonial and postcolonial, and also neither; pre modern and postmodern, and also neither. Joan Dayan wrote about how Vodou served the function of giving everyday Haitian people spiritual fortitude while also preserving their histories which were ignored in the official version written by the colonizers and that has been the one officially passed on to us in books and schooling. Dayan also pointed

¹⁴⁰ Rather than come at these works through English words such as space and place, we can come through the word and concept egun — and the English words will come right behind anyway. Words and naming are a tricky thing, though. So tricky: even the concept of Afro-diasporic religious traditions is probably limiting to what Afro-diasporic religious traditions are about: within the worldview of Afro-diasporic religions, we are all a part of one humanity; it's not a religion for only the Afro-diaspora.

out that despite the history of colonization and enslavement and oppression at the hands of Europeans and descendants of Europeans, the particular practices and deities of Vodou gave continuity to *something that had already existed* and that “this continuum leapt across, or superseded the European-imposed periodicities of such categories as colonial and post-colonial.” (Dayan 2)

Tinsley along these lines attempts a

quite literal response to M. Jacqui Alexander's call ...to consider what it might mean "to move beyond the more dominant understanding of African spiritual practice as cultural retention and survival, to get inside the meaning of the spiritual as epistemological, that is, to pry open the terms, symbols, and organizational codes that the Bantu-Kongo people used to make sense of the world." What differentiates Alexander's emphasis on the "spiritual as epistemological" from other scholars' is her insistence that this way of knowing the world stands to transform not only African diaspora but also feminist scholarship; that because most of the world's women understand their bodies, identities, actions, and desires in relation to spirits and spirituality, feminism misses the boat—misses the Crossing, misses the Middle Passage—when it fails to take this knowledge base seriously. (Tinsley, "Songs for Ezili" 421)

This approach is powerful — and fun. And painful. And healing. It does so much. This religion allows and indeed encourages a remembrance of both painful and joyful history, so different from the dehistoricizing and depoliticizing religious practices that many of us have experienced in Catholicism for example. And at the same time, while it acknowledges the hurts and traumas of history, that is only one piece of what it offers. It also acknowledges how family trauma as well as sexual trauma are passed down, and the ways they are intertwined with historical trauma. A focus on egun admits that a lot of our healing work needs to involve or evoke our ancestors, and that a lot of our pain may be due to the traumatic experiences our ancestors went through. This is in line with recent scientific research about the experiences of ancestors encoded in DNA, although of course that's not the only reason to give it respect. The DNA link and epigenetic trauma has been a huge topic among two of my own communities: the Native American and the African American. Turns out that colonialism has caused trauma in the bodies of the colonized that in turn becomes a part of the DNA that has been passed down to us. The article in *Indian Country Today*, “Trauma May Be Woven Into DNA of Native Americans,” reports that Native people wonder “what took science so long to catch up with traditional Native

knowledge” and quotes LeManuel “Lee” Bitsoi, Navajo, PhD Research Associate in Genetics at Harvard University, who stated that “Native healers, medicine people and elders have always known this and it is common knowledge in Native oral traditions.” (Pember 2015) The dismissal and ridicule of indigenous and Afro-diasporic knowledge continues, however, even as their insights are made valid by science — *even in the very same reports* in which their insights are made valid by science. In an article in the mainstream *Discover* magazine, about the history and importance of epigenetics, one of the subheadings is “Voodoo Genetics,” with the following quote by a leading scientist in this movement: “It sounded like voodoo at first,’ Szyf admits. ‘For a molecular biologist, anything that didn’t have a clear molecular pathway was not serious science.” (Hurley 2015) Yet the joke is on scientists like Szyf because the irony is that this IS, in a way, Vodou — that there’s nothing wrong with that.

Botánicas: Storefronts of Afro-Diasporic Latinx Knowing and Healing

My own introduction to Caribbean Creole religions came via certain places in Brooklyn, New York, in the neighborhood of Sunset Park, in the 1970s — via local stores called botánicas. I recall there were at least two in the immediate neighborhood (46th street and 5th Avenue in Brooklyn), one less than a block away from an apartment we lived in for five years. I wish I could tell you that I have intimate knowledge based on my experiences in the botánicas, but what I have to tell you is a bit different: the botánicas were a constant presence, yet they were also spaces where I actually did not enter in my youth. It was forbidden to me by my parents, or rather, my parents implied that botánicas were not places we should enter. My parents were and continue to be very Catholic, I was educated intimately in that religion — via my family’s cibaëña version of it — a combination of folk Catholicism, liberation theology and official Catholicism — a Catholicism led for the most part by women, composed of practices such as nightly saying of the rosary, weekly going to mass in Spanish, novenas for anyone who died, many Horas Santas for many different reasons, meetings of the Legión de María. As a child I looked at the botánicas with fascination and a sense of familiarity — I saw many things I was familiar with in my day to day

life — statues of saints and Madonnas, for example. As a child, I was confused by my parents’ avoidance of and negative vibes towards these places of religious objects, given how religious my mom and dad were.

How ironic and appropriate that as I went online in 2016 to look for images of botánicas from Sunset Park to share with you all, I find one with a Dominican flag in its sign, its address also just a half block from the same apartment where I lived for those five years as a child, although not in the same location as the botánica that I remember. That Dominican flag marks the space as both welcoming to Dominicans and representative of dominicaness. Yet in my own Dominican experience, these places and spaces were off limits — and their being off limits was actually part of my Dominican experience.¹⁴¹



Figure 66 Botánica in Sunset Park, Brooklyn (ish May 2011)

Botánicas have also come to signify and mark a space as part of an urban USA Latino experience in late 20th century, early 21st century. It is so for the writer of the blog where I found the photo, a blogger who goes by the name of “ish” and identifies himself as a “human. Male. Middle aged. Gay. Bear. Activist. Revolutionary. Santero. Music lover. Creator. Graphic artist.” I enjoyed his perspective on the botánicas even as I felt distanced because there is a sense that he comes to them somewhat as a tourist, a possible gentrifier to my old neighborhood, and yet I owe him the debt of speaking of these places and giving me an internet update of how the old

¹⁴¹ This dual Dominican reality is something that one of my featured authors, Ana Maurine Lara, wrote about in a dissertation that at the moment I’m writing this, is soon to become a book.

neighborhood is looking decades after I left. He does capture the essence of these places when he writes about his love of botánicas and how New York was once full of them, but they are now disappearing. He reports about the things you can find there (“candles, cheap perfumes, painted plaster statues, beads, animal parts, religious pamphlets, prayer cards and all manner of trinkets and baubles, and sometimes refrigerator cases of fresh tropical herbs and plants.”) and the variety of spiritual traditions that are served by this community business (among them “syncretic folk magic, Lucumi Santeria, Puerto Rican espiritismo, Afro-Cuban Palo, Haitian Vodun/Voodoo, the Dominican 21 divisiones, Mexican Santeria, South American Indian herbalists and healers.”) (ish 2 Jan 2011) Here’s a close up of some items in the window, as captured by ish:



Figure 67 Botánica display (ish May 2011)

ish writes:

"I Am With You Always" says a poster of Jesus as twin figures of Santa Muerte, "Saint Death," loom above Him. San Judas — St. Jude — patron Saint of lost causes towers above them all, while a mere three-leafed not-so-lucky clover promises...*something*. Chinese prosperity gods, Haitian goddesses and Indian spirit guides line the shelves behind: It's

multicultural cosmic order at the Botanica San Miguel & Anaisa in Brooklyn. (ish 3 May 2011)



Figure 68 Botánica display (ish January 2011)

Botánicas are places of multiculturalism. This “multicultural cosmic order” has been identified by religious scholar Joseph Murphy as a particularly Latino trait that is born out, made evident in how space is used in botánicas. He studied 18 botánicas in the Washington, D.C. area, and published his findings in the journal *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*, where he wrote of:

... *botánicas*, small shops in urban and suburban neighborhoods that sell spiritual goods to a largely Latino clientele... The botánica owners and patrons are open to the multiple cultural heritages of their homelands and to those they encounter in the United States. They have constructed blends of European, Native American and African traditions and are adding Indian and East Asian spiritualities to them. ... The spiritual world of the botánica is thus accumulative: adding and arranging symbols from increasingly diverse sources. ... There is a *telos* to folk religion that seeks help for the problems of this world as well as reconciliation with the next. ... the openness to the symbolism of multiple traditions allows clients to balance and negotiate the multiple cultural traditions that have shaped and which are shaping their own identities. (Murphy 88-89)

This speaks so much to my experience in the USA as a Latina and as a Dominican, this blending, this incorporating of all the different cultures I have come across and that begin to live through me. And yet I can't shake the feeling that botánicas are not completely known to me and the strange sensation of learning about parts of Dominican culture from writers like Murphy and ish, who did not grow up Dominican at all. Nevertheless, an outsider like ish helped me

understand the background to one of the three novels that I examine in this chapter and helped me learn about the 21 Divisiones and make them part of my own knowledgebase. From ish I learned that San Miguel & Anaisa are syncretic Saints within the Dominican 21 Divisiones. (ish 3 May 2011)



Figure 69 Botánica display (ish January 2011)

And this writing I am offering here cannot be complete — it's the result of research but it is also a journey that continues. I offer these photographs, information and reflections about botánicas because these are concrete places and spaces where the journey began for me as your writer. That journey has taken me to books, conversations, videos and even religious actions. The photo above brings back to me the feeling of the botánicas I remember. The gypsy/flamenco women in red and black brings back also the Maja brand soaps my mother used to buy from my earliest memory, say four years old or so. And then later, as I read books about Santería, there are other connections with these photos. For example, in the book recommended to me by a dissertation writing group colleague Carlos “Rec” McBride, Marta Moreno Vega's book *The Altar of My Soul*, I see passages that reflect and helped me understand the childhood images. Such as this one:

Santería has taught me that the spiritual world is complex, composed of guardian angels who see us in different ways, and of gods and goddesses who bring different energy forces

to our lives. I am initiated with the aché of Obatalá, the orisha of creation, and with the nurturing energy of Yemayá, my sacred maternal orisha. Among my ancestral spirit angels are the Native Indians of the Caribbean, the Moors, Kongos, and Yorubas of Africa, Gypsies and Europeans from Spain and the Caribbean. (ch.1)

Because these spiritual traditions of West African heritage have found their way into the writings of the authors I will discuss here, it felt necessary to give some context for them. Santería and vodou mean many things to many different readers. My own experiences are not meant to be typical as there is no typical, universal reader, not even a universal Latino, Latina, or Dominican or Afro-diasporic reader. There are however, others who will have a similar experience as mine and to tell of our experiences we bring to our readings of these authors is helpful in understanding the impact these writers have had and will have. We come not completely ignorant, not completely knowledgeable; with a particular set of prohibitions, histories, fascinations. The liberatory effects of the writings and of the spirituality they perform and reflect will have particular nuances, will manifest indifferent ways depending on what the reader brings, will operate differentially (a concept from Chela Sandoval).

Afro-Diasporic Religious Traditions in Three Dominican American Novels by Women

Like the spirits of the ancestors themselves, and like practitioners of Afro-diasporic religious traditions today, and like the non-practitioners who live their lives with these religions in a muted background yet always there, sometimes the presence of Afro-diasporic spirituality in literature is visually or verbally loud; other times its presence is somewhat quiet and hidden.¹⁴² What egun really teaches is to honor the ancestors and the spirits around us and all three, *Song of the Water Saints*, *My Daughter's Eyes*, and *Erzulie's Skirt*, do this some way or another. At the same time, a focus on egun is not about being stuck in the past but rather about acknowledging it and when necessary having a conversation or reckoning with the past. Again, all the three of these

¹⁴² As an indication of Santería's salience in literature, note that as of July 10, 2016, 169 articles resulted with a keyword search in the MLA International Bibliography database. Vodou or vudu or voodoo or vodoun yielded 425, but the word voodoo has taken on additional meanings in the English language that are not directly about the Afro-diasporic religion.

works do that. Yet one aspect of the past that does not work its way too much in the text is the Spanish language, since most of the text in all three cases is in English. Part of the discussion to follow will address language and language usage.

Subtle, Unnamed and Omnipresent Spirits in Nelly Rosario's Song of the Water

Saints

In *Song of the Water Saints*, Spanish language markers are there and ever so subtle, so much so that you can easily miss them, just as markers of Afro-diasporic spirituality are very subtle as well. Unlike many Latina/o writers, Rosario uses very little Spanish in her text; there is very little of the code-switching and Spanglish that many of us Latinx are accustomed to in our lives and in our literature. Frankly, at times it was frustrating as I read the book, some word choices sounded strange to my bilingual Dominican sensibility, as in the word kiosk, which I internally translated, as pulpería. Nelly was definitely up to something and it took a second reading of the book to realize that she was using punctuation to indicate when the characters were speaking in Spanish or English. When they spoke in Spanish, Nelly used the em dash (—) to indicate their speech, as is done in Spanish language fiction. When they spoke in English, she used the quotation marks (“ ”) that are used in English language fiction. I've not seen any other critic of this book mention this language style technique and marker, and have not seen it in any other writer. Some characters only speak in Spanish while others only in English. The general effect is to make very very palpable that these characters are speaking to another time and place, a kind of eerie feeling like ghosts coming from the past onto the present via the paper of the book, the language of the novel. This eerie feeling is a bit like the way the ancestors accompany us — they're here but not fully here, their manners are of another time and yet we feel their presence.

The novel captures 4 generations of women in a family, beginning with the character of Graciela and ending with her great granddaughter, Leila. The English at various times is formal. By the time we get to Leila, an interesting development happens in terms of language: in Leila you suddenly have an amazingly almost ridiculously sophisticated vocabulary. Leila's love of

words is a part of her very personality; as a fifteen year old she uses these words and others: chrysophilian, nymphomaniac, anisonogamist, bathycolpian, ephebophilic, and cypridophobia. This is so brilliant and funny on the part of Nelly Rosario and it's another point that has not gotten much mention in analysis or critique. It's a form of code-switching, but not the kind we typically see discussed in Latino literature. It is not how a Latina character is expected to speak. In many ways, Rosario critiques the "white male gaze" that over sexualizes, eroticizes and fetishizes people of color around the world, including us Dominican women — this is most clearly shown in the characters and scenes with Peter West and Eli Chevalier, creator and consumer respectively of supposedly "exotique and erotique" images on postcards.¹⁴³ Leila's language use provides further critique of this gaze, showing how chauvinistic perceptions extend beyond the visual. However, by taking this language into her own mouth, and even taking it to its uppermost limit, Leila makes it hers, takes charge of it. She is not making herself into Peter West or Eli Chevalier, but is rather most identified with her egun, her ancestor: Graciela. The choice of English or Spanish becomes immaterial to the spirit.

The Spanish in *Song of the Water Saints* is subtle and so is Afro-diasporic spirituality and its ideas — and they're both there just the same in this novel. In a similar way to how Spanish is hardly directly invoked in contrast with English, neither the Dominican Misterios nor Santería nor Vodou are much referred to in the novel, as opposed to Catholic references, but they play a key role.

If we come to the book with some familiarity of Santería or Vodou, seeing the title "Song of the Water Saints," we might expect a novel with Yemayá and/or Oshun and/or Oya and/or Ezili and/or Lasiren, etc., as the influences or characters. Yemayá is associated with the ocean waters, Oshun with the sweet waters or river streams, while Oya, who is probably less well known than the other two, is associated with hurricane storms. From Vodou tradition, Ezili Danto,

¹⁴³ Victoria Alicia Chevalier offers a deft analysis of this in her dissertation "Decolonizing Mimesis in the Works of Jessie Fauset, David Bradley, and Nelly Rosario" (2007).

among her numerous attributes, loves Florida water, while Lasiren is a mermaid who brings wealth from the bottom of the sea and also swims in lakes and rivers. These Orishas and Lwas of the waters have a rich representational presence in contemporary diasporan cultures, with many varied visual representations as a quick Google search will bear out. Yet these water saints are never mentioned in the novel by name. The only times that these traditions are alluded to — and the book’s title articulated — are when a nun from Spain is speaking to Graciela, who, as a child, is looking at a globe and asks who lives in the large blue parts. The nun tells her: “No one lives in the ocean. Sure, the Lord created fishes and sea animals, but not the sinful women with fish-tails, or pirate ghosts, or the water saints that you people talk about.” The scene is not particularly pivotal to the plot and can easily be missed — I only realized it myself by searching for the words “water saints” in an ebook version of the novel. In that scene, the nun shows Graciela how tiny the Dominican Republic is in terms of the rest of the world. Thus the scene is clear about the role of Afro-diasporic spirituality, and by naming the novel *Song of the Water Saints*, Rosario is emphasizing that these saints do exist and they are not the Catholic saints, and that the novel itself is their song, sung in the voices of the women characters of the book.

There is one substantial and telling scene that directly deals with Dominican Carnival and thus brings in Dominican Afro syncretic traditions into the narrative. It occurs right after Graciela comes back to her community and family following her abandonment of both. The narrative voice explains that Carnival ends with a celebration of Dominican independence from Haiti. Graciela finds that her young daughter is violently attacking another child, claiming that the other child is Haitian. Through this complicated situation the novel highlights the complicated status and history of race and religion in the Dominican Republic while also highlighting the complicated difficulties of motherhood. Graciela in no way condones her daughter’s actions, and instead tries to punish the girl, yet finds that Mercedes is somewhat out of her reach, swept up by bigger influences. Later, it is Mercedes as an adult woman who sees that

her daughter is out of her control, in the third and final direct reference to Vodou that I was able to find:

But what could Mercedes do when Amalfi, eighteenth student at the school of Capacitación Femenina Maria Trinidad Reyes, and thirty-fifth girlfriend to Attorney at Law Profirio Pimentel, belittled herself by invoking every saint in the Haitian pantheon of gods to strike down that no-good-son-of-a-bitch lawyer for having stirred up the honeycomb between her legs.

So while there is critique in the novel, it is never simple — there is no one character who is all good or all bad. And the Carnaval is presented not as spectacle for the white gaze.

Nelly Rosario repeatedly works with the idea of the white imperial male gaze; she subverts that in part via ancestor veneration — via uses of *egun*, a concept that is not directly named but that is ever present. The novel itself helps us see the ancestors and experience them — a way that ancestors speak to us as well as the characters in the novel. We live a lineage of ancestors, from Graciela, to Mercedes to Amalfi to Leida. It is Graciela who begins and ends the novel, and the novel can thus be read as a different kind of *bildungsroman*: the story of the coming of age of Graciela as an ancestor. The novel traces how a person goes from being a mere human to being an ancestor who provides wisdom for future generations to come, how even the errors and the smallness of one's life become sacred if called upon for service. In her dissertation, *Dominicanas Unbound: Religion, Culture and Politics in Dominican and Dominican American Women's Literature*, Maisha Mitchell gives an excellent discussion of the religious aspects of *Song of the Water Saints* (Mitchell 2014), but I would disagree with her that Graciela is simply trapped in a predetermined political and religious system. What we have in Graciela is someone who within her confines does the best she can; we see the geographic and historical limitations, but her spirit does live on in her great grand daughter Leila. She becomes wise and can step out of her self even as events are unfolding.

Although Graciela is clearly presented as an imperfect human, she can also be read as one of the saints in the title. Graciela always seems to want to be somewhere else, already perhaps possessed by a spirit, something higher than herself and higher than all of us. She is an *andariega*

(a common word Dominicans use, that come to mind as a Dominican reader, but that actually, Nelly Rosario does not use in the novel): she's a wanderer, who wants to move through spaces. She doesn't want to stay in one place. In this sense, she has a strong sense of *egun* — to leave her spirit in places and to have places leave their spirit on her. A critical and characteristic moment in the novel: “—Take me away somewhere, anywhere, Graciela said to him when her spirits lifted. Every day for two weeks, she insisted, until one morning Casimiro wrinkled his face and told her to pack for an overnight stay.” Graciela's partner, Casimiro, fools her by telling her they're going to Puerto Rico, but in actuality he simply takes her via boat to another part of the Dominican Republic, not far from where they live. When she gets there, she remarks, “Puerto Rico's a lot like home,” a statement that packs so much irony, truth and meaning: even though she is not in Puerto Rico, the two countries do have a lot in common. Graciela does eventually learn the truth about this trip, but she also seems to learn a much larger truth, a spiritual truth:

The boat ride back the following morning was harder on Casimiro. The river's current now worked against him as he rowed upstream. Graciela had lost her wonder of Casimiro. Her anger toward him had turned to pity when she realized that he could offer her only what little he had. Tattered clothing and empty pockets obscured his real riches, which Graciela knew lay in his imagination like hidden deposits of gold.

—Beautiful country Puerto Rico, she said as if she had travelled the world.

Egun as theory suggests that places leave their marks on individuals, on our bodies and beings, and that history is carried through individuals via ancestors. Thus history is not divorced from the personal. *Song of the Water Saints* is all about that: weaving as it does this personal, interpersonal, transgenerational, national and transnational story into one. Nelly Rosario gives Dominican history lessons, like Junot Diaz did later in the more well known *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* six years after her book was published. In *Songs of the Water Saints*, history is there but this is more than history: it is also theology. Graciela herself is very aware of the interconnection between national and even global politics and her own life and body. When another woman tries to dismiss talk about “the state of the world” as man talk, Graciela's impulse is: “to continue talking about how the state of the world had left a scar on her nose and had permanently altered

the pitch of her mother's voice, but [she] held her tongue for fear that Dona Falú would think she was unrefined."

Graciela does hold herself back many times, finding her options often limited due to classism, economic inequality, and sexism; she tried to get "around" it: "When they first met, Graciela had made Casimiro promise to take her places. She refused to be confined to the market, the river, and neighboring households, but she knew that to wander further by herself would get her branded a 'woman with loose skins.'" Yet, when she realizes her male partner's limitations, she decides to go out on her own nonetheless. Her *andariega* spirit was so strong that she took the risk of violating what was considered proper for a woman — even leaving her own child behind as she goes off in a train from the Santo Domingo area to the city of Santiago. She is questioned even on that very train, when she meets a European man named Eli Chevalier who challenges her by asking: "—How does a woman travel alone at times like these?" Rosario lets us know this is not a benign question: "Eli injected sting into his voice. "

It's a constant struggle for Graciela and she repeatedly fights the internalization of her second-class status within her own psyche. She puts herself down on the one hand: "—I wasn't taught letters and who gives a damn what a girl like me thinks about things..." Nevertheless, she does give her opinion when she states: "—this country belongs to robbers. Yanquis, Haitians, Dominicans, everyone's got sticky hands" Nelly Rosario lets us know how hard it is for a woman like Graciela to speak her mind: "Her whisper wavered, as she was not used to having her opinions heard." And yet, Graciela does continue: "—Can't raise their own bastard children and want to run a country. Let me take over she said, her thumb dug into her bosom."

The characters of Eli Cavalier and Peter West represent the freedom of mobility and finance of white men from North America and Europe, in stark contrast to Graciela's circumstances as a brown skinned Dominican woman. As co-creators, sellers and buyers of "exotique erotique beauty of racial types," these white men each take part in exploiting Graciela on a world market. They are also precursors to the male participants in the very sex trade that is

alive today in the Dominican Republic as documented by Aurora Arias in her Spanish language stories, in particular in her book *Emoticons*. They thus embody exploitative ancestors, another egun to contend with. Both men are truly exploitative as when “Eli mined the smallness of her world. Like a farmer fattening his cow,” and yet Graciela eventually comes to the conclusion that “Perhaps Mai had been right. Men were no more free, for all their mobility. How ridiculous to have expected Silvio, Casimiro, or even the fool beside her to hand her a world that was not theirs to give.” There is a higher lesson here.

The egun concept helps in understanding the theme of souvenirs and the exploitation of the souvenir industry that the characters Eli Chevalier and Peter West try to benefit from by taking advantage of Graciela. Nelly Rosario critiques that industry not only in the sections regarding the production and marketing of “exotic and erotic” postcards but also decades later, when Leila visits her mother Amalfi in the Dominican Republic and brings her a souvenir from New York:

Amalfi crossed her arms when Leila spread an i-Luv-NY T-shirt for her on the bed.

—I probably made this myself when I worked at the free zone, Amalfi laughed when she read the shirt’s Made in Dominican Republic tag. Leila, Mercedes and Andrés looked on, horrified, as Amalfi went on to explain how she no longer felt like being exploited.

Nevertheless, the concept of egun suggests that physical objects do have power, and that the desire to have and give souvenirs may be in part a recognition of that spiritual power. “Creole religions share a belief in an active, supernatural, mysterious power that can be invested in objects (mineral, vegetable, animal, human), a force not intrinsic to the objects themselves.” (Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 13) A babalao in Puerto Rico, who told me that many years ago, when the very ancient ancestors lived in Africa, people sometimes migrated from one place to another and they always made a practice of leaving some thing, some material object of their lives back in the places they left that would contain their spirits, their egun, and also they made sure to take some object from the former place with them, that would contain the egun of that place. The Afro-diasporic traditions teach that there is power in a certain kind of materialism that isn’t what

we normally think of when we speak of materialism these days, materialism that is not the same as the materialism of capitalism but a materialism that is spiritual.

Objects can have power and carry spirits. Nelly Rosario does not negate that power. She offers, for example, another type of souvenir near the end of the novel, when Leila returns to her home with her grandparents Mercedes and Andres: “In the evenings, Mercedes was amazed to see a pair of freshly washed panties dangling over the tub like a flag of truce.” These panties can be read as the Dominican woman’s flag — which non-Dominicans might not recognize, but which is a recognizable material practice among Dominican women, one that writer Josefina Báez has circulated in her 2000 book *Dominicanish* with the lines “Aquí también los pantis se tienden en el baño.”¹⁴⁴

Like many Afro-diasporic traditions, *Song of the Water Saints* does not completely negate Catholicism, including the materiality of folk Catholicism. This is most clearly shown in the character of Mercedes, who has many of the faults of Catholicism gone wrong. But Nelly Rosario also shows the positive contributions of Catholicism; mirroring the window displays of the botánicas in New York, the novel is inclusive in its spiritual message. Time and again, the book highlights the power of religious Catholic based prayer, in particular one prayer from verses in the book of Mark in the New Testament that Mercedes repeats various times in various places, both in the Dominican Republic and in New York: “... that they should be with Him, and that He may send them forth to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast our devils.” Likewise there is a continuity and power in Mercedes’ use of rosary beads.

Mercedes is an important spiritual figure in her own right, even as she is not the one who frames the novel in the way Graciela does. One of Mercedes’ most important spiritual functions falls fully outside of her pronounced Catholicism: like Graciela she also plays an important role as an ancestor, albeit a still living ancestor. Perhaps her strongest and most enduring ancestral trait is

¹⁴⁴ “Here they also hang their panties in the bathroom to dry” or “Here you should also hang your panties to dry. “

her intellect, which she passes on to both her daughter and her granddaughter. The novel takes great pains to document how she was able to develop her mind from a young girl to a mature woman, and specifically her mathematical and managerial abilities. Her mental capacities are so strong they seem almost spiritual, through egun they live on in the future generations.

Also because of egun, Leila is able to have a long conversation with her great grandmother Graciela, even who died before Leila was even born. Before we as readers learn about who Leila is as a character, a person, we are witness to a long conversation between the two, a seemingly impossible conversation physically and linguistically, as Graciela speaks with the Spanish em dashes and Leila with the English quotation marks. The chapter is titled “Circles,” and it is a reminder that even though the/a novel is printed and most often read in a linear fashion, time is not always linear: sometimes time is circular.¹⁴⁵

Leila lives her life in a very different place and in a different language from Graciela’s and yet so much of her life is similar. Like Graciela, she pushes the confines of what is proscribed to her as a girl by Catholicism and white supremacist systems, and she learns, also like her great grandmother before her, that for women and girls, the places of sex and physical intimacy still come with the risk of exploitation and a threat of violence. In her attempt to break out of the limits in her life, 15 year old Leila pursues a relationship with a married man in her building. Like Eli did to Graciela, Miguel exploits her youth and innocence and dishonors her body and spirit: “—I like you. You’re tough for a skinny little thing, Miguel said, later that night while fingering one of Leila’s nipples. — I could kill you in here, ¿you know? Get a hanger from the closet, wrap it around your neck and spill you on this bedspread.” One sentence deftly connects Leila’s story to Graciela’s story and the exploitation of Dominican women in early 20th century by European men with the exploitation of Dominican women by European men today in the early 21st century: “—I could throw you out the window the way that German did to a cuero back in Boca Chica, he said

¹⁴⁵ And sometimes it takes on other shapes but we won’t go into that now.

and pulled her sparse pubic hairs.” But of course this statement also connects Miguel as a Dominican man with the European men who exploit Dominican women. It’s a sinister and negative egun of violent sexism towards women. In this way Nelly Rosario shows how complicated the challenges are that we Dominican women have faced and are still facing. And yet, because she also has two important male characters in the book, Casimiro and Andrés, who are gentle and respectful of the women in their lives and who themselves challenge the stereotypical roles of men, Rosario offers an alternative and celebrates those men who fight the restrictive toxic masculinity they are caught up in.

Like Graciela before her, Leila comes to the realization that as threatening as men are and as free as they seem, they themselves are caught up in a toxic bind: “When she had come to, Miguel had been propped on his elbow, playing with her hair. The way he had sobbed earlier scared her more than empty threats. “These lessons are indeed very difficult, cosmic, scary and painful: “She wondered if Mercedes and Andrés’ spirits were watching as their bodies lay asleep at home. But her grandparents were probably too entertained in the dream world to spot her dry heaving in a Bronx motel. It was then that Leila really began to cry.”

Leila’s healing takes place in New York, a place that for her is of belonging and of not belonging. There’s a moment when Graciela’s grace seems to touch the great-granddaughter via the city: “When Leila woke up at Mirangeli’s that Saturday, the city was bathed in light. Through the dingy windows of the train that sped Leila downtown, she could see Manhattan sprawled beneath her. The rumble of the tracks gave her an unusual comfort.” As with Graciela, places leave their mark on Leila’s very body: “Buildings flashed across the reflection of her nose.” Leila finds her way to a museum gift shop, where she finds comfort as well, finds her spirit and mind engaged and yet realizing that she could not bring her friends “Mirangeli or Elsa to a place like this” because they do not have the same spirit. However, even though she felt comfortable there, she was made to feel uncomfortable and out of place when one of the clerks racially profiles her. “Finally, after an hour of browsing, a hyper-polite clerk asked Leila if she was sure she did not

need any help.” Leila’s use of language in this place and situation is significant; she doesn’t not use the hyper-sophisticated vocabulary that characterizes her when she responds: “Look, bitch, I’m not gonna steal nothing, okay?” Leila said with a deadly roll of her eyes.” Even though the museum is deemed a “safe place” unlike the shady motel that Miguel had taken her to, due to this commonplace racism, Leila does not feel fully safe and at this point needs to flee to safety. “She decided she just wanted to go home and curl up on her little sandwich bed with a candy bar in one hand and the remote control in the other, with Mercedes listening to the radio in the kitchen and Andres reading in the bedroom.” Although Leila knows she wants to go back to Mercedes and Andres, she doesn’t know how she will speak to them, she doesn’t have the right language. The anxiety over this unresolved question makes her turn her attention to the ads in the station. Her life is filled with the language of advertising, another facet of Dominican-New York life that Nelly Rosario shares with the Dominican writer Josefina Báez: The “ads told Leila about where she could fix her credit, where she could find a mortgage, a great place to study the culinary arts, a new AIDS drug that invigorates the T cells of attractive people, an MTA appeal urging her not to throw her gum wrapper on the train tracks, a blank wall,” but they do not help her with her actual problem. Staring into nothingness, she then feels that familiar feeling of the egun calling to her and hears Graciela’s voice again, a voice and a feeling that she’s felt many times before.

The voice of this ancestor gives Leila the answer — not the ads in the subway with their made up answers to often made up problems. The voice gives Leila advice while also telling her a story of Graciela’s own life, in her own words a summary of her life from the afterlife, letting Leila know that her great grandmother “Never pretended to be a good woman. Never tried to be a bad one.” With a spirit similar to Leila’s, Graciela tells her she: “Just lived what I wanted that’s all my mystery,” and she advises her descendent to “Forget dirty tongues.” Graciela’s intervention brings Leila back to the past but also points her towards the future, enlacing the two life stories together into one with the admonition to pay attention: “You, listen. My life was more salt than goat.

Lived between memory and wishes... but ¿how much can a foot do inside a tight shoe? Make something better of it than me.”

The strange ancestral voice may seem eternal and old, and it is, while at the same time it comes from a woman who we know died very young, and may never have reached to see the age of 30 in her own lifetime. Earlier in the book we are told that due to the syphilis she contracted from Eli Chevalier, “At twenty-seven, Graciela was now a small copper woman with a map of the world on her face. ... Faint splotches spread like continents on her skin.” Cada cabeza es un mundo indeed: Graciela, who so wanted to see the world, wound up with a representation of the world on her own body — and that’s the farthest she was able to reach. But she seems to have reached old age while still young. In this way, we who read this novel are also being given a reminder and a lesson: about the value of people’s lives, especially those who die too young and who have died too young over the centuries due to racism, poverty and sexism. In Graciela we see that a life can be so short and yet so full — a novelful of fullness. By telling this story Nelly Rosario takes us into the infinity of time and space. Cada cabeza es un mundo indeed. Graciela’s life becomes a useful metaphor for all of us, a useful song for all of us.

Although time is not linear it also doesn’t stand still. Egun comes to us to help us in the present and also to propel us to become future egun. Graciela’s life and after life frame the novel but she doesn’t have the last word nor the last piece of action. That falls to Leila. Leila also is not perfect, in reaction to the violence around her she falls prey to her own violent thoughts, in particular towards Miguel after he so disrespects her: “She had more of an overwhelming desire to stick a long needle into the middle of his chest.... He would flinch once. Die slowly, then, vamplike, Leila would walk out of the Jardín Motel.” Nonetheless, Leila does not give in to her violent fantasies thanks to the egun Graciela. After hearing Graciela’s voice, she realizes she

missed Mercedes and Andrés, Ismael and Amalfi, and even the great-grandmother she’s never met. She unpinned Mamá Graciela’s amber crucifix from her bustier and put it in her mouth and was overcome with a desire to love them, to make their lives happy before they all turned to leather, then ash underground.

So the book also ends, deceptively simply. With a spiritual message of love.

Women's Healing Practices in Annecy Báez's My Daughters Eyes

Annecy Báez's *My Daughter's Eyes* has a lot in common with *Song of the Water Saints* and at the same time is so very different. It also imparts universal lessons of healing via the stories of Dominican girls living in a particular region of New York City at the particular time of the late 20th century. Annecy Báez's characters live only a few miles away it seems from Nelly Rosario's, just across the Harlem river north of Manhattan in the Bronx. Mostly narrated in English, *My Daughter's Eyes* also includes a lot of Spanish, much more explicit in its references and use of Spanish than *Song of the Water Saints*. The presence of Afro-diasporic spirituality is also much more explicit. In fact, it uses the word Santería and speaks directly about the importance of ancestors, of egun, although it does not use that word. It also directly narrates and describes the importance of botánicas as places of healing power in Latina/o communities of New York.

As with *Song of the Water Saints*, *My Daughter's Eyes* highlights the power of intergenerational life-storytelling between women. Like Nelly Rosario's book, Annecy's has various chapters with named and dated titles. The opening sequence, "Storyteller," is set in 2000 and is the story of a daughter whose mother is named Mia. We learn that the mother does a morning meditation in a pose like a Buddha and that the stories she tells her daughter are much appreciated by the younger woman. But the daughter notes too that there are important silences and she's drawn to fill in the gaps and even make up her own stories of her mother's life. Then the book goes back in time to Mia's life when she was the age of the daughter, but also to the lives of other girls who comprised Mia's world: Zuleika, Rosa, Mimi, Rica. Additionally, there are adult women characters and men as well as boys.

One of the central characters in the book is a woman named Aura; she is featured in the book's central story "Awakening." Aura explicitly represents the spiritual world of Santería, which is mentioned by name; and the orishas are explicitly mentioned by name, rather than implicitly as in Nelly Rosario's novel. Additionally, the importance of historic and genetic ancestors — who of

course are both — is also made explicit. For example, the character Mia recounts: “Aura comes to tell me stories. Stories about our Ancestor, Los Taíno Indians, or Yoruba stories about Yemayá, Oshún, Elegua and Obatalá. She shares the mysteries with me, the knowledge of the spiritual world.” (p.49)

Thanks to Aura, unlike my own experience as a child, the character Mia not only gets to go inside a botánica as a girl, but is encouraged to do so and is given guidance there.¹⁴⁶

...each day guided by a Yoruba deity and a Catholic Saint, each day with its special ritual and prayer. Aura made sure that we learned about life and death, about spirits and their special guidance, about honoring our ancestors after their passing.

“That side,” she’d say. “It’s as special and real as this side.” (72-73)

In *My Daughter’s Eyes* there is an exploration of places and spaces. The book critiques structural racism and patriarchy that would have children stay silent about how unsafe their day-to-day spaces sometimes are. Two places in particular where children are expected to spend a lot of their time — the home and the classroom — are shown to be extremely unsafe for some of the characters.

Papi is still under the erroneous belief that school in the Bronx is a safe place and that we are being taught the lessons of the day. He doesn’t know that the books are old, torn and in poor condition. He doesn’t know that for the most part we are too scared to learn. So one day I said to Papi, “Things have to change around here because the world out there is not the world of this family.” That was the beginning of the end, Papi slammed his fist on the table, breaking a plate, and gave me one of his dirty looks, and I felt as if he’d smacked me. I knew never to remind him that in Junior High I live in one world and at home I live in another. (10-11)

Both the school and the home are places where violence and violation sometimes take place and they are places where the girls are expected to be silent. Violence to Mia in the home comes in when she tries to speak up about the truths in her life that contradict the stated structures and expectations of girls. Boys get a pass, although they also are not getting an education in the schools. Men get to have the last say and to have their way. Mia’s friends Mimi

¹⁴⁶ A botánica plays a prominent role in the 1991 play *Botánica* by Dolores Prida, in which a Caribbean elder’s attempts to pass on her knowledge and practices about Santería to a new generation is met with resistance from a young college educated Latina.

and Rosa are manipulated into sexual acts with a male doctor who is respected by their grandmother and is renting a room in their apartment. When they try talking about it to their abuela she shuts them down, not believing them, unable to imagine that the esteemed doctor would do such a thing or perhaps afraid herself to admit belief to the girls and have to confront the male who has been given more power in the patriarchal system due to his gender and educational status.

Wherever Aura is by contrast, there is safety, whether in the home or in the botánica. Aura is young Mia's role model, not teachers, not parents. "I want to be like Aura... who understands the language of the spirit world. She can cure illness and create potions that can heal brokenness." (53) Spirituality in this story does not have a rigid dogma. Mia's father buys her a Ouija board at a local Woolworth store in a moment when he tries to reconcile with her after she's been broken by his patriarchal rages and his physical beating. Mia herself is able to receive messages from the dead via this supposed child's toy because Aura had already listened to her and encouraged her in turn to listen to the voices of the dead, of the *egun*. It is significant that spiritual knowledge and spiritual healing in this book comes almost exclusively via female children and women — the ones who are most oppressed are actually the ones with greatest power. Therein also lies the power of the book itself.

The power of *My Daughter's Eyes* was not recognized by the reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* (*PW*) reviewer, however. While neither the general reading public nor the specialized community of literary critics and academics relies much on *PW*, book professionals such as booksellers and librarians, often use it for making quick decisions about what books to acquire. Subsequently, the reviews can play an important role in a book's distribution. As a librarian in the pre-internet era of the 1990s in Connecticut, I would attend weekly "book meetings," in which we'd make buying decisions based on the *PW* reviews, so I know the power that a lukewarm review can have — it can kill the chances of a book being bought when budgets are tight. The *PW* reviewer gave a rather grudging, dismissive recommendation to *My Daughter's Eyes*, implying that the book may be

aesthetically unpleasant and lacking artistry, but that it did have some redeeming qualities, using words like “awkwardly” to describe the tone and stating that “the prose is utilitarian,” and that Annecy Báez was depicting “a niche group,” but that there were some “flashes of insight.” *PW*’s unflattering reference to Baez’s “utilitarian prose” unwittingly points to one of the novel’s greatest strengths: its usefulness. The book’s utility resides in great part in creating a space for healing and for discussion of healing with Dominican woman and girls protagonists whose stories apply to many humans.

It’s such a different assessment from another important reviewer, Latinx author Benjamin Sáenz, who was a judge in the Curbstone Press Mármol prize that resulted in the book being published in the first place. Sáenz wrote that “Annecy Báez is a stylist who peoples her stories with urban characters who hold the language and memory of another country in their hearts and tongues” and that she “brilliantly captures the nuances of the internal lives of her characters as they struggle to express the emotions that sometimes threaten to break them.” According to Sáenz, the book has “a depth here that is undeniably moving... beautiful.” (Back cover of book) The value that Sáenz saw has been borne out in practice: years later, in 2015, a college professor who teaches Latinx students, stated she teaches the book every semester, and that it “never fails to inspire students, and many say it is the first book they have ever read and truly loved.” (Coss Aquino)

Healing has long been an important aspect in and of the writings of women of color in the United States. It is helpful to place *My Daughter’s Eyes* within this broader context. There seem to be particular ways that women of color, and sometimes men of color, have deployed the notion of healing in their/our writing. For many women of color, disease and healing is a theme within the writing — that is the case for both *Song of the Water Saints* and *My Daughter’s Eyes*. One way that healing is deployed in writing is when there is a woman of color as a healing character in a literary work. This figure appears in writings by men as well — perhaps the classic example from Latino studies would be the book *Bless Me Última* by Rudolfo Anaya; likewise in Gloria Anzaldúa’s

Borderlands / La Frontera, the character of a woman healer or curandera comes up various times, but it's also a theme in African American literature and others by people of color, as in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*. These works focus on the healing powers of the healer and also often detail the process by which she was educated as and became a healer. Annecy Báez joins this tradition in her character Aura. In some works by women of color, the company or communion with other women of color is itself a healing practice. *My Daughter's Eyes* also functions this way.

My Daughter's Eyes engages and promotes a specific type of healing that comes from engaging egun in places in addition to people. The way it is even framed as a coherent novel, points to how whatever a space is now, it also encompasses other places. The book begins with a daughter watching her mother meditate and neither we as readers nor she really knows who the mother is or where she has been. Once we finish the book with its many places we come to know that all those places are within that quiet meditator. We come to know, through our reading and reliving, that the meditation room that begins the book, in a scene with Buddhist overtones, also includes crowded New York apartments, botánicas, middle class homes in Santo Domingo via the movement of egun energy. Egun energy is felt in the movement between life and death as well as the movement between different types of spaces — and not just between Dominican Republic and USA, although of course that is an important movement. A good portion of the book takes place in the Dominican Republic, when some of the girls who had become friends in the Bronx find themselves transplanted back to the Dominican Republic. One of them attends an elite school and she confronts some racial differences tied to class differences: the girls at the school are lighter skinned, of a social class that never had to migrate and they shun the darker skinned girls from the Bronx. “The rich girls they hang out with each other, the Bronx girls they hang out with each other.” Mia reflects: “It’s strange to wait so long to come to your own country and then feel like you don’t belong.” (101) But eventually Mia finds belonging in many places, including literature. She finds a poem in the newspaper *Listín Diario* by a writer named Rafael Abreu Mejía and it makes her feel so connected that she feels that she can speak to this poet on first name, tú

basis “as if we are intimate friends.” The egun of literature is as mysterious and real as that of ancestors:

And, how does Rafael know of this place in my heart, this place that is so sad? I start to cry and my vision is blurred as I cut out my father’s obituary. Where is he right now? Is he here with us? Aura said that the dead were not gone, that they were living their lives with us in their time. She felt death was time, that time merged in some strange multiple existence, so that my father is living in some past time while I am in my present without him. (123)

Annecy Báez herself has given us so much via her writing. She is like her own character Rafeael Abréu Mejía, who is really not just a character but a real life author. An interesting thing happened — this healer with words that is Annecy Baez, who herself heals because she too “know[s] of this place in my heart,” (the heart of Isabel Espinal who writes to all of you now), found in the acknowledgement of the power of her writing healing for herself. Reminiscent of how in Afro spiritual traditions we are often urged to heal our own ancestors who heal us. It’s not linear. One day in 2016, as I was writing this chapter, I posted about her book on Facebook and sometime later, she responded:

Isabel... how lovely it was to see that you shared my book with your facebook family, it was a call to adventure to go back to the new stories I have been writing since my husband passed away Grief can be so paralyzing, but what you did, posting it there for all to see, was a reminder to me, and I am deeply grateful to you. For many reasons, I cannot visit the facebook world, but I have friends who visit and share things with me, and they shared this. It was like a jolt that went through my body, and reminded me of the joy I felt when I wrote each of those words in *My Daughter's Eyes*, and how supportive everyone was when the book came out and then my husband got sick, and it took all of me to care for him, and then he died and it took all of me to care for myself, z (March 21 at 12:40pm)

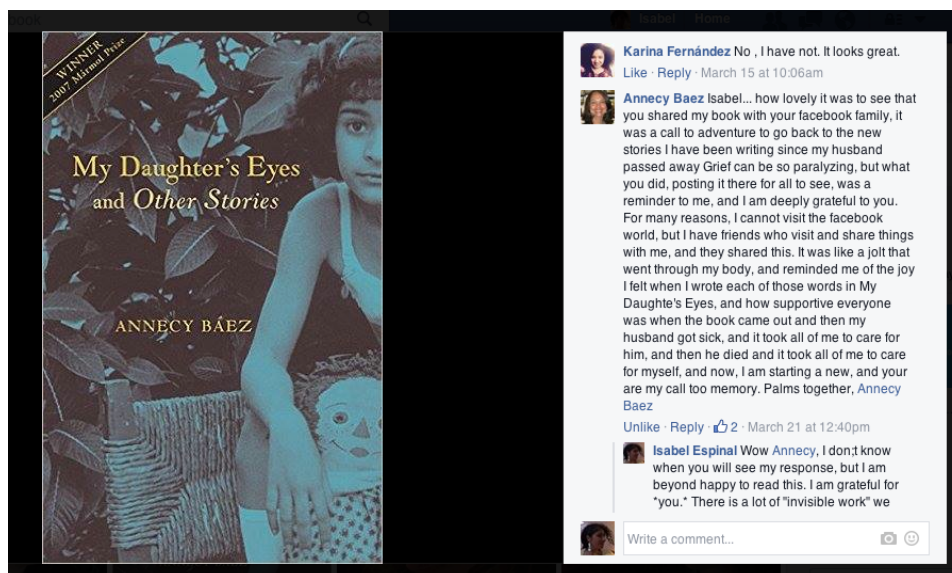


Figure 70 Online discussion about *My Daughter's Eyes* by Annecy Báez

That this happened within the process of research and writing this dissertation is very beautiful and powerful and treasured.

Named and Explained: Afro-Diasporic Women's Healing in Ana Maurine Lara's

Erzulie's Skirt

Of all the books I discuss in this chapter and in this dissertation, Ana Maurine Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt* is the one that I clearly can say I went to for healing. I want to highlight that a bit here because I sense the import of my personal experience can apply to many people and because it gives an important dimension of the literary work that I rarely if ever see acknowledged in literary and cultural studies. When I first read the book in 2013, I wasn't looking to add any more works or authors to my project — I'd already been warned by committee members that I might have taken on too many. I picked it up after coming across Soberia Latorre's work and words (2013, 2011) about Ana Maurine Lara and *Erzulie's Skirt*; I was motivated by curiosity and a feeling that it might help me personally heal. Part, though not all, of what I wanted to be healed from specifically had to do with reading — to heal the malaise of not reading for my own after having spent a good part of my life as an avid reader. When I finally started reading *Erzulie's Skirt*, I was relieved to find that, yes, I could still get completely engrossed in a book just like I

remembered as a child and young adult. That felt miraculous and reading the book did a lot for me as a Dominican American woman. That's all I was looking for, it was supposed to stop there, but a voice nudged me to add it to this project and here it is.

While *Erzulie's Skirt* cured me of my inability to read the way I wanted to, I was actually surprised to find that book itself has a strong healing theme, something I did not know ahead of time. Every chapter, eight altogether, begins with "Recetas para los vivos"¹⁴⁷ such as the very first chapter, below, with a simple herbal recipe for curing stomach aches. The prescriptions are all in Spanish. No translations of the prescriptions are provided.

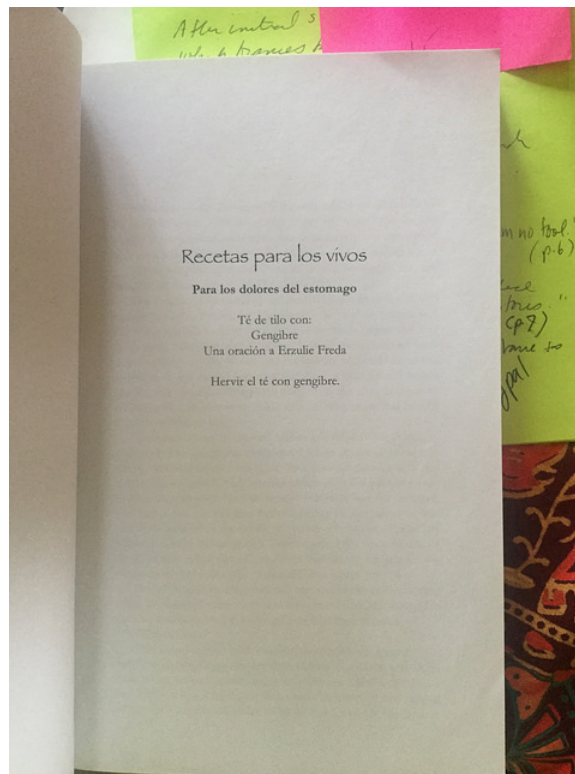


Figure 71 Recipe inside book *Erzulie's Skirt*

Of the three books explored in this chapter, *Erzulie's Skirt* uses the most Spanish, even as it's predominantly written in English. Like Nelly Rosario and Annecy Baez, Ana Maurine Lara has characters speaking Spanish through English — we infer that they are speaking Spanish. But

¹⁴⁷ Prescriptions/recipes for the living.

unlike Nelly Rosario, and even more so than Annecy Báez, Ana Maurine Lara does have words and even entire phrases in Spanish, and of course entire prescriptions. Aside from the prescriptions, she does offer translations, not within the text but rather in a glossary at the end of the book. This book goes beyond English and Spanish however, and offers some words and phrases in Kreyol, which are also translated in the glossary. Of the three books this is the one that is also most explicit about the Afro-diasporic spirituality, which is evident from its very title. Erzulie/Erzulie Freda, Lara states in the glossary, is the “voodoo spirit of the ocean; goddess of love and feminine beauty..” (250) Changó is also a prominent deity in this novel, “Yoruba deity of thunder and lightening. Used among a few Dominican voodoo practitioners.” (250)

One thing that is interesting about this story as a Dominican American story is that none of it takes place on the USA mainland: the closest the characters get to the USA is Puerto Rico, in the section where they go off on a yola to Puerto Rico hoping to make it to Miami from there, but the experience is so horrendous in so many ways that they decide to go back home. While Annecy, in one of her stories, highlighted those in the DR who do not have to migrate due to their higher social and economic status in the DR, Ana Maurine Lara on the other hand, highlights those whose economic status is too low to migrate, even those who lose their lives as a result of trying. For me this brings up parts of the Dominican American experience that are not often told: in particular that part of knowing that there are many in the DR who don't get to migrate, for better or for worse, or for whom migration simply does not work out. The knowledge of these lives lives in our transnational consciousness. For many of us, I believe that we carry the egun of those who stay behind with us wherever we are or go. Not just the family members who stay behind, but also the entire population of the island. This is a huge contribution of this book as a Dominican American book — it's Dominican American and yet none of it takes place in the USA. That's how powerful egun is, the spirits. In an essay, years later, Ana-Maurine Lara elaborates:

Where are Afro-Latina bodies found? For me, we are found everywhere, but most importantly, we are still mostly found in places of labor, especially in the Dominican Republic, where "appearance" and class go hand in hand. Secondly, because of globalized political and economic forces, our bodies are also found in transition from place to place — between islands, between homes, between the past and the present, between dreams and the waking world. We leave the *conucos* (small family farms) and go to the garment factories — either in the city of or homeland or across the water in the United States — in search of a better life for ourselves and our children. We also go to New York, Massachusetts, Texas and California. We also go to college. We also go back "home." ("Bodies and Memories" 44-45)

A few years after this essay and seven years after *Erzulie's Skirt*, Ana Maurine Lara completed a PhD dissertation and wrote that part of her general agenda is to question the accepted ideas of what home is, in particular within black queer studies, politics and cultural production. For us women of Caribbean descent, the word home can bring up so many questions. What is the place of home? Where is home placed? What place(s) can we call home? What egun may be found within a particular home? In a particular body? Lara questions, for example, E. Patrick Johnson when he states that "black studies is a nascent field and we feel compelled to prioritize a concomitant embryonic discussion within U.S. borders in order to make an intervention 'at home' as it were," to which Lara responds: "I am both troubled and forced to ask, whose home?" (Lara, "Bodies and Souls" 12) Because for her at home also means going outside the USA's borders.

Erzulie's Skirt starts out with an introduction, a conversation during "a sleepy morning in the Atlantic Ocean," between "Agwe, the great spirit of the ocean's depths," and "Erzulie, the great goddess of the sweet waters and the ocean's waves." (xiii) The two deities are discussing humans about to be born. The idea of egun and ancestors come in right away as they consider the impending birth of a human named Micaela, who Agwe says has a noteworthy father, to which Erzulie responds: "Yes. But it is the women she comes from. There's her, her mother, her grandmother, her great grand-mother, her great-great-grandmother, her great-great-great-grandmother..." (xv) This reminder of other characters inhabiting the space of the novel and the specific stories that novel tells gets beautifully repeated throughout the book, as in this phrasing in

the beginning of the narrative, when we are introduced to Miriam, an old woman who has just lost her lover Micaela and who is taken into death by a woman who mysteriously appears to Miriam in the night: “She looked at the old woman whose face was filled with the sorrow of ten million stories.” (7) Then, a little later in the novel, but in chronological time earlier in Miriam’s life, as a little girl, we experience her with her parents and the same sensation of other beings being present in the same space: “Her mother and father sat on either side of her, a million other spirits filling the spaces between them.” (16) In Micaela’s childhood, her father, the Brujo Chichi, teaches her about spirits and family and history, and the how the past literally lives in the present. During that lesson:

The room filled with people, speaking in languages that made her sleepy. Her father whispered to her, kneeling once again before the altar.

“Your mother’s people are my people too. Do you see them?”

“The spirits in the room began to shout blessings and warnings into the air.” (80)

In another example, much later, Yealidad, Micaela and Miriam’s young apprentice, finds herself having “crossed over into the land of all memories” during her initiation ceremony. (230)

Spirits of the past are not just present in and between people, but also in nature, for example in the gran bois tree where some ceremonies take place:

“Their bodies pressed together formed a swaying mass that moved the energy of the gaga toward the gran bois. The large tree stood silently in the darkness, its trunk wrapped in white, its branches bearing histories as it dripped streams of sap onto the earth.” (34)

When I read this I wondered if the gran bois is the same as the ceiba tree, whose name and presence I learned about in recent years. There are three references to ceiba trees in the book (40,44,250) and not a clear connection with the gran bois. Yet familiarity with the importance of ceibas as well as their huge size, suggests that they might be the same and even if not, it’s healing to know about ceiba trees. I think I first came across the ceiba in front of an old church in the Zona Colonial of Santo Domingo, when I went there for the Feria de Libro in 2013. It was out of the way of the tourist areas, going into the neighborhood where workers lived and where I bought myself a very inexpensive meal in a cafeteria frequented by workers and residents of that area.

The tree's trunk was massive yet very tangly-looking. It definitely spoke a drama without words. Much later, I found out that the name of this tree is ceiba. I learned this inadvertently after I was supposed to meet with a babalao in Puerto Rico and one of his instructions was that he lived near a ceiba tree, but when I went to the approximate place, I realized I didn't know what a ceiba tree looked like, I saw all kinds of trees and it was not easy to find him. Later when I researched ceiba tree, I found out it was the same dramatic tree I'd encountered in the Zona Colonial and I also found out that this tree is known as a keeper of stories and of history throughout the Caribbean and Central America. In the *Popol Vuj* Mayan scriptures, the Ceiba is seen as the mother-tree connecting youth to the ancestors (Carcelén-Estrada 104)

I also found many beautiful discussions and images of the Ceiba all over the internet. One of the most beautiful writings was from a "love spell" website that reads like a work of literature as it gives readers an interpretation of the Ceiba's background and significance for us all.

The Taino people venerated this tree as Bibi Ceiba or Ancient Mother Ceiba, the mother of all trees. Not just in Boriken "Puerto Rico" is the Ceiba viewed as sacred and blessed, but through out the Caribbean, she is viewed as a Saint, a Queen, the Majesty and the Mother of all trees. She is the ancient daughter of Yaya, sister to Yucahu, and faithful maiden of Atabeira. She is known as "She who holds the mysteries and secrets of Mother Earth, Atabey."

It is said that La Ceiba is indestructible the "Zemi / Cemi" , Loases and Orisha Spirits who govern the forces of Nature respect her and do not dare harm her. The great Spirit Jurakan does not pull her from her roots, Guabanex herself the ancient spirit of the winds does not harm her, and the great Spirit Guataba who is the spirit of lightning itself dares not strike her, for fear of unleashing the fury of Yaya.

Imagine if la Ceiba could speak, the stories she would tell and the secrets she may reveal. She would tell the tales of the Taino Aracoel "grandmothers" the stories they told their grandchildren under her shade. La Ceiba would tell of the lament of both the Africans and the Taino, she would reveal the struggles both these proud people had to endure. [sic] She would tell us the tale of the Taina Guanina and the Spanish Conquistador Don Cristobal Sotomayor, she would tell of the Arietos and the Guateques the Taino people had and how they under the light of the Full Moon would dance their guarachas and jaranas to the beat of maracas and mayohacan, and how the Africans would dance la bomba to the beat of tambores, the ancient dances of Dahomey and Yoruba.

La Ceiba tree should never be killed by the careless hands of humans, for if she suffers so shall he who dare kill her. La Ceiba must be respected and venerated, she must be loved and held with great esteem. ("Abuela ceiba.")

I cite here at length to show just one example of how in contemporary popular parlance around folk spirituality of the Caribbean, there is a veneration of natural places and of nature that is mixed with history lessons —this kind of writing and discourse is not limited to the realm of literature. Trees, rivers, mountains and other features of our landscape have witnessed centuries of history. In this case, the lessons feature heavily our Taino history, while not negating our African history, indeed, as in this case, acknowledging our African history and how it came to be that we have both indigenous and African ancestry combined in a particular way. As in Ana Maurine Lara’s book, the history lessons are not separate from the spiritual assistance and spiritual practices.

In English the ceiba tree is called silk cotton, and it is found in other parts of the world as well. Here is an example from India that shows its majesty:



Figure 72 Ceiba tree (Iyer 2011)

The message that egun spirit resides in spaces as well as in people and in nature is not unique to the gran bois or the ceiba. Micaela teaches her apprentice Yealidad:

Everything in this store is sacred. We do not cheat people; we do not take from them what is rightfully theirs. Everything in this store carries the breath of Dios and our

ancestors' hard work. Even the bread that comes here every afternoon has been formed by someone's hand that has been helped by a force more powerful than us. I want you to remember that as you work, now that you can understand the force that I am speaking of. (232)

There is a lot of intergenerational learning in *Erzulie's Skirt*, some of which is between generations alive and generations already dead, as in:

As she drifted in the warmth of sleep, she remembered the drumming of her childhood. She heard her mother's voice. She left the village of her nightmare and walked over to where her mother's mother and her mother's mother's mother sat waiting for her. They embraced her, and she felt an absolute calm pass over her as she sat down in front of them, their hands welcoming her into their world." (52)

What happens to Micaela here is reminiscent of what Leila goes through at the end of *Song of the Water Saints*, but here it happens early on, and some version of this experience happens repeatedly as there are repeated tragedies in the lives of the main characters, Miriam and Micaela. Unlike Graciela from *Song of the Water Saints*, however who dies young, Micaela and Miriam —especially Miriam— overcome many near death experiences, live long lives and they actually die in old age. We know that as readers, but we go back and forth in time in the book. In keeping with Afro-diasporic spirituality, time is not simply linear. *Erzulie's Skirt* is a much less linear book than either *Song of the Water Saints* or *My Daughter's Eyes*.

The conception of time and space in *Erzulie's Skirt* seems to be the same one the one that Ana Maurine Lara fleshes out in the PhD dissertation she completed at Yale in 2014, where she states that "Ancestors and spirits have clearly defined genders and sexualities, colors and time periods — even through the time in which the spirits live transcends linearity." (Lara 2014, 73) It's an important principle of the African and Indigenous based religious traditions that she writes about and from. She explains some of this in a discussion of one spirit, the India Canuma, which applies to other spirits as well:

The India Canuma is different from the *indios* of the *vudu* pantheon - she is not an embodiment of an elemental force, she is a spirit. As a spirit, she can speak, and she speaks in Spanish. However, there are things she refers to in gestures because spoken language cannot reach into those places (as she has said). The India Canuma is beyond time, though she knows - and everybody who has witnessed her concurs - that she is an "old" spirit. Not just in terms of her embodied age (she appears as an elderly woman), but also because of her points of reference, which do not correspond to the modern

geography of the Dominican Republic, but to an older geography of places, occurrences and social values. La India Canuma regularly heals people by locating them in spaces of memory (having them recall times when their spirits wandered specific places, or when their ancestors engaged in specific ceremonies), and through her consultations, teaches community members indigenous history. (Lara 2014, 73)

This lack of linearity in time is not a negation of history: it's a very historical spirituality.

It actually becomes an opportunity to teach and to learn and to relive history. It becomes a way to understand the very meanings and consequences of history, in particular the African and indigenous history of Dominicans and other Caribbean people.

Spirituality is infused with history and history is infused with spirituality— not the officially school-taught history but an intimately taught history, learned in the home alongside spiritual traditions. Micaela's father, el Brujo Chichi, tells her at an altar: "Mechy: your people come from Africa. They come to tell you the story of how you arrived, and how we have survived." (79-80) At that moment, the 21 saints of the 21 Divisions of Dominican vudú appear and: "Their presence filled the room..." Chichi then tells his daughter a family story that is also a history of cimarrones:

"Your mother's family were cimarrones. They resisted the Spanish slavers who ran bateyes where they grew sugar cane. They took the cane and with our blood made it into sugar. Your mother's people fled. They came to the mountains before their feet could be cut off. They hid amongst the spirits of the trees that protected them when the Spaniards rode their horses in search of those that escaped the whippings and torture of the plantations. (80)

Similarly, Miriam's father tells her: "Miriam, learn this now, while you are still young.

You were born in this country but you are Haitian. Our people are treated poorly because we are free." (22) The spirituality feeds the history, the history feeds the spirituality; both feed the body, making life itself possible. Mamá Housin says:

"When we were in Guinée, we had everything we needed. All the riches of the earth were ours. But, by the force of iron and whip we arrived here. Everything we do is to remember where we came from. Everything we have is because the misterios make it possible for us to live. God is great." (53)

Black queer women are at the center of *Erzulie's Skirt*, in the characters of the lovers Miriam and Micaela, who are the main protagonists. This aspect has already been very well

covered by three particular scholars (Tinsley 2008, Stinchcomb 2013, Urbistondo 2013), although it bears repeating and amplifying. Urbistondo writes: “While the novel never names these women as ‘lesbian,’ their sexual and intimate relationship is the very practice that sustains their lives. “ (17) It isn’t the sexual and love practices alone, but also the religious practices that make their survival possible and both areas of life are intertwined. Tinsley writes that “Miriam and Micaela become not only lovers but literal and figurative shipmates” and that their “twentieth-century captivity is framed and given meaning by its connection to a history of transoceanic slavers.” When they are crossing the waters between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico they find themselves enslaved and navigate again “the liminal space where ancestors and spirits reside in Vodoun cosmology...” (Tinsley, “Black Atlantic” 200)

Dawn Stinchomb asserts that Ana-Maurine “Lara could not have chosen a more appropriate deity to work with than Erzulie precisely because of her femininity and the fluidity of sexuality that she embodies in all of her manifestations.” (Sinchcomb 2013 8) So who is Erzulie? Practitioners will know from their own experiences. But someone like myself and some of you won’t have that knowledge coming into the book *Erzulie’s Skirt*. In Joan Dayan’s 1994 beautiful detailed essay about this Haitian and Haitian-Dominican deity, I learned that Erzulie “marries women as well as men,” that she is able to “confound and discard the culturally defined roles of men and women,” and that she is particularly sought after by queer practitioners, “a goddess born on the soil of Haiti who has no precedent in Yorubaland or Dahomey. In her varying incarnations, her many faces, she bears the extremes of colonial history.” Although always appearing as feminine, her appearance varies racially. Some writers have tried to compare her to European deities such as Venus or the Madonna, however Dayan suggests that these are external impositions and that Erzulie should be understood on her own terms, on Haitian terms, which reflects a “complicated lineage.” Vodou does not rely on dualisms and this is embodied in Erzulie, whose many essences populate a spectrum rather than two opposite sides (3).

In an essay about Erzulie, Ezili, almost twenty years later, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley places her in the context of the emancipatory power of Vodou more broadly, both spiritually and politically: Stating that “This spiritual and epistemological system is literally revolutionary,” Tinsley recounts how “the Haitian revolution—the world's only successful slave revolution, in which enslaved Africans emancipated themselves and went on to defeat Napoleon's army to form the world's first black republic in 1804—began during a Vodou ceremony.” Vodou was banned due to its threatening nature during colonization but even after emancipation, Haiti has also often and consistently banned Vodou. (Tinsley, “Songs for Ezili” 418) In the Dominican context, the State has oppressed both Vodou and same-sex sexual practices throughout our history and to this day. In her dissertation, Ana Maurine Lara examines the connection between religion and homosexuality and exposes the specific collusion of the government and the Catholic Church in repressing both Afro-diasporic religious practices as well as homosexuality in the Dominican Republic.

That the two lovers get to live a life together is a triumph, that they get to die of old age is also a triumph. A triumphant story. Yealidiad is entrusted with carrying on what Micaela teaches her — all three novels end with the new generation looking on. All three are triumphant and that triumph, though not the traditional happy ending, does important psychological, spiritual and political work.

There is at least one other piece of text in *Erzulie's Skirt* that is not translated. The first time I read it, it didn't stand out much. But the next time I read it, chills went through me. A few months before reading it, I learned from my mother that there was a secret prayer she knew that her father had entrusted her with that she used to help stop bleeding. We teased her about it — who would she pass the prayer onto? She wouldn't say. I learned of this prayer, this secret, for the first time in my life at age 51. It left a strong impression. Then as I reread Ana-Maurine's novel, I come across:

Sangre no sea tan vorana

No te vuelvas a derramar
Sangre vuelve a tu centro
Sangre vuelve a tu lugar.¹⁴⁸ (15)

I'm not sure if I will ask my mother to tell me if this is or isn't the secret prayer.

Who am I to Speak of Egun? Who Are We? How These Writers and Egun Bring Us Back to Ourselves

At times I personally hesitated to discuss egun in the context of these writings. I had my own version of Graciela's thoughts in *Song of the Water Saints* when she says "—I wasn't taught letters and who gives a damn what a girl like me thinks about things..." I understand how Graciela felt — I wasn't taught Santería, La Regla de Ocha, la religión Lucumí, El monte, Shango, Arará, Gagá, espiritismo, Voodoo, Voudun, and brujería or las 21 Divisiones. Who am I to write of these things? I identify with Graciela. But also, thanks to the skillful artistry of Nelly Rosario, I know also that we all are Graciela. We can all speak. Nelly thus gave me permission to have this discussion.

The concept of egun points to a melding of time as well as space. If we keep going back to what some call the egungun, the very very very ancient ancestors, we realize that they are everyone's ancestors, as Dagara elder Malidoma Somé states, there's "an umbrella under which all ancestors are the same for everybody," and that we are also all hybrid (Somé, *Malidoma Somé: The Parallel Worlds*). And that hybridity is universal. Somé also asserts that the most direct link are the most recently deceased in any of our lives. From that we can build a bigger circle, so there's a lot going on at once. The ones who have passed away live in a parallel world to ours and at the same time are present in our world. It's important to address one's personal relationships with those who have been physically present in our lives. A "... person addressing ancestors begins

¹⁴⁸ Blood don't be so vortical
Don't spill out ever again
Blood go back to your center
Blood go back from where you came.

with his or her own ancestors. And by “own ancestors,” I mean the biological ones who have recently crossed or who have crossed [a] long, long time ago. They are still present. (Somé *Malidoma Somé: The Parallel Worlds*).

Going up the spiral, into the bigger circles, many of us, and specifically people from the Spanish speaking Caribbean, find a particular set of ancestors, of eguns, that includes Africans, Native Americans, gypsies, and other Europeans, that recurs in many writings, both academic as well as popular. The Internet today is full of them. One writer speaks of “different ranges of eguns,” beginning with “eguns that everyone knows about which are the Congo eguns...that came from Africa that lived an everyday life and were taken as slaves to the New World.” But there are many others from many other places, who because of the specific histories are considered to have specific lessons for us. These include gitanos and gitanas, or gypsies from Spain, even Catholic nuns, priests, and monks. “Now there’s much more. We have our Indians, Arabs, Egyptians, Mayans, Romans. All walks of life are eguns because they once walked this earth. And ... they now walk with us ...” (Peters, “Egun”). We’ve already seen similar juxtapositions, one in Annecy Báez’s *My Daughter’s Eyes* and the other in the passage from Marta Moreno Vega, both quoted earlier.

Passages like these can serve as captions to the photos to the botánica windows — the botánicas forbidden by parents such as mine and by certain Christian segments in our communities. But it seems that we can’t really stay away from the forbidden botánica — we carry it in our own genetic make-up, in our DNA. As a case in point, my DNA report — an amalgamation of places on the globe — are all those elements that my parents were afraid to confront in the botánica — they are inside their own daughter, passed on by them, they are inside of them too:

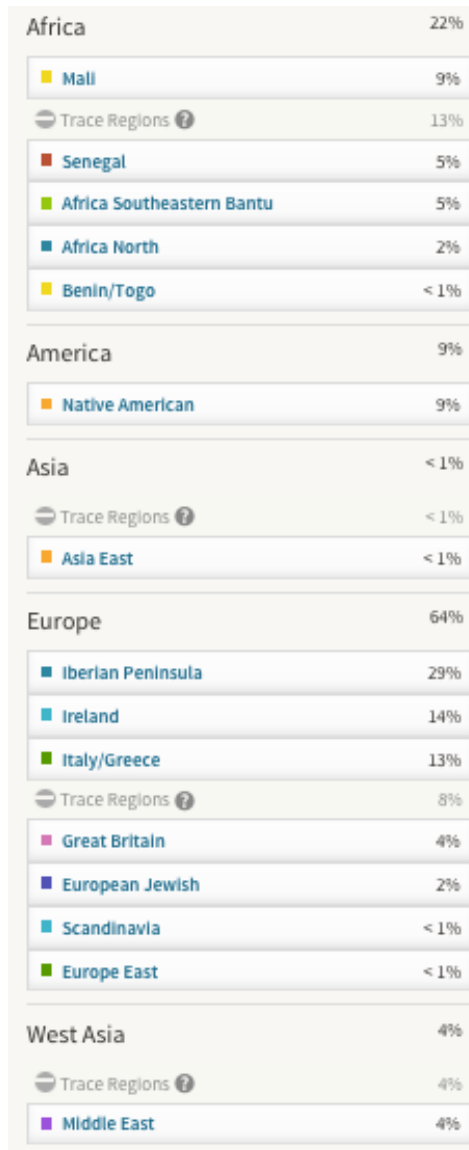


Figure 73 DNA report summary from Ancestry.com

I sense that I am breaking a rule by citing here my own DNA report. I have no model in academic writing for doing this. DNA analyses have made their way into a variety of academic contexts and disciplines, but in a somewhat impersonal way. In the last decade or so, scholars and researchers have continuously produced and reported on a wide range of new implications and uses of DNA evidence, such as in discussions of intergenerational trauma (Waldram; Brave Heart; Spiegel) and the development of human history in the Caribbean (Benn Torres). DNA evidence helps create a holistic understanding of our Caribbean history and identity and thus

academics can go beyond simply addressing anthropological questions and also bring the relevance of the work to indigenous Caribbean and other stakeholder communities. Anthropological genetics and archaeology, specifically, can create a synergistic effect that can serve as a way for scholars to challenge old ideas and for indigenous Caribbean peoples to reimagine themselves outside of common hegemonic tropes of extinction and indigeneity. (Benn Torres 6)

Genetics has even been used to reveal extensive kin relationships in Caribbean societies like those that implicate familial connections between contemporary intellectuals in Cuba who may have assumed to belong to completely different family lineages and racial categories based on phenotype and/or social class (Marcheco-Teruel). This last example is one that got personal in the sense that the individual DNA reports of Cuban intellectuals were named in the conference presentation to make its points. Dominican writer Raquel Cepeda makes ancestral DNA tests a central part of her memoir *Bird of Paradise: How I Became Latina* (2013), which also serves as a broader treatise on Latinx identity in the USA and racial identity globally. It is perhaps Cepeda who is the best mentor for citing DNA here, giving me a model of how situating, sitting with and reflecting on one's individual DNA test result can illuminate issues that are relevant to all of us. Thank you Raquel Cepeda!

And while I'm aware of misuses and abuses of DNA in the making of political claims, for example in Native North American communities (Tallbear 2013), I felt it was relevant and I hope it's of use to you. Maybe I am following the advice of Walter D. Mignolo when he says: "our thinking and doing is at best transdisciplinary, but more so undisciplined. For it is not enough to question the disciplines if your questioning remains within disciplinary rules." (Kaganof and Mignolo) Another way to look at this undisciplinarity is as a *cimarrón* expression, *cimarronality* if you will. When I read Ana Maurine Lara's description of what *cimarrones* are within Dominican Vudu, I saw a connection to my DNA report, specifically that possible 5% part from Senegal, where Wolof is spoken:

The term *cimarron* refers to the African and Indigenous people who rebelled during the colonial time period. Sometimes the term makes explicit reference to the Wolof, who were reputed to be extremely resistant to Spanish enslavement. Just like *Mandingo* is used among Dominicans to refer to a tall, large person, *cimarron* refers to a person's rebellious

nature and can signal a metonymic relationship between this history and the contemporary enactment of resistance within the space of ceremony. A Cimarron spirit won't obey anybody - including the priests - and so must be given room to act as they will, without causing harm to their horse. *Cimarrones* are geographically specific, appearing generally in ceremonies in regions where there were, historically, actual maroons. (Lara 2014, 81)

I do feel I've had that cimarron spirit that doesn't obey, an affinity to that particular egun.

Eguns are often visible even as they're not visibly named. They work in *Song of the Water Saints* through the emphasis on ancestors and on the connection and communication between ancestors and Dominican women in the present. The place in the novel where the title is mentioned is a key location and moment and yet it's not pivotal to the plot, so in essence that moment and the specific water saints stay somewhat hidden, somewhat invisible. We have to do some work to get at this vital connection—not so different from what many of us we experience in our lives, where Afro-diasporic spirituality is kept from us and we have to work to approach it. Nevertheless, Nelly Rosario's novel completely relies on the concept of tracing one's psychic health by connecting with our eguns. In Santería, the immediate ancestors — the ones who have recently died, are the egun, the ones closest to the orishas. In *Song of the Water Saints* it is precisely the one woman ancestor who most recently dies, Graciela, who comes into the life of her young relative, Leila, her great granddaughter who Graciela was never able to meet while living. In rituals of Santeria and Vodoun, the dead speak to the living; in *Song of the Water Saints*, the conversation between the dead Graciela and the living Leila is central and fully visible to the reader.

This is one of many aspects that makes egun a legitimate and rich concept for understanding and reading Nelly Rosario's book as well as the Annecy Báez's and Ana Maurine Lara's. Admittedly, egun here, in this discussion of these books, may most likely be a temporary concept, one that I personally have braided together, perhaps idiosyncratically, albeit not arbitrarily and definitely based on reliable trusted sources. Whether or not these three authors would agree with my reasoning, or what some might call a theoretical apparatus, they give ample

evidence in their writings and interviews that their writings pay homage to Afro-diasporic traditions. The theoretical framework here is most closely akin to Gloria Anzaldúa's. I do not use her terminology, but I do believe I am using her methodology. Anzaldúa's theoretical framework and methodology are at heart not only decolonizing but also grounded in the experiences and spiritual and historical and language traditions of people of color, women in particular.

Anzaldúa stated that she deliberately chose precolonial as well as non-Anglo words and concepts like Coatlicue, la llorona, la facultad, la frontera, and Nepantla as a way to connect with Pre-Columbian (pre-colonial) histories and value systems to the post-colonial or neo-colonial 20th century that she was living and writing in. She said her goal and method was to "find a language for my ideas and my concepts that comes from the indigenous part of me rather than from the European part of me." Anzaldúa wanted "to show a continuity, to show a progression" with traditions outside of the Euro-American, even as she admitted her hybridity and inheritance of the European tradition as well.

To use words not of the English or Spanish languages is both methodology as well as theoretical framework, a piece of a conceptual architecture that helps us understand and approach all manner of cultural and political phenomena. It's not always about the specific terminology or words: in Anzaldúa's work there is a strong emphasis on borders, fronteras, the use of Spanish words, and terms like Neplanta; I use different terminology, but the method is similar, with a specific emphasis on orishas, ancestors, yoruba and other words and terms like of course egun. Neplanta and egun specifically are ways to explore the meaning of spaces and time without tying ourselves to these English words. Anzaldúa remarked: "all of the concepts that I have about postcoloniality, come under this umbrella heading of Nepantla, which means el lugar en medio, the space in between, the middle ground." Like the concept egun, Neplanta also had various connotations, not all about space. There's a whole academic literature of space and place. As an academic writing project, this chapter could have made more reference to that established

literature and ongoing conversation. But inspired by Anzaldúa, Tinsley, and a few others, I decided to go in a different direction, one of many decolonial directions.

In this direction, spirituality and cultural analysis are not dialectically opposed, just as spirituality and literature come together in Afro-diasporic traditions. McKinley Melton writes of the figure of the “prayer artist” in Afro-diasporic traditions, “one who is recognized as occupying a position of ‘great honor,’ “thoroughly rooted in a diasporic sensibility regarding the power of speech and the communal respect accorded to verbal artists” (248). Because of the infusion of spirituality and the spiritual work they do, we can think of each of these works — *Song of the Water Saints*, *My Daughter’s Eyes*, and *Erzulie’s Skirt* — as prayers, we can feel them this way. I did and I dare say many readers also, many have been and will continue to be moved by the spirit. The fiction performs healing and does a service—the service is to point us to Afro-diasporic religions within the space of literature, even if that means that some of us have to do research to really know the meanings of the references to these spiritual traditions. The authors’ stylistic techniques are different —they differ in the way they deal with language, with humor, with the way they map out and unfold the storylines themselves. Nelly Rosario uses subtlety and indirectness regarding Afro-diasporic spirituality in *Song of the Water Saints* — hardly naming it or any of its elements per se, yet her strong message of the connection of women’s lives via ancestors and her chronicling the specific steps by which a young woman becomes an ancestor are in accord with the importance of ancestors in Afro-diasporic religions—she is giving the same lesson as the religions. In her book even the meaning of the title is not easy to find, but once found it’s is very clear that it is about Afro-diasporic religion. Because she is not explicit, Rosario opens up questions rather than giving answers. In *My Daughter’s Eyes*, Anney Baez explicitly lays out the central role of healing and of women as healers within Caribbean Creole religions, with the character of Aura pivotal to the healing storyline, nevertheless, the specific spirituality stays contained within one part of the book. In a much different approach, Ana Maurine Lara’s characters in *Erzulie’s Skirt* repeatedly draw out a variety of aspects of very specific Afro-diasporic traditions - Haitian vodou

and Dominican 21 Divisiones - the book could not exist without this spirituality that is woven into every chapter and into the very characters themselves. Lara makes it a point to define and describe the elements of the religious tradition. For readers knowledgeable about Afro-diasporic spirituality, those who unlike me, have lived it and learned it in detail, these writings might have an effect of confirmation of what's been lived, while for readers such as myself these writings help us delve into a part of our cultures that has been politically and systematically denied. For many others who may not consider themselves part of this culture at all, the books also have a function—the healing is not limited to one community just as the spirituality is not only for people of African descent.

Of course, there is so much more to spirituality that cannot be captured by words on a page. I mentioned earlier when offering the summary by Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert that there are many other aspects of Afro-diasporic religions. Other ways eguns function, other places and spaces. Music, dance and community, for example, are fundamental locations. There is absolutely no way I could represent all that here with just writing. I will offer this YouTube video of one of the Erzulies, Erzulie Dantor, and hope its eguns make their way onto your heart and soul:



Figure 74 Image from [Erzulie Dantor](#) video (Lakay 2011)

Action?

To continue in the format of proposing action for these chapters, I think I'll keep it simple. I'd like to go back to my introduction and suggest the action of making a concrete proposal for the Centro León. The point made by the wall is actually an important one: Dominicans do try to hide our African heritage. The problem is that the exhibit leaves it there: it perpetuates the wall. Maybe one solution might be to leave the wall but provide the museum goers with a way to enter the full exhibit behind the wall, making them first pass through the area with the wall and lead them perhaps to a door that can be opened. After all, the vision of “convertirse en uno de los centros culturales más completos en el Caribe y Latinoamérica en la documentación y realización de ofertas y productos culturales.” It cannot be complete if it hides an important part of Caribbean culture and heritage behind an immovable wall. Don't hide the egun.

CHAPTER 5
BOOK AND RESEARCH TRAVELLING WITH RAQUEL CEPEDA'S *BIRD OF PARADISE*
PARADISE

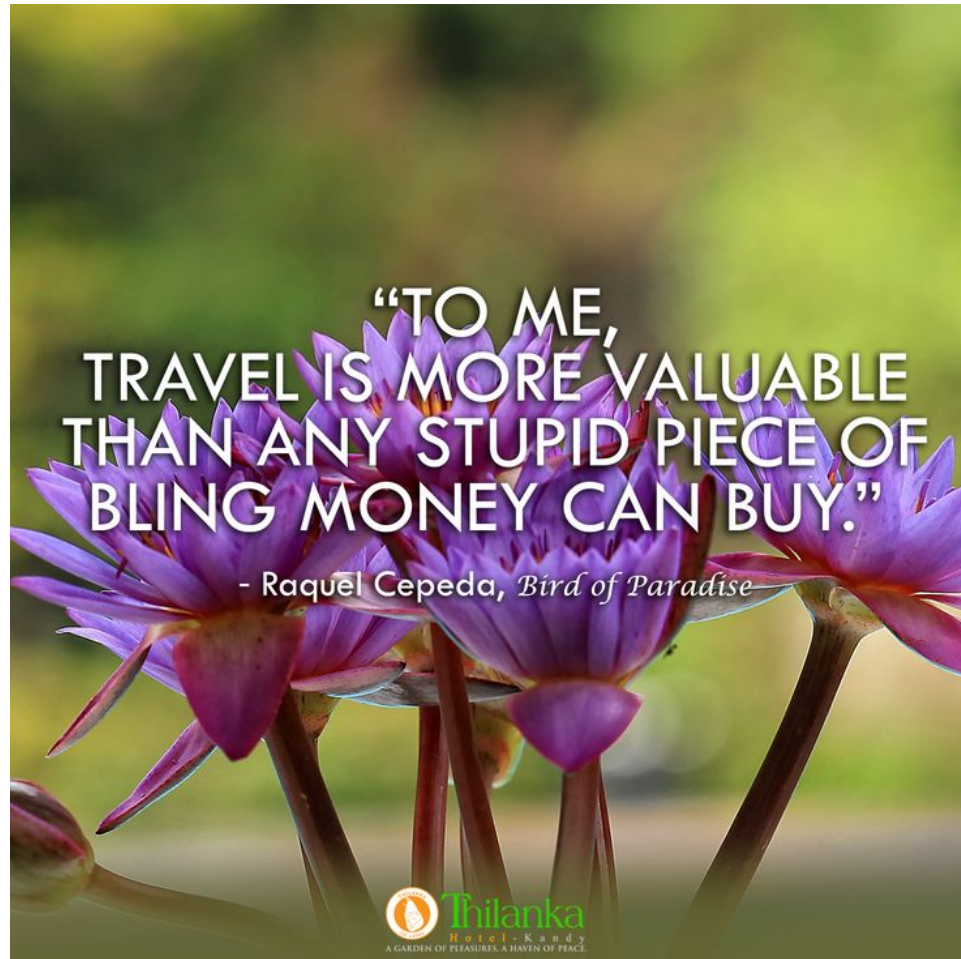


Figure 75 Raquel Cepeda quote used in an ad

...And since I am convinced that the technology called the essay can take me places I have been unable to imagine, I have decided to attempt a nomadic journey, to, in fact, travel in the thinking that writing produces in search of the field...

...I found I could not write a proper introduction to the dissertation since I could find no beginning to describe; later, I resisted writing an ending, since I did not know how to end something that had no beginning. I was not surprised by my inability to perform a conclusion, for I had not yet finished. Indeed, I wondered whether I could ever finish...

Elizabeth A. St. Pierre

“Nomadic inquiry in the smooth spaces of the field”

This dissertation has traversed many spaces of Dominican women’s writings in the United States. And we’re not done yet. In lieu of a traditional conclusion, I offer in these last

pages some reminders of where we've been in this dissertation and in the research behind it and where we might go from here, while also covering (or flying over) new ground, using Raquel Cepeda's book *Bird of Paradise* as a guide.

Raquel Cepeda and Dominican DNA Travelling

In October of 2014, I went with my daughter Sabina to hear a talk by Raquel Cepeda at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where I've worked since 1998. Cepeda was the featured speaker at that year's Latin@ Heritage Month activities. Her talk and book wound up having a very profound effect on me and on my work, in particular two specific points she made: 1. the powerful potentiality and ease of having one's DNA tested for possible geographic regions in one's ancestry, and in particular the potential for Latinxs generally (and Dominicans specifically) in learning about our African and Native American ancestry, as well as unexpected ancestries from parts of the world we don't usually factor in our histories; 2. the possibilities for empowerment and even urgency of travelling for people of color, but in particular for Latinas.

Over the years I'd often heard mention of DNA testing, but Cepeda was the first one I heard who so thoroughly and forcefully detailed DNA testing as a method of cultural and political empowerment and who also clearly explained how easy it was to go about this testing. Up to that point, I'd seen many critiques of genomic programs and schemes such as the Human Genome Project, which drew a lot of wariness and skepticism from Native American communities, among others. As a humanities student and librarian and writer, the discussions seemed removed from my professional and personal life and I mostly steered clear of them. But Raquel Cepeda made genomic investigation come home for me.



Figure 76 Raquel Cepeda at UMass Latin@ Heritage Month

In her talk, Cepeda took on both Dominican and USA anti-Black racism, highlighting how DNA testing served to fight against the anti-Black internalized racism of her Dominican family members, forcing them to face their African ancestry. This was one aspect of the power of DNA knowledge. Another side is how for those of us of African ancestry who have never denied it, we are able to obtain some idea of the specific geographic origin of our African ancestors. In addition to acknowledging our general African past, we get a better sense of what *part* of Africa our ancestors may have come from, what part of that continent they were ripped away from, connecting to specific places and spaces. In Cepeda’s case, she was able to pinpoint one of her ancestral origins to the region of Africa that today carries the name of the modern country Guinea-Bissau. This particular use of DNA testing has since the year 2000 or so, become a popular tool for African Americans as well (Goldberg A1; Nelson 2013 and 2016), with one company, African Ancestry, focused specifically on the African American community for its product and client base (Nelson *The Social Life of DNA*). Some might confuse this phenomenon as a

movement to re-inscribe a genetic understanding of race, but on the contrary, DNA testing has been well established as a way to debunk any idea that race has any biological meaning. The popular 2003 documentary, *Race—The Power of an Illusion*, is a good example of this, showing a group of people from various “races” whose DNA tests reveal no basis for assigning racial differences. Yet, DNA testing can be used to uncover patterns about human life that are not tied to ideas of distinct races, such as health trends and ancestral migrations and histories. For the descendants of peoples who were stripped from their homelands and histories (such as Black Africans abducted, shipped to the Americas and forced into slavery and loss of language) or whose homelands and histories were stripped from them (such as indigenous people of Abya Yala—the Americas—whose lands, and too often also language along with the many rituals and other facets of culture, were stolen), DNA testing offers us a way to put together broken or often untold stories of how we got to this place and time. Furthermore, these stories have political consequences. Alondra Nelson argues that “rejecting outright a reductive, essentialist understanding of race as a genetic fact does not, and perhaps should not, preclude exploration of the ways in which DNA analysis contributes to the politics of social justice and belonging.” (“DNA ethnicity as Black Social Action?”) Nelson also points out that direct-to-consumer genetic testing is also a profitable business, making money off of these yearnings of ancestral connection, with an aggregate client base of over two million customers in 2015, half of which belonged to just one company, 23 and Me. Trent Masiki questions Raquel Cepeda’s focus on a specific company, Family Tree DNA, in her DNA-inspired memoir, pointing out that she does not provide readers with any guidance or need to compare and evaluate competing DNA testing companies (Masiki 343). This is a valid critique, as is his critique that Cepeda could do more to “raise awareness in her community about the bioethical controversies surrounding genetic profiling” (Masiki 343). Cepeda’s *Bird of Paradise* could have benefitted from the kind of approach that Alondra Nelson takes in *The Social Life of DNA*, which offers criticism about the dangers of commercialized DNA testing, while also pointing

out its potential for empowering communities of color. Nevertheless, Cepeda's focus on how DNA testing can lead to a search for historical knowledge should not be underestimated.

Raquel Cepeda's experience with using DNA to document her Taína ancestry probably had an even more profound and life-changing effect on me as a Dominican than the African ancestry because it caused me to begin to see the persistence of indigenous heritage in my experience in the world. For Dominicans, there is a lot of awareness of our African heritage, notwithstanding pervasive Dominican internalized racism; but we have not fully come to grips with our native ancestry. Cepeda used DNA analysis to determine with much certainty that she carries Native American genetic patterns and she asserts that many more Dominicans if not most Dominicans probably also do. I have always thought of myself as carrying my African ancestry in my own body and have thought of myself and of Dominicans as part of the African diaspora, but I had never been taught to think of my native ancestry that way, never thought that we are actually Native American or indigenous—that seemed a label for others, like we just didn't have the right to call ourselves that, to be part of that identification. Dominicans are taught to think of our Native heritage as something relegated to the past, not something that, because it literally lives within us, within our own bodies, in the present, makes us indigenous, part of the (so called) Americas' native peoples. Yet we are. In her book, Cepeda quotes anthropologist and historian Lynne Guitar, who told Cepeda: "Too many people say that Dominicans are a European-African mix, but Dominicans are Indigenous based, with an overlay of European and African." (232) The visit to Cepeda's book led me to travel to Guitar's writings. Guitar had for many years been studying present day Dominicans as well as Spanish invasion era documents and had come to the conclusion that Taínos did not die out as has been commonly written about and taught to us, and actually could not have possibly died out, based on the facts of the European invasion of our island. In particular, Guitar notes the gender-cultural differences and dynamics of the invasions, with overwhelmingly male entourages arriving on the island to encounter a culture where it was customary for women to have sexual liaisons with visiting men as a sign of hospitality. Children of

these indigenous women and the European men were born shortly after. The women did not die out nor did their children. Nor did their descendants —most of us present day Dominicans.

Guitar also notes inconsistencies and gaps in the census documents that were used to make the claim of rapid Taíno demographic demise, and questions for the motivations on the part of Europeans making those claims — specifically the European motivation to take ownership of the now supposedly emptied island and bring in enslaved Africans to the islands. (Guitar 2002)

Inspired by Cepeda, I also undertook an analysis of my DNA. I found out afterwards that many Dominicans have also been doing this or want to do this. Some have shared their results on social media or privately with me via text, phone or email. There's even a kind of genre that has emerged: the *YouTube* or other social media video of announcing one's DNA results (among numerous examples: Pero Like; Headchampion; and MZ). In these videos, Dominicans and other Latinxs such as "Headchampion" and "M Z" visibly show their excitement at knowing their results. The motivations, reactions, and actual results of other Dominicans residing in the United States are similar to my own, often first and foremost to get more specific information about our African origins. Headchampion states "that honestly was the most important part of me taking this test was finding out my African ancestry," while M Z says: "I wanted to be from a specific area from Africa." When Headchampion finds out he is genetically linked to Benin Togo, he exclaims: "I love it! I'm so proud. I'm so happy." Thus Headchampion, like many other Dominicans, contrary to the official Dominican government narratives and those of right wing elements on the society, not only embraces his African heritage, but seeks it out and celebrates it. On the other hand, within the context of North American racial categories, we often find that our Africanness and Blackness are denied us from others within those categories who do not consider us Black enough: Headchampion also says in his video: "So all you all who said you ain't African, you ain't Black: there you go."

Our reactions to finding Native DNA share similarities as well, one is in making us question what we have been taught regarding our Indigenous heritage. Headchampion states: "It

seems like it's not true what history says that they all died out, no. Maybe a good amount of the Natives did mix with the Africans and the Europeans." M Z states: "We learned that the Taíno people were eradicated, exterminated and extinct in the early 1600s so for me to have 12% Native American DNA that was mind blowing ... that's almost equivalent to having a great great grandparent who's Native American."

Some are surprised to find that there are parts of the planet represented in our DNA that we were not at all expecting, such as MZ who finds an 11% Irish DNA match, similar to my own 14% Irish DNA match. Our mental map of who we are is more expansive than we may have realized until then. In this way, the theme of DNA and the theme of travel actually come together for me as they probably do for Cepeda and most Dominicans. The DNA company I used provides a map of one's DNA story. My map shows in spatial terms how my DNA story is literally all over the map, all over the place:

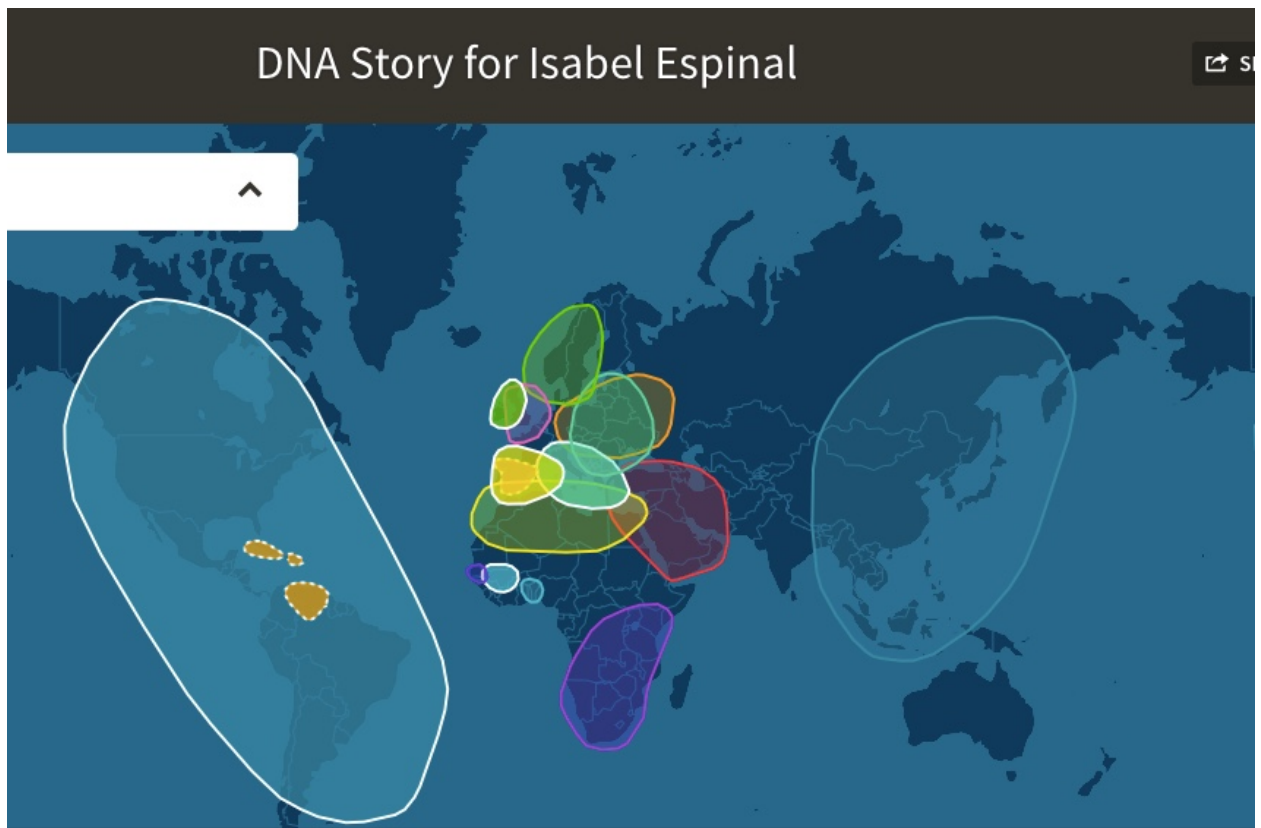


Figure 77 My DNA story map

Dominicans already knew we were a mixture of people from different places, but the DNA knowledge of recent years has compounded that sense of being from everywhere. It's a little disorienting and also exhilarating to find places you did not expect inside of you. We have the sense now that many of us contain the whole world inside of us — travel inside of us and we travel inside the planet.

It's hard to write or think about this without skirting essentialism, the idea that our identity or nature is in our biological essence. But contemporary epigenetics suggests something subtly different from an essentialist understanding: that changes in external life circumstances, including historical traumatic events, can affect gene expression from one generation to the next. Without falling into essentialism, we can entertain many questions, like: does this knowledge help explain our inclusive nature? Our often desultory nature? The very way many of us Dominicans think? The very way for example, I approached this dissertation? The way my writing moves, meanders, travels. The irony is that many of us have actually not travelled much in the common sense. We are from a place that has been travelled TO over and over over the last 5 centuries— and now with the tourism industry our island is a travel destination even as many of us cannot afford to live there or visit as much as we'd like. And there are parts of our DNA travel that were forced upon us brutally via the experience of ancestors who were captured, ripped from their homelands, and enslaved in completely new lands against their will so that travel in this context was a process of trauma and violation. Now in this moment, as a transnational people, we are migrants, we are immigrants to other places, but we ourselves are not known as travelers. The words traveler and travel are reserved for the privileged of this world.

Which gets to the other point of Cepeda's talk that stayed with me. Speaking directly to the students of color in the audience, and more specifically to the Latina students, Cepeda insisted on the importance of physically travelling to other countries. She spoke directly to our racialized condition as Latinas and how that impacts our experiences and our and others' view of ourselves and our place in the world—of not having money, of being seen as sexual objects and even the

objects of tourism, but not subjects. On the one hand, Cepeda acknowledged and encouraged us to see how our place results from a particular set of historical and geographical circumstances that are embedded in our very DNA, but she emphasized that this does not define our core nor limit our future, and she told us that it was possible to travel even if you are not wealthy or middle class or white or male. She actually urged us to think of ourselves as travelers and more importantly: to become travelers. To go to geographic locations that are not expected or “assigned” to us. And to make that a priority — and that it IS possible, and that we will have to take it upon ourselves to do it: Latinxs, especially Latinas will have to take it upon ourselves to become world travelers because that will not be handed to us like it is for others. This is what I remember that Cepeda said to us, although not in so many words.

Travelling and Research. Research as Travel

I like to think that Cepeda gave her advice with some skepticism or suspicion — it was definitely heard by me with apprehension, alongside the agreement and gratitude. Latina women and people of color in general have developed a suspicion of the idea of travelling, as much of it has been perverted by the history of colonial travelers from Europe and what they did as they went about travelling. At the same time, many of our very academic disciplines actually derive from this travelling history. So we may be suspicious of travelling in the same vein that we are suspicious of academia and its very idea of research itself. Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith points this out very well in her discussion of the relationship between travelling and research:

One of the issues examined relates to the way research became institutionalized in the colonies, not just through academic disciplines, but through learned and scientific societies and scholarly networks. The transplanting of research institutions, including universities, from the imperial centres of Europe enabled local scientific interests to be organized and embedded in the colonial system. Many of the earliest local researchers were not formally ‘trained’ and were hobbyist researchers and adventurers. The significance of travellers’ tales and adventurers’ adventures is that they represented the Other to a general audience back in Europe which became fixed in the milieu of cultural ideas. Images of the ‘cannibal’ chief, the ‘red’ Indian, the ‘witch’ doctor, or the ‘tattooed and shrunken’ head, and stories which told of savagery and primitivism, generated further interest, and therefore further opportunities, to represent the Other again.

Travellers' stories were generally the experiences and observations of white men whose interactions with indigenous 'societies' or 'peoples' were constructed around their own cultural views of gender and sexuality. (Smith, "Introduction")

We are suspicious, and yet we travel. We are suspicious, and yet we research. Our very lives cannot help but include travel, even if we never get on an airplane or cross state lines: another way in which travel figures into Raquel Cepeda's writing is in her experience as a Dominican who grows up in New York City. She writes: "I'm dominiyorkian, ... a transnational who isn't all the way American or Dominican but travels between both worlds." In this she is not alone as a traveler. Many years ago, in 1987, the philosopher María Lugones published the essay "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling and Loving Perception," in which she asserted: "As outsiders to the mainstream, women of color in the U.S. practice 'world'-travelling, mostly out of necessity." (2) and that

inhabiting more than one "world" at the same time and "travelling" between "worlds" is part and parcel of our experience and our situation. One can be at the same time in a "world" that constructs one as stereotypically latin, for example, and in a "world" that constructs one as latin. Being stereotypically latin and being simply latin are different simultaneous constructions of persons that are part of different "worlds."(11)

Even as she pointed out that women of color cannot escape the constant travel between worlds, Lugones recommended that we take on world travelling *intentionally* as a "willful exercise" — but that we do so playfully and lovingly. In her idea of playfulness, Lugones urged us to travel with a "metaphysical attitude" that is not fixated on a particular set of rules, a particular construction of our identity, or even of the idea of competence (16), with an "openness to being a fool." (17) As I get to the finish of this meandering dissertation, Lugones' words come to me like both a calming healing balm and a cup of strong energizing Dominican coffee. Even though they were published 30 years ago, her words still have many minds to reach: I know that in my dealings with academics, in trying to produce this dissertation, and in my studies in general, it often felt like I was getting the exact opposite advice, something I really struggled with.

For me, academia, and academic pursuits more generally, were mixed up with travel from an early age, and were also mixed up with feminism. "Going away to college" was one of my

first feats of travel. I travelled in 1981, from Brooklyn, New York to Cambridge Massachusetts, to go to college at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology when I was seventeen years old. I was what is now called a first generation student. I was traversing the new terrain of academia, as also this new geographic terrain of the Boston area, a place different from New York City, but most importantly, I was in the terrain of a different place from living under my family's restrictions towards girls' behavior— which is where the feminism comes in. To explain that, I have to tell the story that I've told a few of you in person over the years: when I first announced to my mother and father that I had been accepted by and was going to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, my mother was confused. I had to first clarify to her that it was not located in New York City, then that it was located in the state of Massachusetts and then that Massachusetts was far away from New York, hours away by train. At seventeen, I wanted to get away from the restrictions of my family, and I wanted to see the world, and academia promised me a way to do both. The reaction of my family to my going away to college confirmed that this was a feminist act. I remember my mom very carefully trying to pronounce this new word, this new place: Mass — A — CHU — setts, Mass — A — CHU — setts. She asked if there were nuns at the Masa — a — CHU — setts Institute of Technology: the only way she could fathom that I would go to live in a place so far away to study was if it was convent because in our world, unmarried women only had these two options: live with your family or live in a convent. My parents were so angry with me once they understood that I was going to leave their home and live unchaperoned, that they did not speak to me for months during my senior year of high school. They made it clear that girls were not supposed to do what I was about to do.

30-40 years later, academia again gave me a reason to travel. I've travelled to many library and academic conferences. In 2005, I travelled to the conference of the Caribbean Studies Association, which was held in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. The experience of going to that conference and giving a presentation on a Dominican woman author I had been working on, solidified for me my dissertation topic and also propelled me towards future travel experiences

related to academia and books, many of which fed back into the dissertation. I was able to attend the conference thanks to the help of two Puerto Rican professors at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. I remember feeling so much gratitude to them but at the same time feeling like at age 41, I was more than 20 years late in making my first academic voyage to my own country of origin. I could not shake off the feeling that I should have done that in college, when I first studied Latin American literature, when I struggled so hard to find a way to make academic study relevant to my life, to make that connection. Why hadn't my professors at Princeton (where I transferred to after leaving MIT), in the late 1980s not helped me get to the Dominican Republic back then? Princeton, for all its resources and accumulated knowledge, had no one who knew anything in depth about Dominican literature. For my senior thesis, I was advised by a professor in the Romance Languages department because, even though her specialty was classical literature from Spain, she had lived with her husband in the Dominican Republic, while he was sent there for his job. The professor was generally very friendly, yet one day she made some kind of joke about Dominicans being lazy and not working hard because "the mangoes fall easily to the ground," and after she shared that with me, I could never really trust her to be on my side and to not make fun of me behind my back. My senior thesis turned out to be a disaster; I got a failing grade and could not receive my degree even though I'd fulfilled all the course requirements. (Eventually, I resubmitted and did well enough to get a grade that allowed me to go to graduate school.) Years later I saw my old advisor's CV online and saw that she had listed my name and my senior thesis topic as one of her accomplishments. It was the first time I felt that she somehow did take me seriously back in the day. When I attended the CSA conference in Santo Domingo in 2005, I remember, sitting at a place that I'd heard so much about from Marianela Medrano, an outdoor café in the main plaza of la Zona Colonial, across from the great cathedral. It was known as "the café de los esquizofrénicos" due to all the disparate conversations and events that took place there. I finally made it there and among the disparate thoughts

whirling within my own version of esquizofrenia, were memories of the failures and traumas of academia in my life, including memories of my professor from 20 years ealier.

I tell all these stories because I cannot disentangle my personal journey from my academic journey. Having reached the almost end to the dissertation, my own little story somehow seems connected to all the bigger themes I have traversed. I am exposing myself and exposing individuals and institutions in my life. I could easily cover up this failure, these various failures. But for too many years I have questioned: Who failed? Who failed whom? Who failed what? There was no place to put these questions or these stories. So I put them here. I tell these stories to say that yes, travel is possible for us, and yet travel is fraught with risk and danger. My failures, after I made the decision to travel away from my home at age 17, were part of that danger. At the same time, travelling though time can help in healing the wounds of failure. And travelling back to a former time as I did by going back to academia, can help in travelling geographically. Once I went, even if it was 20 years later than it could have or should have been, possibilities were opened to me that I thought I'd missed by my previous failures and traumas. I give you my story, my spiral time travel story, in case it could help you when you think you've missed your chance, that it's too late for something you though yourself too old for — you never know. You might be able to go forward by going back, you might be able to travel out by travelling in. Raquel Cepeda reminds us of this.

How Much Do Books Travel, How Much Do These Writers Travel, Book Fairs and Book Travelling, Travelling to Book Fairs and What That Taught

I found that one way to travel as a librarian-academic is by attending book fairs. Book fairs are also another way to research authors. Throughout the years, I've thought about how books travel, wondering: how do they get from idea to production to distribution and into the hands of readers, into my own hands? After 47 years of experiencing books somehow arriving in my hands, eyes, and consciousness, it's still a bit of a mystery, even as my experiences as librarian, writer, researcher and friend of writers has given me some insights. During the course of

researching specific Dominican women authors who write in the United States, I had occasion to travel and do research at the following book fairs: the F eria del Libro de la Mujer Dominicana NYC 2008; Feria del Libro Madrid 2010; LIBER, Feria Internacional del Libro (Barcelona) 2011; Feria Internacional del Libro Santo Domingo 2013; Feria Internacional del Libro Santo Domingo 2014; Feria Internacional del Libro Santo Domingo 2015; Feria del Libro de La Habana 2016; Feria del Libro Dominicano en New York 2016. I also gained insights about how books by Dominican women travel by visiting bookstores and educational venues such as the Strand Bookstore in New York City in 2015 and the Foro Educativo in the town of El Seibo, Dominican Republic in 2017.

In a kind of survey tour of book venues, I was looking for the presence and treatment of the Dominican women authors I was studying. The journey began auspiciously at the Feria del Libro de la Mujer Dominicana (Dominican Women’s Book Fair) in New York in 2008, at an event that was part of the book fair titled “Del poema a la canci n,” which launched a CD of songs based on poems by Dominican women. It was a bit of a reunion for me, having travelled to New York from Massachusetts, after about 10 years of living away from the Dominican women writing scene in Nueva York. Both Marianela Medrano and Yrene Santos, were there, as well as other literary acquaintances who went to hear them read their poetry, travelling themselves from places such as Connecticut. Marianela and Yrene were featured both in the CD and in the book fair itself. This prominence gave validation to my own assessment of them: they were obviously important to a wider community of Dominican women, and it wasn’t just my own friendship ties and personal bias that motivated my focus on them. The event was helpful in my research and photographs from it give context to an understanding of these two writers and their writing and are included in the third chapter of this dissertation.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ More photographs are online at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/isabelespinal/sets/72157604196632538>.

The next leg of the journey was similarly promising and fruitful. It was an accidental research experience. In 2010, I was invited to give some talks in Spain to librarians about librarianship in the United States. I had the opportunity to visit the Feria del Libro de Madrid (Madrid Book Fair) and looked for Terremozas, the Spanish book publisher that published Marianela Medrano's book *Curada de Espantos*. How exciting to find it and see copies of Marianela's book prominently displayed there.





Figure 78 Images from the 2010 Feria del Libro de Madrid

What this suggested is that, again, Marianela's book had some reach. Its physicality as a book existed far away from its author. I remembered what Marianela had said in an interview a few years earlier, that I discuss in Chapter 3: that she had not been able to travel to Spain when the book was published because neither she nor the publisher had the budget to fly her there. She had

felt that the book was like a child she was sending off unaccompanied and alone into the world. In part, I took photos and tagged them so that Marianela could see how well her child was doing. Visiting the book fair and looking for her book, then, while on a trip for my professional work, was like visiting a family member while on a business trip.

Knowing that I was doing a dissertation that included her and other women writers, Marianela repeatedly invited and urged me to attend the Dominican national book fair in 2011 and 2012, called la Feria Internacional del Libro (FIL), Santo Domingo. These invitations caught me off guard. Given my limited budget and my monetary commitments to supporting my three children as a single mother, it has never been possible to just pick up and go when great opportunities for research and literary connections come knocking. The trip to the 2008 book fair in New York was relatively easy, as I have most of my family in that region and can drive there from where I live. The 2010 visit to the Madrid book fair was something I squeezed into a trip that was funded by the United States Embassy in Madrid: they paid for me to travel to Spain and speak to Spanish librarians about contemporary library issues in the United States, reaching out to me specifically as there were very few librarians in the United States with the full bilingual skills to do this. I stopped by the Madrid book fair in my free time from giving those talks, with camera in hand. Two years later, when the invitations from Marianela were arriving, it wasn't so easy to just get out there, even as it was the perfect venue for my research. I tried to get funding, but could not in the end go to the fair, the money just wasn't there. So I observed and learned, and "researched" by following Marianela's posts about it on Facebook. That is how I learned that at the 2012 FIL in Santo Domingo, Marianela Medrano was an honored writer, with an actual street in the book fair dedicated to her: Calle Marianela Medrano, and an enormous replica of her latest book's cover, set up on that street (a different book cover than the one I serendipitously found in Madrid, Spain, but by the same publisher, Terremozas).



Figure 79 Street at Dominican book fair dedicated to Marianela Medrano, May 2012

I did begin to think to the next year's book fair and to look for funding. That fall I secured a travel grant from my union in order to attend the following spring. With high hopes, I arrived in Santo Domingo in April 2013 and was blown away by the book fair, which was set up in an area of the Capital that includes some of the largest cultural institutional buildings, such as the national library and the anthropological museum (Museo del Hombre). It was a little like the National Mall in Washington, D.C. There was a building set up to showcase Dominican authors, called the Pabellón de Escritores Dominicanos.

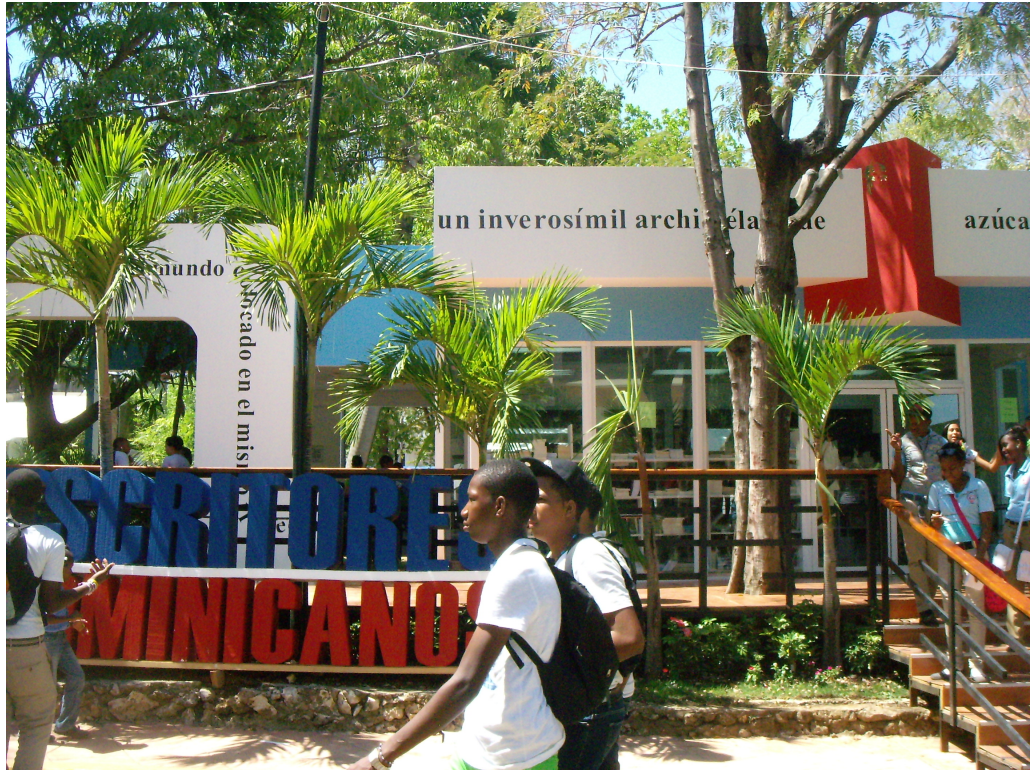


Figure 80 Outside of the Pabellón de Escritores Dominicanos

I was curious to see if some of the authors I was studying were showcased in that building, somehow sure that at least Marianela's would be, since she figured so prominently at the fair the year before. It was disappointing to find none of the authors I was studying in the Pabellón de Escritores Dominicanos, which evokes many questions and reflections and speculations about the impermanence of books and authors, about the vulnerability of texts. What does it mean that one of the honored authors at a national book fair would not have her books included in that nation's book display the following year? Because I am nearing the end of this project, I will leave this question and other unasked questions here, with my story and my photos. This could be a future project for me or for others.



Figure 81 The poetry section at the 2013 book fair in Santo Domingo did not include any poetry books by Marianela Medrano or Yrene Santos or Josefina Báez

In another kiosk at the book fair, however, I was able to see one (and only one) of the books by one of the authors I was studying. Marianela Medrano had just published her children's book *Prietica* with the publishing house Alfaguara, a division of the company Santillana, located in Spain. She'd had not yet seen her published book and when she found out I was going to the book fair, she asked me to see if her book was there and bring her back a copy. There, in the very large Santillana kiosk, I saw *Prietica* on the shelves, nestled between a book by Julia Alvarez and another by Emelda Ramos.





Figure 82 Marianela Medrano's book *Prietica* at the 2013 book fair in Santo Domingo

At this book fair, I also learned context for a passage from Anney Bález's book, *My Daughter's Eyes*, in an exhibit dedicated to Coronel Francisco Alberto Caamaño, who is mentioned in one of the book's vignettes.

Most of my family works for the government. Papi says these are dangerous times, everywhere. Papi is worried because there is constant criticism of the government and the President. He fears that the Dominican Republic will become another Cuba. Just recently, the country was again in turmoil, Francisco Alberto Caamano [sic], the leader of the 1965 revolution that the United States troops were sent to put down, was shot and killed while leading a guerilla movement against Joaquín Balaguer. I tried to cut it out of the newspaper to create a collage of stories about this time, but Papi didn't let me. He took away the scissors and the paper and said, "This can get you into a lot of trouble Mia." (102)

Although one could easily learn about Caamaño by researching and reading, something in seeing the exhibit in spatial terms gave this historical figure a different meaning, something in seeing how much space was allotted to him and in seeing Dominican people go in and out of the space. It also presents quite a contrast to the passage from the book. Instead of Caamaño as a figure who is dangerous to even read about, here is a space funded and sponsored by the Dominican government that promotes his image and invites Dominican citizens to read and learn about him. Seems like much had changed in the country between the time period detailed in the book and the present day. The book thus gives context to that space just as the space gives context to the book.



Figure 83 Exhibit about Caamaño at FIL Santo Domingo 2013

At the 2013 book fair in Santo Domingo, I also found many things I was not explicitly looking for that were related to my work and this project, but more tangentially. For example, it was there that I learned about Hilma Contreras. Born 100 years earlier, in 1913, she was the first woman to win the Dominican Premio Nacional de Literatura (the National Literature Award)—in 2002, when she was 89 years old. I had not heard of her until this book fair. Probably only a few of you reading this will have heard of her before seeing me mention her.





Figure 84 Images from Hilma Contreras exhibit 2013

The use of exhibit space definitely served to capture my attention, as well as the attention of other book fair attendees. I hope it captures your attention too. The poster with the butterflies reads “Hilma Contreras / Una mujer con pantalones.”¹⁵⁰ That alone is intriguing and evocative. As of this moment, December 6, 2017, there are only 4 articles about her in the database *MLA International Bibliography*. I hope that my reporting of how she appeared in my literary travels will inspire some of us to add to that number. Let’s see what the future brings in that regard.

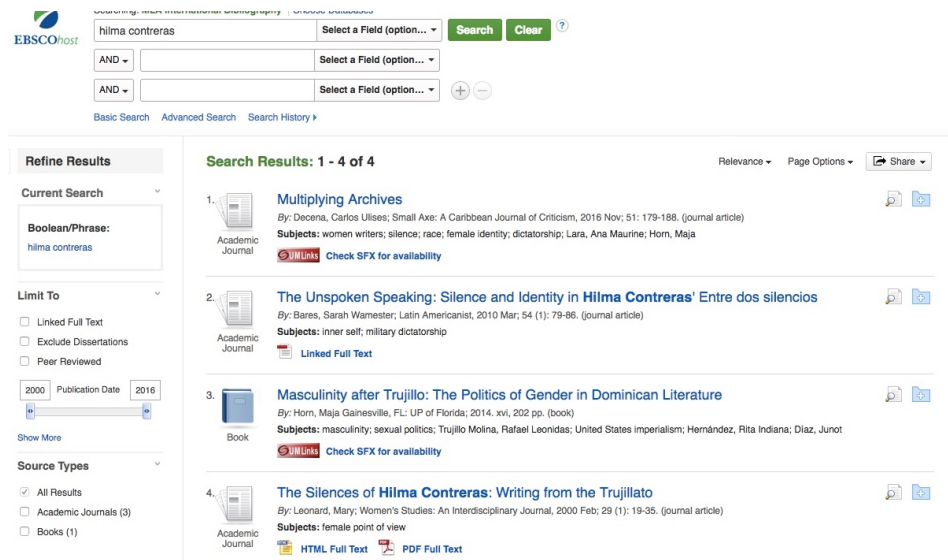


Figure 85 Hilma Contreras in MLA database, December 6, 2017

It’s getting late. I am running out of pages here. I see now that I cannot take you with me to show you all that I saw or even to witness my analyses of the book fair travels and how they illuminate issues of gender and authorship and space. Time and space in this dissertation are running out. I will say a few more things but also leave here links to my photos from some of those experiences and will leave a marker future analyses of book fairs and the spaces of Dominican women’s writings in the United States and beyond.

- Feria Internacional del Libro, Santo Domingo, 2013
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/isabelespinal/albums/72157633899526620>

¹⁵⁰ “Hilma Contreras / A woman with pants”

- Feria Internacional del Libro, Santo Domingo, 2014
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/isabelespinal/albums/72157644079450179>
- Donación Biblioteca Infantil y Juvenil República Dominicana, 2015
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/isabelespinal/albums/72157653763601186>
- Strand bookstore, 2015
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/isabelespinal/albums/72157687933057114>
- Feria Internacional del Libro de la Habana, 2016
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/isabelespinal/albums/72157664836648681>
- Feria del Libro Dominicano Nueva York 2016
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/isabelespinal/albums/72157690661228295>
- Foro Educativo El Seibo, 2017
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/isabelespinal/albums/72157678211971143>

The Feria del Libro Dominicano Nueva York 2016 became a contested space for some of the writers and for issues of Dominican cultural politics. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Yrene Santos was an honored writer, receiving treatment similar to what Marianela received at the FIL in Santo Domingo in 2013. Her image and name were prominently displayed in posters and publications and in the spaces of the book fair itself, as shown in the photos likened above and the ones I've selected, below. I learned after travelling to the book fair, that Marianela, who'd been a colleague and close friend of Yrene for decades, predating their time in the United States, and through whom I met Yrene, was boycotting the book fair as a protest of the Dominican government's policies towards Haitians and Haitian Dominicans (the book fairs in Santo Domingo and New York are funded by the Dominican government). As many activists and scholars such as Lorgia-Peña have indicated, these anti-Haitian positions are part of a broader anti-blackness trend and history in various powerful sectors of Dominican society. Ironically, one the more memorable programs I attended at this very book fair, was led by Diógenes Abréu, author of the book *Sin Haitianidad No Hay Diominicanidad* (2014), a history and treatise that argues that Haitian culture and identity is embedded within the very notions of what it means to be Dominican; there is no Domincanness without Haitianness, not because one identity has been played off the other within our history, but because elements of our cultural and and political

histories are so intertwined they cannot be extricated from each other. Adding to the irony: Diógenes' book had been funded and published by the very government that on the one hand organizes the books fairs, and on the other hand, abuses the human rights of Haitians and Haitian Dominicans.



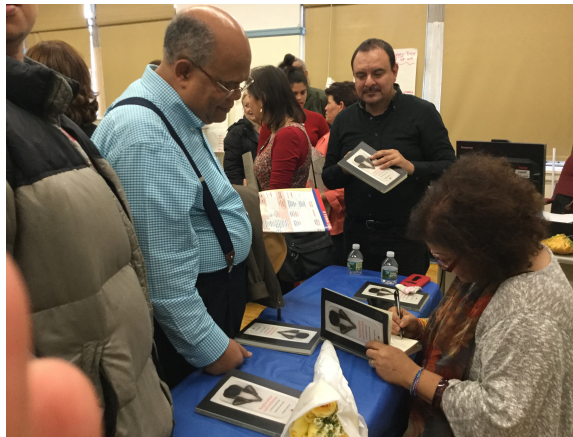


Figure 86 Yrene Santos at the Feria del Libro Dominicano NY 2016

I would not have known about Dió-genes Abréu's book had I not attended the 2014 book fair that featured Dió-genes in one of the key book fair presentations as winner of the 2013 Premio de Ultramar that resulted in the publication of the book. And I would not have Dió-genes in my mental map had I not met him years earlier via Marianela, who ironically was boycotting the event in 2016 in which this renowned proponent of Haitinness in Domincanness took part in. Dió-genes is part of the segment of Dominican society and leaders who embraces and celebrates our Black African heritages. This came through loud and clear in the 2016 New York book fair where he took on the role not of book author but of presenter to another proponent of Dominican blackness, Dominican dance expert Ricardo Ureña. The presentation by Dió-genes and Ricardo

Ureña opened up an interesting space in the book fair as it included musicians, and people in attendance naturally started dancing. I am sharing a video of it to give you a taste of how wonderful the sounds and energy were. Into that room, walked Yrene Santos who at the end, greeted her old friend and fellow DominicanYork writer Dió-genes Abréu.



Figure 87 Writers Yrene Santos, Isabel Espinal, Ynoemia Villar, Marianela Medrano, Diógenes Abréu, at the home of Isabel Espinal, circa 1994

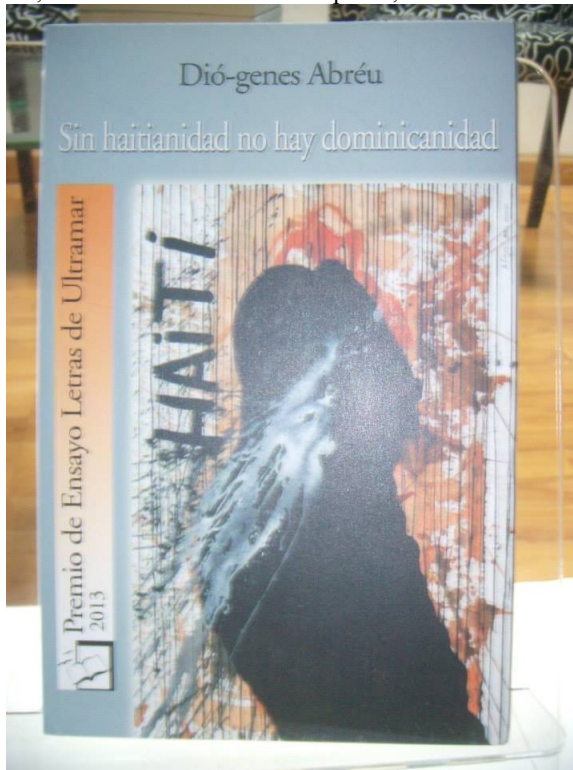




Figure 88 Dió-genes Abréu, at Feria Internacional del Libro, Santo Domingo 2014

I'd like you to experience a little of what it felt like to have Afro Dominican music and dance in the book fair in New York. The image below has a link to a video I took. The people dancing had been sitting and listening to a presentation. But when the music started they got themselves up to dance. So much joy. So different from the experience of stifled African heritage at the Centro León Museum I discussed in Chapter 4.



Figure 89 Afro Dominican Music and dance at the Feria del Libro Dominicano. Video screen shot. Full video at <https://umass.box.com/v/feria2016musicanddance>

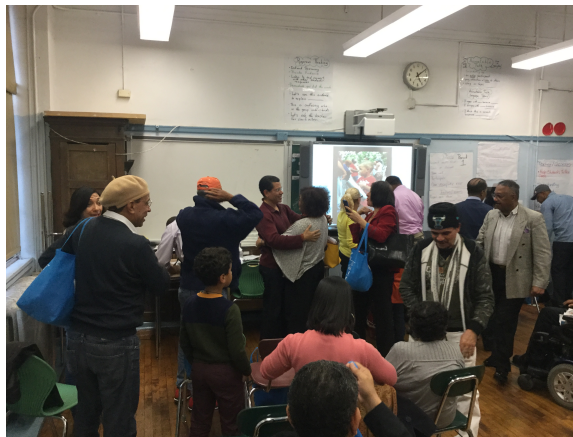


Figure 90 Authors and longtime friends Dió-genes Abréu and Yrene Santos embrace at Feria del Libro Dominicano NY 2016

I think this might be a good time to talk a little bit about my writing process, which has to do with travelling too. I have tended to use many photographs in this dissertation and especially in this ending chapter, a sign of the times I am writing in, a marker of the moment in history when photographs are ubiquitous and have in many instances overtaken language. I have used a “blog-like” style, in other words. In preparation for the writing, I had placed here a photograph of my father in my house, reading Dió-genes’ book. The photograph sat here for weeks in my draft, and it was like a cliff I needed to jump to or landmark I needed to get you to via words that would show you connected ideas. The writing process has been like that: I sense the place I need to get you to, but the words are the route and they are not always obvious. Finding the right words is like finding the right route to the next spot. The path to this photograph includes my father’s love

of reading, something he and I have in common. Many mornings when he has visited me from New York or I have visited him in New York, we've been the first two people to get up in the morning. While everyone is sleeping, we both have coffee and read. My father, being very religious and having had little access to books, usually reads from the Bible. But one day, when he was visiting me, I caught him reading the book *Sin Haitianidad No Hay Dominicanidad*, which was probably lying around in the room he'd been sleeping in. That was a powerful moment, to see this book in the hands of my father. Seeing the image of my father reading this book, I wonder about the effect that such a book has to counter the anti-Haitian narratives that circulate to Dominican people from on high. I feel hopeful.



Figure 91 My father reading the book *Sin Haitianidad No Hay Dominicanidad*

So, how do books travel? How do they get into the hands of readers? How do readers get to know about authors? How do they get included in book fairs? On the shelves of bookstores? In Chapter 3 of this dissertation, I recounted the story of how a man named Whitley Stokes found Edward Fitzgerald's translations of Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* in a discount bin in England, got excited

about the book, and personally began a campaign to share that with his circles and eventually the book became very popular; a story which highlights the importance of individuals and their passion for books in the way books travel to readers; individuals whose names readers most often don't know play a crucial role. In the case of Dominican women writers, there are many such individuals who have helped keep these authors and their books alive. Daisy Cocco de Fillippis is one mentioned earlier in the dissertation. Miriam Mejía and Hortensia González are two others. As Hortensia recounts in her Facebook post, she and Miriam were the creators of the Dominican Women's Book Festival that I attended in 2008. It was they who created that space.



Figure 92 Miriam Mejía and Hortensia González November 27, 2017

Similarly, by following clues, we can trace how Hilma Contreras, a feminist literary icon who I had not known about before I travelled to the Dominican book fair in 2013, came to prominence. Wikipedia gives the following clue in its entry on Contreras in Spanish (one that does

not appear in the English language entry): “Su redescubrimiento literario se atribuye a Manuel Mora Serrano.”¹⁵¹ Hmm... As is too often the case with Wikipedia, there was no citation for this assertion, but it would be good to verify, to follow this clue, to know how it is that some of us now know of Hilma Contreras. Another clue is the very exhibit at the 2013 book fair: whose idea was it to create that exhibit of Hilma Contreras? Who made it so prominent within the space of the fair? These behind the scenes stories are very important because they highlight the role of individuals and political processes in how authors and books travel to readers. These individual acts of noticing, highlighting, championing, inviting need to be uncovered and recognized.

Before I move on from this section on book and author travels, I also want to highlight again, something touched on in Chapter 3, that these writers themselves actually do travel a great deal, even when they can’t always accompany their books (as was the case with Marianela and her books published by Terremozas). They do too much travel in fact, to document in these pages. Here for example, are Marianela Medrano and Aurora Arias in Mexico earlier that same year that I attended the Dominican book fair for the first time:



Figure 93 Marianela Medrano and Aurora Arias in Mexico

¹⁵¹ https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hilma_Contreras

Space and time travel

These writers also travel in the dimension of time as well as the dimension of space. Timing and history are part of the journey, not just Dominican, Quisqueyan history and so forth, but literary history. We need to remember the importance of **when** these women writers came about, beginning in the early 1980s in Santo Domingo, and flowing into the 1990s in New York, and continuing in the 2000s and 2010s, into all the places they have and their writings have travelled in these later decades. These writers came up at a moment in Dominican literature that was extremely sexist, where the literary space were extremely sexist, where Dominican women had to literally make physical space to be writers, as in the tertulias at the home of Dr. Daisy Cocco De Filippis in the mid 1990s in New York City, which we visited in Chapter 3. Every so often the realization came to me that these women I've been researching and writing about and sharing with you are historic — even as they are living among us now, they are also part of history. And this time travel leaves us with questions for the future. Has it gotten better now? What was their historic contribution in terms of opening up the spaces for women? What was it like to come up as a woman writer “back then”? How has this history been recorded?

The Experiment with PAR; The Blog Experiment. Travelling Across Disciplinary Methodologies

Except for Raquel Cepeda, who I never approached about it and thus was not invited, the writers in this dissertation all agreed to travel with me to the uncharted path of using Participatory Action Research within a cultural, American Studies rubric. It was neither obvious nor easy to start a Participatory Action Research (PAR) literature project, especially one involving writers. PAR involves a different set of skills on the part of the researcher than what is normally expected in American Studies, and certainly in literary studies. It requires the ability to bring people together; the ability to communicate to people outside the field about what American Studies is and does; the ability to coordinate participation; and more. There is a set of facilitation and project management tasks that needed to get done. I needed to decide on a method for

communicating to the participants in the first place, i.e. in-person meeting, email, blog, and/or telephone. I also needed to consider whether it was necessary to obtain the approval of the appropriate Institutional Review Board for Human Subject Research — since I involved people in this study as well as texts and material culture. This is something we are not at all trained to do in American Studies.

At the onset of the research and to this day, the participants are geographically spread out throughout the United States, and some of them frequently are out of the country, either in the Dominican Republic or participating in literary events in other countries. I knew it would be difficult if not impossible to get them all together in one place physically, so I decided to find a technological way to have the group interact. The question then was, what technology? Some of the options were: a blog, a wiki, an email listserv, and Skype or other online interactive meeting technologies. For various reasons, I decided a blog might be better than other methods. It seemed better than email in that a blog created a space that allows for choice and variety on the part of the participants: it is easier to control which blogs one visits or subscribes to, whereas it is harder to control emails arriving in the participants' inboxes; blogs allow for organization and revision of content; blogs allowed for multimedia embedding. It had advantages over a wiki in that it is a more familiar technology to most people today. These technologies and writing and meeting venues may all turn out to be ephemeral. As one of the advisers to this dissertation asked: will anyone even know what a wiki is 10 years from now? I cannot predict the future and thus could not give her a good answer to that; 10 years from now these questions of which technology to choose might not mean anything, in which case this will serve as a document of questions that existed in a particular moment in time (2011-2017) and that might have some worth in itself.

Also on the logistical end, it even took a bit of a long time to determine if I needed Human Subjects Review via my university's Institutional Review Board and/or establish a consent form for this project. For a good while, I assumed that I did, and had thought of creating a consent form and presenting it at the moment I would invite the writers to participate, but then

I thought it actually might be better to try to develop one together after getting their acceptance of the project. I had envisioned that this was probably going to be one of our first joint tasks. But I kept finding that this was not as straightforward as another project I had done involving a consent form. Even among my committee members there was disagreement, with the co-chair from the social sciences side indicating that I probably would have to go through the review process and the other co-chair, from the humanities side, indicating that I probably didn't. No one knew for sure. In the end, I dispensed with the whole idea of Institutional Review Board and consent forms, following the commonsense precedent of authors who are already in the public eye getting interviewed all the time as part of their vocation and indeed putting out in public format many private truths as part of their writing practice. Although it may seem like a minor issue, I discuss it here because with PAR it seemed like nothing could be taken for granted and even routine questions and processes were up for discussion. The literature of Participatory Action Research does indicate that consent forms and traditional human subjects research protocol can be tricky when engaging in PAR (Tuck; Bradley 342; Gubrium and Harper 49). Consent forms are meant to be a form of protection for research subject; but if those same subjects are also co-researchers, who then writes the consent form? And how? In my case, since I was bringing a social science methodology into the humanities, I found myself asking a question that rarely occurs to those in the humanities side.

I used a blog at blogger.com to get the participatory research process started. I chose Blogger.com over other options such as wordpress.com since at least two of the participants, Josefina Báez and Annecy Báez, had already used that platform in some of their work. I started the blog at <http://el-fogon-de-escritoras.blogspot.com/> and called it “El fogón de escritor@s,” which translates as “the writers’ wood stove.” Fogones in the Dominican Republic were very common until recently — in the 1970s they were probably the most common type of stove. I highlighted in the blog a picture of a Dominican fogón that I had taken in 2005, on a side trip up

to El Cibao, to visit my aunt and uncle while I was attending the 2005 Caribbean Studies Association conference down in La Capital.



Figure 94 My aunt's fogón

In September of 2011, I wrote a blog post that explained the PAR process and the particular research that I hoped to be doing. Via email and Facebook messages, I invited the intended participants to take part, gave a link to the blog, and asked them how they think we should proceed. (As of September 2015, I was Facebook friends with all of them.) On the blog, I included a comments feature as one way the participants could get involved. I also invited any of the participants to become co-authors of the blog. At that time, I had not decided to include Ana Maurine Lara, so there were only six invitees at first.

Initially, two of the writers immediately accepted the blog author invitations (Rosario and Medrano), meaning they were willing and understood how to post their own articles on the blog. All six of the original invitees accepted the invitation to be part of this PAR project (Marianela Medrano, Yrene Santos, Aurora Arias, Nelly Rosario, Annecy Báez, and Josefina Báez). Some of the writers also participated outside the blog, through email, telephone and face-to-face contact.

The initial response from the writers was quite enthusiastic.¹⁵² One writer did ask if the blog would be private or public, “because there is a level of performance that happens when experimenting with thought in the presence of an audience.” She indicated a preference for a closed discussion, but was willing to participate in a publicly accessible dialogue. The first comment received on the blog itself was from Aurora, who said:

Hola Isabel! Gracias por invitarme a cocinar algo bueno en tu fogón... o tal vez deba decir "nuestro fogón". Apoyo tu iniciativa y espero que nos mantengamos en contacto. Una sola sugerencia: me gustaria más que se llamara "El fogón de LAS escritoras". Abrazos!:)¹⁵³

In response to Aurora, I adjusted the name to “El fogón de las escritoras,” indicating clearly the feminine gender. Her comment validated my decision to limit the study to women writers and to focus on feminism and women’s issues.

Going into this project, I knew that experience might wind up indicating that PAR is simply not appropriate either for this subject or for this researcher or for these participants. It is impossible to unilaterally impose participation on research processes:

No one may mandate in advance that a particular research process will become a fully developed Participatory Action Research project. Participation is a process that must be generated. It begins with participatory intent and continues by building participatory processes into the activity within the limits set by the participants and the conditions. To view participation as something that can be imposed is both naive and morally suspect. (Greenwood, Whyte, and Harkavy)

The possibility existed that the writers would not ultimately feel engaged in the participatory research process, or any research process for that matter. On the other hand, it was also possible that some of the writers would be very active participants, while others might provide valuable participation even if limited in some way. Indeed, there is a participatory and experimental aspect to much of their writing and their projects. As an example, Josefina Báez had been keeping

¹⁵² In the Spring of 2014, I invited a seventh writer, Ana Maurine Lara, who also accepted.

¹⁵³ Hello Isabel! Thanks for inviting me to cook something good on your wood stove... or maybe I should say “our wood stove.” I support your initiative and I hope we will stay in touch. Only one suggestion: I would prefer that it be called “El fogón de LAS escritoras”. Hugs! :)

her own blog that began as the birthplace and now serves as an extension of her latest printed work:



Figure 95 Josefina Báez's blog in 2011

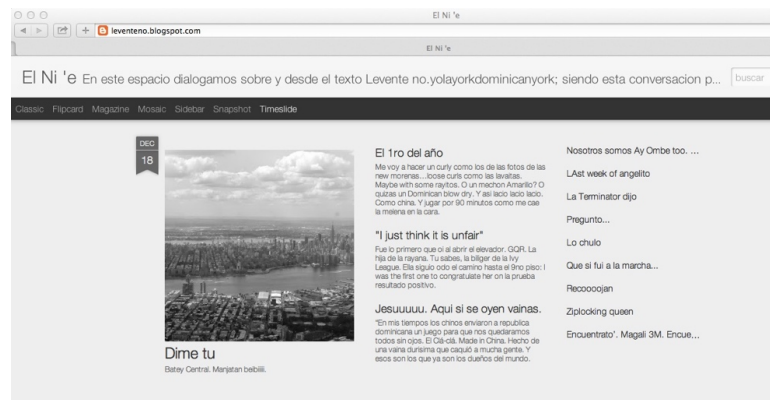


Figure 96 Josefina Báez's blog in 2014

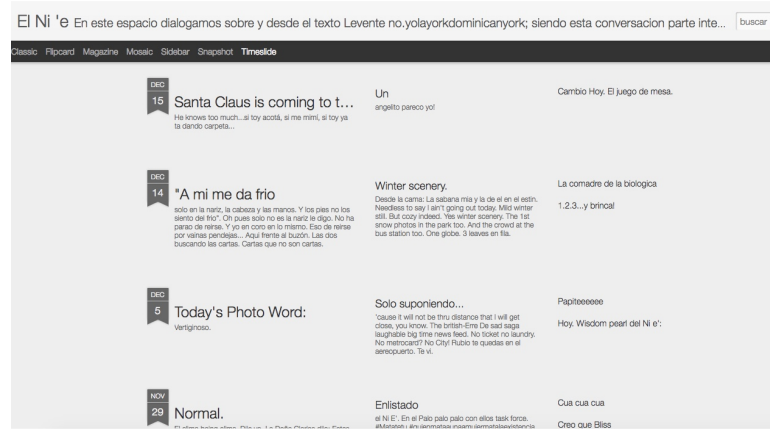


Figure 97 Josefina Báez's blog in 2017

Going into this project, I felt that regardless of the outcome of the participatory part, other parts of my research and analysis would bear enough fruit for a dissertation. So even if the PAR aspect had failed altogether, other aspects would still have made this a worthwhile study.¹⁵⁴

It did turn out to be difficult to carry out the PAR aspect of this project as fully as I might have liked and perhaps as the participants might have wished. There were many barriers that sometimes made me want to give up that aspect of this project completely. And I knew it really wasn't *necessary*. It wasn't something the writers, nor my dissertation committee, nor the field was clamoring for explicitly. But I found it hard to let go of trying. **Why** did I not let go — even as it became embarrassingly incomplete? Why did I keep trying? And then, as time accumulated without some pretty or flashy results, why not pretend it never happened? Why include this in the final write up if it's not the main idea? What really came of it that is worth mentioning? And on the other hand, if there is enough of value to write about, why even mention the embarrassing aspects?

¹⁵⁴ I did have some previous experience with PAR. In 2005, I created a PAR study, funded by the American Library Association, under the guidance of Professor Leda Cooks in the UMass Communication Department, about Latino reading, in which I engaged librarians who work with Latino communities. It was a very positive and fruitful experience that can be continued in the future and that gave me encouragement for this study.

Maybe there's a bit of a scientist in me here, a bit of science in this humanities project. There is value in suggesting an idea and a methodology even if the results are not fully complete. Part of the process and value would be for others to try it. Part of the value also is in just expressing the possibilities of this methodology for the humanities, for American Studies, as I did above. As I demonstrated, I have found out that in the literary field and in the humanities more broadly, Participatory Action Research is not well known at all. My dissertation committee members on the humanities side of academia had not heard of this methodology, although the ones in the social sciences surely had. That introduction to these specific stakeholders alone is valuable. But if they had not heard of it, maybe someone else also drawn to the topic of Dominican women writers, might learn something as well. And maybe someone else can take this up and do a better job after learning about the methodology. Part of the value then also is in delineating the challenges by discussing the supposed failures, so that others may learn from them. Now, on the positive side, this "experiment" did yield some good results. It showed that it's possible to get 100% of a small group of contemporary writers asked to participate in such a Participatory Action Research project to agree to take part. It yielded some interesting questions from them and showed some of the thinking of Dominican women writers in the USA regarding questions of space and place. What an honor and a privilege and an excitement it was to even get that far. It also showed some specific obstacles and challenges in this type of research today.

And, what were those hardships or obstacles? The first was probably my own positionality as a researcher who was only a part time doctoral student. Through the course of this dissertation and all of my doctoral studies, I was a full time librarian and mother of three children who were preteens and teenagers through most of this. My constraints were then confounded by an invitation I received right about the time I began the blog (late 2011), to run for the office of Vice-President/President elect of REFORMA: The National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and The Spanish Speaking, an invitation that I accepted. The experience of being vice president and president and immediate past president of this

organization almost completely derailed this research; it was an intense three years. This would have been another reason to abandon the PAR and the blog in particular: as a way to hide just how slow going it was. Without that aspect of the project there would be little public documentation of how long the dissertation was taking.

After the initial blog post, I made two more within a month but did not receive any responses to the other two posts. One post was just a reprinting of the email I had sent them all to invite them to the project, so it's not a surprise that they did not respond. The second post was about my participation at the LIBER book expo in Spanish in October 2011; in that post I asked some research related questions. I sent them a message via Facebook with a link to the post, asking them to respond. Some responded to the Facebook message, but did not respond to the blog post or indicate in any way that they read it. But I did not follow up with further messages; and I did not send any messages outside of Facebook. Many months passed before I undertook any activity on this part of the project. About a year later, I met with Marianela and she volunteered to "rekindle the flames" of el fogón, with a post in October 2012. Again, no response and by this time I was too deep in my professional library work to give the project much time. Marianela repeated the post in March 2013. Then in October of 2014, she posted another question. This one did receive responses.

So in the spirit of a scientist, I offer my flawed experiment. Hopefully others will take it and improve on it. I will give some details about what specifically happened in the blog and PAR aspects — although, frankly, most of the time not much happened. The inactivity was probably mostly caused by the autistic inertia I was experiencing, which had nothing to do with the six writers in the project. It also was a result of the lack of structures for this type of project in the humanities.

I stand by my insistence, suggestion, argument if you will, that Participatory Action Research can be fruitful in American Studies and contemporary literary studies. Although we didn't get very far with it or into it, our foray into PAR, via use of the blog *El fogón de las escritoras*,

produced a conversation that circles back or spirals into this very discussion of travelling and space and that touches on some of the metaphors and spaces of the different chapters of this dissertation. As a group, we had decided that the writers would take turns posing questions. When it was Marianela's turn, she posted the poem "Jardín Infinito" ("Infinite Garden"), from the yet unpublished book she'd been working on titled *La casa es humana* (*The House is Human*) <http://el-fogon-de-escriptoras.blogspot.com/2014/10/buenos-dias-mujeres-vamos-reanudar.html> The poem was followed by her questions for the group, about of all things, a wandering house:

Con este poema abro una conversación sobre la casa errante, la que no tiene dirección postal, la que nos transforma en cada punto geográfico al que entramos. Cómo cambia la visión del Ser en las mudanzas? Cómo impacta la adquisición de un nuevo idioma al espacio del Ser, a la casa errante?¹⁵⁵

So the use of PAR with writers in which the writers are co researchers, worked very well in this instance to elicit research questions.

And what of the answers, the findings from this research question? There were two: one by Nelly Rosario and one by Ana Maurine Lara. Nelly responded with a version of what I found out via research, was a mini essay she wrote for the Spanish language New York newspaper *El Diario La Prensa*. We've seen in Chapter 4 that Nelly Rosario writes in English. Via her response to Marianela's question, we also see that she writes in Spanish too. The mini essay is a tribute to a specific woman who is a neighbor of Nelly, when Nelly, a native New Yorker lives in Texas. We see in now that Nelly in her travels found a healer in the person of Maricela Ramos who gardens and grows typical Mexican plants. Thus Nelly's answer to Marianela's question shows the complexity of language and cultural identity for Dominican woman writers in the USA. It shows Nelly's travels as it is signed from San Marcos, TX, but at the same time, it is an essay that emphasizes how at home she feels with this Latina woman: "Tan lejos de mi familia, en Maricela

¹⁵⁵ With this poem I open a conversation about the wandering house, the one with no mailing address, the one that transforms us at every geographic point that we enter. How does the notion of Self change with every move? How does the acquisition of a new language in the space of the Self impact the wandering house?

he encontrado de nuevo el jardín que mi mamá se las arregla para cultivar en su cocina y en su pequeño balcón (las dos jardineras hasta son tocayas).”¹⁵⁶ Ana Maurine’s response was also a literary piece. They all spoke and asked questions in a literary style, in their language of literature. They all engaged with the idea of home as well as the practice of gardening. In a question about space, they all brought in ideas about travel.

Although we didn’t get as far as I and maybe they had hoped, I am forever grateful to the seven writers who agreed to take part in the PAR experiment. Even though I have written so much of this dissertation in the first person, I always felt their support throughout the process. “knowledge is a collective thing”—the concept of knowledge as communal vis-a-vis traditional academia came up in Patrick Stewart’s indigenous dissertation that gave this work such a lift at about the halfway writing point. One of the voices in there said this (stewart 115)¹⁵⁷:

i mean it [architecture school] is very much a western framework in the way that knowledge is treated as a commodity you pay for it you have to earn it and hold on to it and it becomes very much about the individual the thing i found indeed still find that quite unusual i am not sure about your people but my people knowledge is a collective thing and there are still times at which you receive more knowledge but in the end it is owned by everyone it is not this thing where someone writes a book and then there s copyright and all these sorts of things so one of the things i really found hard recently was watching these supposed writers going to aboriginal communities writing their stories down and then putting them in their books which they then claim copyright (k o brien personal communication november 28 2014)

¹⁵⁶ “So far from my family, in Maricela I have found again the garden my mom managed to get in order to cultivate in her kitchen and in her small balcony (the two gardeners are even namesakes of each other).”

¹⁵⁷ I present this text as a picture taken from this dissertation so the fonts and spacing, etc., can appear exactly as Stewart presented them.

How will the research travel back?

This is not a linear journey, this travelling. My methodology was travelling, wandering, traversing. It's not a completed journey. After finishing final drafts of the first four chapters of this dissertation, I came across a reading list of indigenous methodologies. You'd think by chapter five, which is supposed to conclude the project, it would be too late to consider any new methodological ideas, but I was drawn to these readings and began with the first book suggested: *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, by Linda Tuhiwai Smith. The book actually came at a very opportune time. Another healing read. It might have helped to have read it as I was starting out, but reading it now provided a nice way to exit, with the question of how will this research travel back:

Some of my students have presented their work in formal ceremonies to family and tribal councils; one has had his work positioned amongst the wreaths which have surrounded the casket of a deceased relation. I have travelled with another student back to an area where she carried out her interviews so that she could present copies of her work to the people she interviewed. The family was waiting for her; they cooked food and made us welcome. We left knowing that her work will be passed around the family to be read and eventually will have a place in the living room along with other valued family books and family photographs. Other indigenous students have presented a symposium on their research into native schools to an international conference, or given a paper to an academic audience. Some have been able to develop strategies and community-based initiatives directly from their own research projects. Some have taken a theoretical approach to a problem and through their analyses have shown new ways of thinking about issues of concern to indigenous peoples. (53)

Research as Bus Ride

Levente no. Reading this book I wondered if there is something that I get that another person would need to have explained because they are not familiar with Dominican thinking. Of course, the discussion in Chapter 2 shows how the very title was an illustration of where *I myself* was not Dominican enough to get it. There is something in the structure and style of the book that seems very comfortable to me, I think very Dominican. All those different voices, all the different names, short bursts of wisdom and humor. For some reason the book reminds me of the short bus rides I took in Santo Domingo to get to the book fair from my hotel.

I was questioned about my desire to take the bus — questioned by the workers at the hotel, questioned by my aunts and uncles, questioned by Aurora Arias. Why would I want to take the bus when it was dangerous, unnecessary, uncomfortable, out of the way since I would have to walk a way to the bus stop. And the assumption seemed to be that I could afford a taxi: I did not need to take the bus. But something in me felt uncomfortable with the idea of taking a taxi when there was a bus available. Part of it was my own upbringing and identification as a working class person. Part of it was my recent understanding of the global climate crisis and the need to stop using cars in order to limit the carbon emissions that are hurting the planet's chances for survival. I insisted on at least trying to take the bus and Felizor, the hotel concierge and clerk, offered to walk me to the bus stop at the end of his shift. What a wonderful experience it was. The buses were very small and very crowded but I felt very much at home in them. I felt so relaxed on those buses — both the quiet and the noisy times. During the quiet times it reminded me so much of buses and subway in New York, packed with people and sitting in all that humanity feeling like all our dreams and feelings are somehow mixing and overlapping into each other's in those close quarters, along with our breaths. As a city girl with country origins I felt at home; as a Dominican I felt at home. Sometimes the bus would be playing music or a radio station over the speakers. Sometimes someone would spontaneously start talking, and it would be like reading *Levente no. yola york dominican york*. The way conversations would just spontaneously start in the book and characters spontaneously be introduced. The radio on the buses would often play Christian talk shows. They would discuss practical and emotional everyday problems that people might have in their lives and offer suggested solutions based on Christian practices (the ones I remember included patience and love as a basis for dealing with family problems). On one of the bus ride at one point, an older man sitting next to me seemed to have been listening to a story on the radio and offered his own story of a family with a similar problem to the one being discussed, but his had a different twist. He told of a man he knew whose wife cheated on him and who forgave her and then he cheated on her again. My bus neighbor said it was the man's own fault for forgiving

her. Other people responded to him with similar stories or thoughts on his story. No one treated him as if he was crazy in any way, the way they might if that had happened in New York. This was the kind of conversation I was used to listening to at home or in the home of one of my relatives or even in the factoría my parents worked in, but in New York or other parts of the US, I had not experienced such ease in conversation riding public transportation. I was struck by how natural it was for this man to express his thoughts out loud on the bus to everyone there. No introduction was necessary. He just said what was on his mind. And the other passengers engaged with him and did not act as if this was strange, out of place, or out of “turn.”

The buses themselves are very different from the buses I grew up with in New York. They may be different from what you know or they may be very familiar. A few pictures are in order. I didn't take these — I looked online for photos of buses similar to the ones I took for getting to the book fair. The buses were mostly beige in color and of this size, although some were much more beat up. Most were packed with people as in these pictures:



Figure 98 Dominican guagua (Cohen-Rose and Rose 2006)

The Santo Domingo buses experiences has also come up as a metaphor or analogy to this dissertation itself and the approach that I am taking in methodology and scope. Well informed people, including professors, including perhaps one (or even two) member(s) of my dissertation

committee have asked why have I taken on so much — so many writers, so many disparate themes at once — and why have I engaged in such a complicated methodology, specifically attempting Participatory Action Research in a dissertation when it could be much simpler to focus on one or at most two of the authors and one or at most two of the themes and combine a close reading with some cultural-historical-sociological background, topped off with an interview of that one writer? These questions give me a similar feeling to the one I get when asked why do I want to take buses in Santo Domingo when I could just get a taxi or at least a *carro público*?¹⁵⁸ My gut told me to try the bus — even if it meant walking a little and needing to be more “careful.” And I was so glad I did. The walk to the bus and back from the bus turned out to be really wonderful — uncovering other parts of the city, other treasures, such as the Chinatown the very small cafeteria (an eating place) and bakery where I bought really inexpensive food and pastries for a fraction of what it cost in the tourist areas, and the shopping strip that reminded me of 5th Avenue in Sunset Park Brooklyn — that reminded me of home and where I felt really at home. I would have missed out on so much had I not taken those buses.

To carry the analogy further, as much as I may find using Participatory Action Research in a humanities department also puts me in self-conscious position — someone who is a little out of place. I feel I stand out in a sea of social scientist like I did on the Santo Domingo buses. I hope I can also blend in like I did with my fellow bus travellers in the Dominican Republic.

¹⁵⁸ A *carro público* is a type of shared taxi.

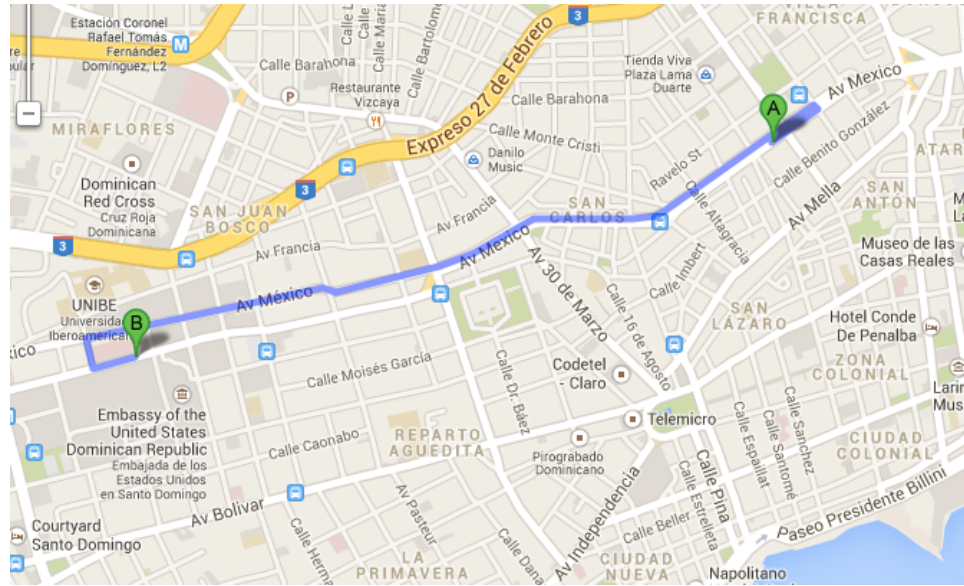


Figure 99 I think this was the bus ride route

Clan Travel or Travelling Alone? Travel Importancies, and Travel Dangers

The postscript chapter in *Bird of Paradise* tells of Raquel Cepeda’s experience with a group of Latina school girls from different places in Latin America —such as Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Honduras. By focusing on teenage girls, it points towards the future and it points towards a communal understanding and sharing. Here Cepeda models for us a way to make research travel—to Latina girls who could most use it. “It turns out that Latina teens across the country are so weighed down by emotional baggage that some don’t have the energy to articulate the pain,” writes Cepeda. After telling the girls of her “genetic adventure,” the girls let her know that they’d like to have the same adventure and Cepeda facilitates that. This is one way Cepeda enacts knowledge as “a collective thing,” to use the phrase that Kevin O’Brien, an indigenous architect, used in speaking of the role of knowledge for his people (Stewart 115). Knowledge for Cepeda is something not just for herself.

Like Cepeda, I am concerned here not only for myself, but for other Latinas, other women of color. And for all Latinas, for Dominicans in particular, for Kiskeyanas, I want travel as an option, that freedom. I’m using the “a” and not the “x” because I want to highlight the gendered nature of our travelling and the trauma of being travelled to by the colonizers and well

as the tourists. Our travelling today is not the travel of an individual only, it's not the tourist travel that now brings so many to our island. We can't travel carelessly. We must recognize that travel in the way it is practiced by the people of the planet's climate-crisis-causing countries is bringing us further into climate catastrophe (Rosenthal 2010 & 2013; Higham et al.; Monbiot), just as the travel of the European colonizers and their economic systems at the end of the 1400s brought catastrophe into our lives and into our DNA. As Macarena Gómez-Barris points out, the two catastrophes are one and the same: the problem of the Anthropocene, the crisis of future life on this planet, is a direct result of colonial capitalism, "the main catastrophic event that has gobbled up the planet's resources, discursively constructing racialized bodies within geographies of difference, systematically destroying through dispossession, enslavement, and then producing the planet as a corporate bio-territory." (4) I am personally struggling with the implications of air travel right now as I plan for the next few years — will I travel much? I know I am not alone in this place. We are still learning who "we" are, but we are travelling together, as Raquel Cepeda states in *Bird of Paradise*:

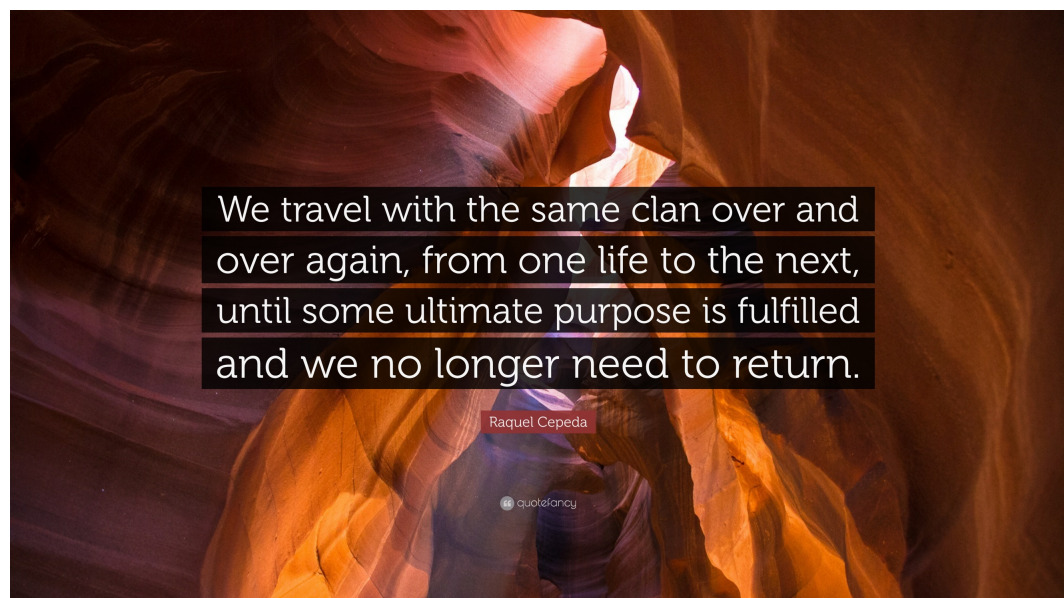


Figure 100 Another travel quote by Raquel Cepeda (*quotefancy*)

Amazingly, as I near the end of this dissertation, a gift has traveled to me, carried by a friend I made along this journey who has inspired me and motivated me to keep going because of some similarities in our situations that make me feel less alone. I met Ellen Correa in 2012 in my role as a librarian, when she brought a group of her students to the library for some library instruction. We learned that we had a lot in common: both raised in the USA of Caribbean Spanish speaking origin, both first generation studies, both older PhD students with previous careers outside of academia, both attempting to write unconventional dissertations. Recently, I ran into Ellen again and the encounter motivated me to read her dissertation that she did finish in 2016, four years after we met. And there was the gift, on page 11, where she writes:

Richardson & St. Pierre (2005) dub as “writing as a method of nomadic inquiry” (p. 967). That is, “writing [as] thinking, writing [as] analysis, writing [as] indeed a seductive and tangled method of discovery” (p. 967). In *Bootstrap Boricuas* I employ different methods to write, not as a solitary endeavor, but to engage in nomadic inquiry together, in dialogue, with my family.

It was a many faceted gift. In particular, the gift given to me by Ellen by her use of the term “nomadic inquiry” helped me get to the end of this piece of work. I looked up the phrase “nomadic inquiry,” because it resonated so much with the travelling approach that I had been using all these years and found it in a 1997 article by Elizabeth A. St. Pierre, “Nomadic Inquiry in the Smooth Spaces of the Field: A Preface.” Just as Ellen helps me feel that I was not travelling alone, so too St. Pierre, even beginning with the motivation for research, that felt so much like mine. St. Pierre writes: “Thus, my research is not motivated by the desire to produce knowledge for knowledge’s sake. I urgently need to hear what these women tell me about thinking and doing; in fact, during our interviews two years ago, I often sat on the edge of my chair waiting for their responses to my questions” (366). Likewise my own nomadic inquiry at times was a personal intervention, something I needed for my own healing from my own traumas. Which does not negate that my healing is part of a communal healing and my trauma part of a communal trauma. In October 2017, I was invited to speak to a class about some of the research in this dissertation. The rapt attention and questions these students had for me that day corroborated

that we are in this together and that my personal journey resonates with other women of color. For me this photograph captures the path of author (Yrene Santos), critic and advocate (myself) and potential future reader (the student sitting in the first row). The person behind the camera must also be acknowledged: theater instructor Priscilla Page, who invited me to her classroom.



Figure 101 Speaking to undergraduates about Yrene Santos

St. Pierre, also accompanies me in her very style of writing, one that resists structures, eludes traditional beginnings and endings: How wonderful to read here words from the epigraph to this chapter now: so it's not just me! How wonderful to find someone willing to write about the inability to do a traditional introduction and conclusion, someone with an openly unstructured method. I am not alone in this travelling approach, this meandering style.

A Dominican clan. Taking María Lugones' advice, I'm going to begin to end by getting a little playful here. Let's pretend that this is a travelogue, and that I will show you photographs of a lifelong ethnography of an exotic Dominican clan. It's my family, but I'm going to show you my travels in a pseudo-scholarly format. First photograph. Seated is the author's maternal grandmother, whose image is shown in two separate photographs in the first chapter of this dissertation. Next to her is the author's niece, daughter of the author's sister), followed by the son of one of the author's 73 first cousins, sitting on the lap of the author's maternal grandfather. Standing to the far left is the author's paternal grandmother, with one of the author's cousins next to her and behind that cousin, a first cousin of the author's mother, next to the author's cousin is the author's uncle, then his sister (the author's mother). Finally, seated at the far right is another cousin of the author's mother. Given that the author does have 73 first cousins, these are only a fraction of her clan. They are also my genetic travelling companions—oops, I meant the author's. The third person writing is tedious. Game over.



Figure 102 Part of a Dominican clan, sometime in the 1990s

Seed of a matriarch, 1997. The previous photograph showed four different Dominican matriarchs among the various ancestors. Many new matriarchs have arisen since then. I myself am blossoming into one as I've finished this project, as my children become grown and now continue to look up to and to me while they navigate life, even as they move freely about the world. A woman really becomes a matriarch when her children are adults. The seeds of matriarchy of course come in new motherhood. In this photograph below I am young, 20 years younger than today. But I am very tired, much more tired than I am at this moment that I write this. In the years that I was writing this dissertation, I was also doing the work of motherhood and growing the seed of matriarchy. Nelly Rosario's book *Song of the Water Saints*, which I discuss in Chapter 4, includes the story of the coming of age of an ancestor, who dies younger than I am in this photograph. Her book helps us understand a different side of women's development, specifically how women develop to influence future generations of family members, future genetic travelers. Women ancestors from long ago passed on specific traits that I carry with me in my DNA, very likely a Taíno woman, another a woman from a tribe in Mali, another a Wolof woman. The research I did for this dissertation has shown me that most likely it's the women ancestors who are native to the Americas and to Africa, while most likely the male ancestors are from Europe (Spinney 4; Guitar "Documenting the Myth"; Forte 54; Zimmer "Tales of African-American History Found in DNA"). That's a really powerful thought for us to sit with. In this way, for Dominicans and Latinxs in general, genetic history becomes a feminist issue as well as an issue in the history of racialization. Not to discount our men ancestors, but we must continue this journey towards our women ancestors even as the traveling moves us into the future via our children. My own children also carry the map of the world I shared with you earlier, with some probable additions from their father's side.



Figure 103 Dominican mother (me) and her three children, Connecticut 1997

In this dissertation I touched upon questions of identity, of Dominican identity, of Latinx identity. At the same time, I tried to break away from the confines of that discussion, to see Dominican women authors in particular as having authority on much more than on their Dominican identities or geographies or identities as women. And I brought my own identity into this exploration, and the aspects of my identity and history that have influenced my trajectory and approach to what you're reading here. I was a first generation college student. By definition my children could never be that. I tell my stories and pass them down to the next generation but they will need to tell other stories as well, their own stories. The identity of first generation college student is helpful to me and many others like me, something we didn't have back in the day, but our descendants will have to take it further. And just as we needed this identity to encapsulate an experience that was silent in the academy, silent in higher education back in the 1980s, so will my children and so many others like them, need to define themselves as non-first generation Latinxs.



Figure 104 Figure 81 Latinas in higher ed, first and second generation Latinxs (My daughter Lucía and I, when she graduated from college), 2017

Dominican landscape. Natives in a native land, in love with each other, in love with the land.

Dominican women writers consistently question what constitutes a Dominican landscape. In the United States they confront different layers of what constitutes Blackness as an identity, as well as what constitutes Indigeneity. Their writings and their actions travel back to the Dominican Republic in the fight against the submergence of these histories in official Dominican narratives of who we are. In Chapter 3 of this dissertation, we witnessed how Marianela Medrano got the inspiration for her dissertation and eventual book of poetry *Dioas de la Yuca* as she paddled the Naugatuck River—an Algonquian word (Bright 318)—in Connecticut—another Algonquian word (Bright 119)—on a canoe, a canoa—a Taíno word (Zamora 161).



Figure 105 Two Dominican women with indigenous ancestry at the Connecticut River (My daughter Sabina and I), 2015

Language. Words. Questions. Fractured answers. In his influential book *Decolonising the Mind*, African writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, has for decades helped many throughout the world acknowledge and question the power of language and words in political liberation struggles.

Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonised, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world... The domination of a people’s language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised. (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 16)

What language to speak? What words to use? How to write all this and for whom? How to label ourselves? What is the name for us or for the land we walk on? We are afro Dominicans. We are indo Dominicans. We are afro indigenous. And we are also of European ancestry. What is the word for that we some of us are? Afroeuroindigenous? Lynne Guitart uses the term Indo-Afro-European (Guitart, “Criollos” 1) but it hasn’t really caught on. Dominicans, like Latinxs more broadly, have an evolving understanding of our identity, based on our asking: How did we get here? And sometimes more desperately: What the hell happened to us? “You don’t look

Dominican.” What does a Dominican look like? What does an indigenous person look like? And how long will Dominican identify last? Even the name Dominican feels not right once we gain knowledge of our past. Thus, a young writer Ynanna Djehuty, recounts how it came to be that she moved from an identification as Dominican, to Afro-Latina to Quisqueyana, drawing inspiration from Boricuas (a popular indigenous-based way to refer to Puerto Ricans) and also Haitians (who from the very start of their independence from colonial France honored the indigenous roots of their land by using the indigenous name Ayiti which came to be spelled and known by the world as Haiti). Djehuty writes: “Calling myself Quisqueyana invokes the history before the colonization. I feel more authentic to my roots using this word instead (“Quisqueyana: Identifying with my Indigenous Roots”). For her and many others the names Dominican Republic and Dominican prioritize the European colonizer’s discredited project of plunder and oppression. Yet the use of indigenous names is also fraught with complications, contradictions and dangers, one of which is as a way to be and act *against* our African ancestry, against our Haitian heritage or solidarity with Haitians, against blackness. Some historians have even argued that “the rise of Anti-Haitianism and the development of an indigenous Dominican identity” went hand in hand and point out that in “creating independent countries, both officials in Haiti and Dominican Republic used indigenous names as a method of claiming ownership over the land, legitimacy over their struggle, and sovereignty as a nation” (Lara “Reclaiming Ayiti-Quisqueya”). Nevertheless, Dominican diaspora activists are asking and claiming for a view of our past that includes both these heritages (among others) and an imagining and move to a future that not only honors the intertwined colonized and enslaved heritages, but rights the wrongs of past and present, acknowledging the oppressive legacies of both Spanish and French colonialism and United States imperialism, and also the exploitation at the hands of other world powers, while imagining that another world is indeed possible. Génesis Lara thus states: “Despite ... the fact that Dominican officials coined the use of Quisqueya after obtaining independence as a way of

differentiating from their neighbors, I use this joint [name] as a way of asking, what if Ayiti-Quisqueya existed?” (“Reclaiming Ayiti-Quisqueya”)

Inspired by Ynanna Djehuty, inspired by Josefina Báez, I added the words “Kiskeyanas valientes” to the title of this dissertation in 2017. Kiskeyana an alternate spelling of Quisqueyana, Kiskeyanas instead of Quisqueyanos instead of Kiskeyanos, from the opening verses of the national anthem of the country, a line most Dominicans – most Kiskeyanxs – are familiar with: “Quisqueyanos valientes alcemos / nuestro canto con viva emoción...”¹⁵⁹ Valientes translates to: brave. “Kiskeyanas valientes” translates as “brave kiskeyanas.” The stories these Dominican women writers told, both on the page and off the page—most not reported even in this dissertation—prove that yes, they were brave. They were daring; Erika Martínez asserts in the title of her book, *Daring to Write: Contemporary Narratives by Dominican Women*, that up to this very moment in history, it is a brave feat for a Dominican (aka Kiskeyan) women to even write. Kiskeyana, as opposed to kiskeyano, focuses on women, on our gender experience. Lastly, I am not alone in this move to spell Kiskeya in this way, as a decolonial and anti-racist move:



Figure 106 Protesters against denationalization of Dominicans of Haitian descent use indigenous names of our lands. Photo by: Amanda Alcántara. (Lara “Reclaiming Ayiti-Quisqueya”)

Speaking of language, at various times in this dissertation, I had to confront choices between academic language and language that seemed more accessible. Oftentimes I felt that I

¹⁵⁹ “Brave Quisqueyans raise / our song with lively emotin...”

successfully accomplished neither. Also, at various points in this dissertation, but especially in Chapter 4, I drew from the concept of *egun* in Santería to explore how spirits, people and ideas move about (travel) and persist and remain simultaneously through space and time. By focusing on this word and concept, I was hoping to travel away from the persistent colonizing effects of academic English and also get a richer understanding of the literary works and experiences of three Dominican women specifically and of Afro-diasporic people more generally, and ultimately of all of us. Luckily I was not alone in the journey, finding for example the scholarship of Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley and her argument for and use of what she terms “Vodou epistemologies,” a way of using the concepts of Vodou to understand culture rather than the language of Western academic theorists.

Moving forward, we can take this way of thinking and writing in many different directions. It's an approach that resonates in indigenous scholarship as well. We can visit other people's ways of understanding the world through their own concepts and words and apply them to our own. In her book that speaks of the travels of colonialism and of indigenous knowledge, Jodi Byrd of the Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma, introduces an interesting word I'd like to leave us with, a word for us to travel with as we move forward: *haksuba*. Byrd uses this word, as she encourages us to “read the cacophonies of colonialism as they are rather than to attempt to hierarchize them into coeval or causal order” (xxvii). I'm introducing this word now, because it comes in a context of Byrd's fluent academic English language, while she advocates for a different way of expressing and even seeing and experiencing things, as evidenced in her discussion of “indigenous phenomenologies,” a word not used much *outside* of academia. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy* defines phenomenology as “the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view.” Most often when I see this word in academic text no one bothers to define it because we're all supposed to know. Byrd does define *haksuba* here:

Southeastern indigenous phenomenologies understand the Middle World (the reality we all inhabit) as a bridge between Upper and Lower Worlds of creation. When the boundaries between worlds break down and the distinctive characteristics of each world begin to collapse upon and bleed into the others, possibilities for rejuvenation and destruction emerge to transform this world radically. The goal is to find balance. To understand the dualistic pairings of this dynamic system is to understand, as Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice has argued, “its necessary complementarity; it is a dynamic and relational perspective, not an assumption of unitary supremacy.”²⁶ Choctaw novelist and scholar LeAnne Howe demonstrates in her writing the ways a phenomenology that draws upon traditional Southeastern cosmologies of balance between worlds might transform written narratives and theorizations to represent the passage of time and the interactions of relationships and kinship differently. In her short story, “A Chaos of Angels,” Howe explains that “when the Upper and Lower Worlds collide in the Between World,” there are repercussions in this world. The resultant chaos, or what she translates into Choctaw as “haksuba,” is both a generative, creative force as well as a potentially destructive one. Her story focuses on the collision between the Choctaw, Chickasaw, French, and British worldings that occur in the creation of New Orleans. “Haksuba or chaos,” she tells us, “occurs when Indians and non-Indians bang their heads together in search of cross-cultural understanding. (xxvii)

Haksuba. Cacophony. Chaos. It seems very relevant to this project! I suspect some of you reading this might have experienced a sense of haksuba as different worlds collided in this writing.



Figure 107 Contemporary Afroeuroindigenous Dominican Mexican man and his Afroeuroindigenous Dominican mother (My son Lucas and me, 2017)

Finished House

Those unfinished houses haunt—the ones I evoked and identified with in Chapter 1. I can't shake this off—it's more aesthetically and emotionally pleasing to see a simple house that is finished and painted, one like this that fits in its environment, not cement grey, but brightly painted, against the green and blue of its Caribbean country landscape:



Figure 108 A simple finished beautiful Dominican house

This house belongs to one of my mom's cousins in El Cibao, one of the cousins who never left. My mom's cousin and I may look at this house with very different eyes and feelings based on our travels or lack of travels, yet there's an inescapable nexus of connected trajectories, the intertwined histories that do not forget but instead include those of us who never get to travel and those of us who are forced to travel and never get to stay, and those of us who go back and forth in varied ways. By telling our intersecting stories and verses, Dominican women writers in the United States, like Ana Maurine Lara, Annecy Báez, Marianela Medrano, Josefina Báez, Yrene Santos, Aurora Arias, Nelly Rosario and Raquel Cepeda serve in this way as connectors of dispersed peoples.

In Chapter 2 of this dissertation, I shared some words that Josefina Báez offered to me in a phone interview: “Gloria Anzaldúa es una maestra importante para mí.¹⁶⁰ I’ve had to tell people, do not just Foucault or Derrida my work. Go to la Gloria for theory. She’s much closer to me.” Josefina had seen how these two French men and their theories were used over and over to analyze the works and lives of Latinx people. Gloria Anzaldúa’s expression of her ideas and theories relied heavily on metaphor. In many ways this dissertation also relied heavily on metaphor and would not have been possible without Anzaldúa. She also relied on the intermixing of her personal story with collective stories and of an academic style with a poetic style, of analysis with poetry and narrative—many times within the same piece. Since I’ve introduced metaphors here of houses and construction and have also spoken of personal and communal interests, I want to take you to a video talk I came across in my online travels, by none other than María Lugones (who I relied on for my focus on traveling and playfulness), about Gloria Anzaldúa, that revisits the relationship between the personal “I” stories and the communal “we” stories and that uses a metaphor related to the metaphor of the house. In her talk, “Mestizaje and the Communal,” a keynote speech at a conference titled *Feminist Architectures of Gloria Anzaldúa*, in 2015, María Lugones focuses on the “relation between the solitary shamanistic creator”—Anzaldúa, and the “communal being, creatively moving the shaman’s creation,”— Anzaldúa’s community as she expresses it and also us, who are moved by her work, who create own own movement as a result of her work. I put a link below to the video so you have a chance to experience here María Lugones’ spirit outside of her written words that I’ve shared with you. This is also part of the dissertation journey. I was struck by many things. I was struck by María Lugones’ gentle and loving style and by her hyper academic and demure dress and body language, even as she speaks openly about how she doesn’t fit in mainstream academia, making reference to how “it’s not always that I’m invited to these spaces.” Lugones speaks about the spiritual work that Anzaldúa

¹⁶⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa is an important teacher for me.

accomplished in her academic writing, calling Anzaldúa a shaman, who created a cosmology, who constructed a space and a path for the descendants of indigenous women in the Americas, whether “purely” native, or some kind of mestiza or African and European and Amerindian blending, which ultimately is what almost all Dominican women are.



**Feminist Architectures of Gloria Anzaldúa Keynote
Speaker 4/11/15**

Figure 109 Link to María Lugones’ speech “Mestizaje and the Communal”

This dissertation was a constructed space, a house that holds ideas and truths, within a chaotic architecture. It has also been a humble Dominican bus ride — which might have the latest technologies here and there, but worn upholstery. It is cramped and may make you uncomfortable if you’re not used to it. And at times it may seem even corny. But I hope that from here you will have had a view you might not have otherwise. This dissertation is also a fogón in the Dominican countryside. And it’s a living room in Brooklyn in the 1970s. It’s been both a house and a journey, and as Marianela suggests: una casa errante.

Spit level travel

I spit 500 years into a plastic container
And not knowing it I spit into it half the world
A confluence of cultures
A shattering of nations
Into a mosaic of wholeness: me
Me + all the others
Evading equations
Fracturing borders
Belying lies

This is not a poem but a history
This is not a history but a poem
This poem is a science
This science is a history
This poem doesn't have all the words it needs
This poem has the wrong language
This poem has no words

The Spanish poet Antonio Machado's famous lines, "Caminante no hay camino. Se hace camino al andar," come to mind but don't exactly apply to me. There was no path, yet I wandered. But as I traveled I did not make a path — I made a way, I followed a way (the way of Anzaldúa, of Lugones, of the writers of *This Bridge Called My Back*). I followed and made a way to wander but not a path to walk on: Caminé, pero no hice camino. I didn't walk alone. I walked with some, like my Grandmother Mamá Antonia, never left the island that Christopher Columbus invaded and infested, who never travelled and yet made a path for me and many others. One day I wrote a poem about this — in Spanish. Inspired and taking permission from Josefina Báez's example from Chapter 2, I won't translate this one (I already have in a way). In summary:

Caminé pero no hice camino

He andado por donde había
Y por donde no había camino
Por lugares dentro y fuera
del mapa del destino

Camino pero mis pasos se borran
Camino para decir que el bosque es infinito
Camino para dejar de caminar —
Y tirarme al río

Y así sigo:

Al andar no hago camino:
Hago memorias
Hago historias
Talvez una canción
(o disertación)
Talvez un libro

PostScript:

Mamá Antonia
No viajó:
Y hasta en los lugares donde no anduvo,
Hizo camino.



Figure 110 Mamá Antonia speaking, one who never left, I can hear her voice now

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