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# DOMINICAN DIASPORA LITERATURE: MARKETING AND PEDAGOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

## LITERATURA DE LA DIÁSPORA DOMINICANA: CONSIDERACIONES PEDAGÓGICAS Y DE RECEPCIÓN

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines questions around the visibility and availability of Dominican diaspora literature in the United States and underscores the literary production of several women authors who have received little critical attention but whose contributions to the field deserve closer scrutiny and consideration. Through an analysis of what comprises today's Dominican diaspora literary canon, this essay addresses some of the following questions: What role does language play in the marketability and academic interest generated by writers

of Dominican descent living and writing in the US? How is Dominican diaspora literature being defined and by whom?

### RESUMEN

Este ensayo explora la complejidad y la visibilidad de la producción literaria de la diáspora dominicana en Estados Unidos. A través de un análisis del "canon" de la literatura de la diáspora dominicana, se intenta responder a las siguientes preguntas: ¿quiénes componen y definen los parámetros de la literatura dominicana en Estados Unidos? ¿hasta qué punto influye el idioma en el que se publica un texto, en su crítica y diseminación? Por último, se presenta el trabajo de escritoras dominicanas que se han mantenido al margen pero cuya

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producción literaria intenta expandir la definición de la identidad dominicana en la diáspora.

## KEYWORDS

Dominican-American literature, Dominican women writers in the US, Marianela Medrano, Ana-Maurine Lara.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Literatura de la diáspora dominicana, escritoras dominicanas en Estados Unidos, Marianela Medrano, Ana-Maurine Lara.

## INTRODUCTION

The Dominican population in the United States had surpassed 2 million people by 2017 according to data from the Pew Research Center (Noe-Bustamante). The large number of Dominicans living across the states, mostly concentrated in the East Coast and urban centers like New York City, has not translated into the type of visibility one would expect. Within the literary field, for instance, only a handful of writers of Dominican origin have achieved mainstream success. With a few notable exceptions, Dominican literature in the United States remains an underrepresented subfield of Latino/a/x literary studies.

Within the broader context of Dominican immigration, the purpose of this paper is to examine questions around the visibility and availability of Dominican diaspora literature and to highlight the literary production of several authors who have received little critical attention but whose contributions to the field deserve closer scrutiny and consideration. By examining both the emerging canon and writers who seem to be positioned at its margin, this paper addresses more specifically the following questions: What role does language play in the marketability and academic interest generated by writers of Dominican descent living and writing in the US? How is Dominican diaspora literature being defined and by whom? Last, I offer some

reflections on the place of contemporary Dominican literature in the US within the field of Latino/a/x studies.

## DOMINICAN AMERICAN AUTHORS IN TODAY'S LITERARY LANDSCAPE

Authors Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz are the two most recognized Dominican literary voices within the US literary establishment. Both have enjoyed enormous success, generated an impressive body of literature, and inspired a wealth of critical scholarly work. Alvarez catapulted into the literary scene in 1991 with the publication of her first novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*. For some Dominicans who, like Julia Alvarez, came of age in the United States, this book was the first time that they had an opportunity to see some of their own experiences represented within the pages of a novel. Lauren LeBlanc writes that through the publication of this book,

Alvarez became a major figure in 20th century American literature. Centered around four Dominican sisters, finding their way as immigrants in the United States, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* was a landmark book, solidly placing her among the ranks of fellow writers such as Jamaica Kincaid, Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, women who brought the immigrant experience to the center of contemporary literature (LeBlanc).

Indeed, *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* is pioneering in its depiction of the Dominican immigrant experience from the perspective of culturally hybrid young women characters and helped fill a significant gap in Latino/a/x literature at the time of its publication. Notably, the novel recounts the specific experiences of characters who had to flee the Dominican Republic for political reasons. Although Chicano/a/x and US-Puerto Rican literatures had already long-established literary traditions in the United States by the time Alvarez came to the scene, Dominican

American voices were few and far between prior to her literary interventions. Alvarez's first novel became part of "ethnic literatures" syllabi in universities across the country and today many of her books are found on the shelves of school and public libraries. Díaz's literary debut came a few years later in 1996, when he published his renowned collection of short stories, *Drown*. The collection is a raw, at times humorous, and often heartbreaking depiction of immigrant life in a poverty-stricken area of New Jersey. At the time of its publication, the book received praise from top critics, and several of Díaz's stories were quickly anthologized in important collections. With the publication of his first novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, for which Díaz received the coveted Pulitzer Prize in 2008, the author further cemented his standing in contemporary American letters.

Despite their shared *dominicanidad ausente*, each writer has fostered different readerships. Alvarez's stories, which often draw from her individual experiences as a child of self-exiles from the Trujillo dictatorship (1930-1961), tend to focus on the role of women within Dominican and Dominican diaspora histories. Her condemnation of Trujillo's patriarchal authority in her highly acclaimed novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) and her centering of immigrant women's experiences in essays, poetry, and other writings have secured her a major place within Latin American and US feminist literary and activist circles. Her coming-of-age stories and multiple books for children and young adults which include her award-winning novel, *Before Were Free* (2002) and the beloved *How Tia Lola* (2001-) series, among many others, demonstrate her versatility as a writer and have considerably expanded her audience. In more recent years, Alvarez has been engaged in activism/education work around the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic with the goal of mourning and remembering the loss of life brought by

the 1937 massacre and its devastating effects on the countries on either side of the border. Díaz's writing, while also grounded in the history of the Dominican Republic and Trujillo's role in shaping notions of Dominican identity, has focused on working-class characters, particularly male subjects. As scholar Lucía Suárez writes in her insightful book, *The Tears of Hispaniola*, Díaz's "literary world is one where poverty adds to an already established disenfranchising culture of machismo, homophobia, racism, and violence" (102). By centering his narrative on a Dominican migratory experience different from the experiences of political exiles for which Alvarez became well-known, Díaz added a much needed and important perspective. Together, Alvarez and Díaz, with their focus on different aspects of the US Dominican experience, remain the most familiar names associated with Dominican literary production in the United States and beyond.

Other important authors, including Angie Cruz, Nelly Rosario, Raquel Cepeda, and Elizabeth Acevedo, to name a few, have gained critical success while helping to further carve a niche for Dominican voices and experiences within Latino/a/x literary studies. Their literary interventions particularly around questions of gender, sexuality, and racial politics have done much to disrupt more traditional renditions of Dominican identity within the US and the Dominican Republic. Their works have undoubtedly contributed to the development of the Dominican diaspora literary canon and have increased the Dominican presence in the US literary scene. To better gauge the extent of the Dominican literary production in the US it is necessary at this juncture not only to continue our engagement with these writers' work but also to enter them in dialogue with the work of authors whose work has not become as visible but whose literary interventions will help us to more comprehensively represent the wide range

of experiences that make up the tapestry of the Dominican diaspora.

### DOMINICAN DIASPORA LITERATURE: OLD AND NEW CHALLENGES

Prominent Dominican studies scholar Silvio Torres-Saillant has written extensively on Dominican American literature and has often lamented the marginal status of Dominican writing in the US. Moreover, Torres-Saillant reminds us of the challenges associated with defining and categorizing the US Dominican community. As he writes,

The Dominican population in the United States consists of people with various different lengths of stay, social incorporation, and cultural integration in American society. What US scholars and the media term “The Dominican Community” includes people born in the United States, often going back several generations, as well as persons who only recently arrived as immigrants. (*The Routledge Companion to Latino Literature* 423)

Consequently, the literature that emerges from this community articulates a variety of experiences (cultural, historical, and linguistic) and migration patterns that disallow the articulation of a unified corpus.

Indeed, while predominantly associated with its most notable representatives (Alvarez and Díaz) the literary production of Dominicans in the US is quite diverse, though only certain stories have found a viable market. In the 1998 seminal book, *The Dominican Americans*, authors Silvio Torres-Saillant and Ramona Hernández cite the language of publication and poor distribution as two of the main obstacles to the wide dissemination of Dominican texts in the US. As they argue,

Dominican literature in the United States continues to be a marginal cultural expression. The majority of Dominican authors write predominantly in Spanish for the virtually exclusive consumption of small literary circles. These literary artists have very few publication opportunities. They have hardly any chance of becoming included in mainstream literary markets or at least attaining a level of prestige outside their immigrant enclaves. (Torres-Saillant and Hernández 120)

There have been significant developments and changes in the field of Dominican Studies since the 1998 publication of *The Dominican Americans*. For instance, the number of authors writing and publishing in English has significantly increased. Also, as already mentioned, more writers are finding a home in large publication venues (namely those who publish directly in English). Lastly, some of these authors have collected important literary awards including the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature (Acevedo), PEN Open Book Award (Rosario), and the ALA/YALSAAlex Award (Cruz), to name just a few. The success of a handful of writers, however, does not accurately reflect the standing of Dominican literature in today’s literary market and some of Torres-Saillant’s and Hernández’s assertions regarding the place and challenges faced by Dominican literary production remain true today. Publishing in Spanish and/or in small distribution presses, for instance, continue to pose significant hurdles to the wide dissemination of works by both veteran and emerging authors.

Within the context of Latino/a/x Studies, the question of language is most often raised in relation to the study of diaspora versus national literature. Torres-Saillant reminds us,

Language also becomes a factor in how one classifies the literary texts of a

particular ethnic group. Many in literary circles of the Dominican Republic would frown upon an effort to place the Anglophone writings of Angie Cruz or Nelly Rosario within the country's national literary history, just as many in the United States would deny the Spanish-language texts of New York-based Dominican poets Juan Rivero or Tomás Rivera Martínez a place of belonging within American literature. (*The Routledge Companion of Latino Literature*)

National identity and belonging are often intertwined with specific linguistic expectations. As Torres-Saillant and others have highlighted, English-dominant writers of Dominican descent are often placed outside the national literary tradition of the Dominican Republic and must struggle for inclusion and recognition. Julia Alvarez's responses to those who have challenged her identity based on language are widely cited. Díaz too has been criticized and accused of not being representative of *real* Dominicans. Other Latinx authors have wrestled with similar issues of authenticity and belonging based on language or birthplace. The English/Spanish, diaspora/home country divides have been amply debated within the field of Latino/a/x studies, and I suspect, will continue to be a topic of study for some years to come, as language fluidity remains an important characteristic of Latino/a/x communities across the states. What has been studied far less, however, is the linguistic difference among writers belonging to the same national group within the US.

For instance, the Spanish/English binary significantly impacts the literary production and criticism surrounding the "Dominican community" as defined by Torres-Saillant. While some writers who write predominantly in English find themselves ostracized from literary circles in the Dominican Republic, it is

also true, as Torres-Saillant points out, that US-based writers who write in Spanish do not have a place in the American literary landscape. They are also excluded from mainstream academic circles and university classrooms in the US. One reason for this exclusion might be linguistic inaccessibility rather than content. That is, publishing directly in Spanish limits the potential market/readership of a literary text. Although Spanish is spoken by millions of people across the US and beyond, publishing in English rather than Spanish makes texts accessible to a wider readership and therefore a larger pool of literary critics, students, and general readers. The scholarship surrounding Dominican diaspora writing reflects the limited exposure of Spanish-dominant writers within academic discourse. It is not coincidental that Díaz's colloquial language which aims to mirror language use among Latino/a/x youth in predominantly urban settings and Alvarez's English-dominant writing lead the curriculum and scholarship around Dominican literature of the diaspora. Both writers, just by virtue of their own educational training and experiences, make *dominicanidad* accessible to English monolingual readers.

This is not the case for Dominican authors residing in the United States who publish primarily in Spanish—including Marianela Medrano, Aurora Arias, Yrene Santos, to name just a few—who are well known in Dominican literary circles in the United States, the Caribbean, and throughout Latin America, but are less visible within the US mainstream literary market. Connecticut-based poet Marianela Medrano, whose literary oeuvre includes numerous books published in Spanish, speaks to this point in an interview. As she says:

I haven't been picked up by a big press. . . . There is a lack of support for writers who write in Spanish in this country. There are some slight positive changes. For the last



few years I have attended a couple of conferences in different parts of the country where presentations were offered in Spanish. . . . I can see that things are turning and that more people are turning their attention to the writing that is written in Spanish, but there is a long way to go. . . . Part of what happens is that what we are writing doesn't necessarily speak to the sensitivities of the people who are approaching this work and that when they read what we are writing, it doesn't mean as much as it would mean to someone in Puerto Rico or Dominican Republic. There's something lost in translation, I think cultural meanings are lost in translation. . . . I'm not writing about what has become marketable. Writing about the ghettos sells, sensationalizing the immigrant experience sells. And that's not what I do. (Latorre, "Writing Dominicanidad" 1317-1318)

Despite not having been "picked up by a big press" in the US, Medrano is by no means an unknown author. Her books of poetry have been well received by a wide readership in Latin America, Spain, the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, as well as Spanish-speaking communities within the US. Some of her poems appear in important edited collections and she is often invited to participate in international poetry festivals and other literary events. Medrano's frustration is perhaps rooted in what might be both a problem of cultural translatability and a sort of monopoly of content that privileges a *certain type* of immigrant experience. Medrano's comments bring up important questions about the field: What is the Dominican immigrant experience that "sells"? Are some experiences deemed more valid or authentic than others? Who or what determines how Dominican texts should be approached? Are cultural meanings and

contexts translatable or lost? What does it mean to "sensationalize" the immigrant experience?

Key to Medrano's writing is a preoccupation for expanding readers' understanding of the ways in which the Dominican past informs the present. In various writings, particularly her poetry collection, *Diosas de la yuca* (2011), Medrano engages in a poetic reconstruction of Taíno history and the encounter between the original inhabitants of the Caribbean and the European colonizers, which centers Dominicans' indigenous heritage. The study of Taíno history is not necessarily new in Dominican letters, what is particularly innovative is the ways in which Medrano's writing often connects Taíno history in the Dominican Republic to the African presence on the Island. Unlike more traditional renditions of the Dominican past, which have traditionally disavowed Dominicans' African heritage, Medrano also explores in some of her writings how the Taíno and African heritages of the Dominican people intersect in an attempt to offer a more nuanced understanding of *dominicanidad*.

Although she brings a unique voice and perspective to the Dominican diasporic experience, there are also important thematic links between Medrano's work and that of more popular US-based Dominican writers. Marisel Moreno is one of a few scholars who have seriously considered the significance of placing writers like Medrano within the context of Dominican diaspora literature, despite the poet's tendency to write and publish in Spanish. In "Burlando la raza: La poesía de escritoras dominicanas en la diáspora," Moreno accurately situates Medrano among writers who openly challenge "traditional definitions of Dominicanity as incompatible with blackness" (169). Moreno convincingly articulates Medrano's critiques of internalized racism within the Dominican Republic. Thus, rather than an issue of content, I would argue that Medrano's limited visibility in certain literary circles may be attributable, in part, to

her propensity to publish in Spanish. Though some of her works have been successfully translated into English and she has recently published a bilingual edition of her poems, she is most recognized within Spanish-speaking/writing circles. Medrano also favors the genre of poetry, which tends to be less marketable than prose.

In addition to questions of visibility, the language of publication has important pedagogical implications in the US academy. For instance, Dominican texts written by US-based authors in Spanish are inaccessible to non-Spanishspeakers/students in English classrooms, where Latino/a/x texts are traditionally taught. Likewise, instructors in Spanish courses may be hesitant to assign texts originally published in English to students in the Spanish-language classroom or must refrain from assigning them altogether if there are departmental or institutional restrictions on using materials in languages other than Spanish. Teaching in translation seems a plausible answer to the predicaments of where to effectively include Dominican diaspora texts, regardless of the language of publication. However, the quality of the translations varies from text to text, making the choice of using texts in translation for many instructors less appealing.

Discussing the translation from English to Spanish of her debut novel, *Soledad* (2001), author Angie Cruz commented:

It is translated into Spanish from Spain, so it is really funny to read some of the translations of the English slang. . . . I specifically remember telling my foreign rights agent that I wished they found someone Dominican or Caribbean to translate so that person could catch some of the cultural nuances, but I am just so happy it got

translated into Spanish period, and I really had very little say in the process” (Latorre, “Shifting Borders” 482).

Like Medrano, Cruz acknowledges that something may be lost in translation. For Cruz, however, the loss deals with aspects of the Dominican American hyphenated identity and of the linguistic practices of many diasporic subjects who traverse the world between English and Spanish. The linguistic tension and creativity that many diasporic writers engage in, which is an important aspect of their work, is lost in some of the more traditional translation approaches. The possibility of making her text accessible to Spanish-speaking readers, however, undermines the writer’s desire for more linguistic accuracy/equivalency. Cruz’s comments also underscore the possible limitations of publishing in large presses, where writers must weigh creative decisions against marketing considerations.

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Self-identified Afro-Dominicana author, Ana-Maurine Lara, has chosen small, mission-driven presses to publish her creative works, which include novels, poetry, and other creative projects. As such, her literary contributions, which expand the themes and topics that have been broached in Dominican and Dominican American Studies, have remained largely outside the mainstream. Her first novel, *Erzulie’s Skirt*, was published by Redbone Press in 2006. RedBone is an independent publication venue with a very specific mission. As stated in its website, the press “publishes work celebrating the cultures of black lesbians and gay men, and work that further promotes understanding between black gays and lesbians and the black mainstream” (<https://www.redbonepress.com/pages/frontpage>). Given the novel’s critical engagement with women of the African diaspora, lesbian love and desire, and the relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, it aligns beautifully

with the mission of the press. Like Medrano's, Lara's work does not engage directly with the Dominican experience in the United States. Rather, it narrates a transnational journey that takes her characters from the complicated border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico and back to the Dominican Republic. Her work is transnational in scope and raises timely questions about women and sexuality, spirituality, history, and motherhood. Lara's debut novel successfully links the history of women in the Caribbean, Africa, and the United States (via Puerto Rico).

Despite her valuable contributions to the field, Lara's creative work has yet to receive the recognition it deserves. This may be due in part to the fact that her poetry and novels are published in small distribution venues, but I would also argue that her treatment of sexuality and lesbian desire, which remain marginalized topics within Dominican and Dominican diaspora communities, impacts the reception and dissemination of her work. In some of her scholarly work, Lara expands on the questions she addresses in her fiction related to the African diaspora and LGBTQ communities within the Dominican Republic and the Dominican diaspora. Lara's commitment to expanding our notions of *dominicanidad* to be inclusive of blackness, sexual, gender, and non-binary identities are notable and do much to expand the fields of Dominican and Latino/a/x Literary Studies.

To engage with Dominican diaspora writing more comprehensively in the US, it is incumbent upon scholarly/teaching communities to look beyond the mainstream market to find and define the Dominican diaspora literary corpus. Doing so will not only enrich the dialogue developed around writerly communities but also allow us to see the broader strokes of the Dominican diasporic experience. Moreover, by representing Dominican American experiences

through just a handful of voices, one runs the risk of presenting essentialized versions of *dominicanidad*. Dominican writing in the US is as diverse as the community itself and reflects the many preoccupations, cultural and racial biases, class differences, and struggles Dominicans often bring with them to their new home. Dominican diaspora writing, in many ways, demonstrates "an effort to express the complex situation experienced by individuals who are forced to move from their place of origin and to settle in a foreign space" (Rodríguez 146). How writers witness, live, and choose to express these experiences, linguistically and thematically, may very well differ.

## CONCLUSION

The above reflections on the marketing and pedagogical challenges associated with Dominican literary production in the United States aim to offer a glimpse into some of the hurdles faced by Dominican writers in today's market and an appreciation for the diversity of the Dominican experience in the United States. Thus, this essay is an invitation to scholars and teachers to expand the margins of the Dominican American literary canon and, by extension, of Latino/a/x literature in general. While the field has benefited from the remarkable and well-deserved success of a few authors already mentioned throughout this paper, it is crucial at this junction that we acknowledge and validate a literary corpus that reflects the inherent diversity of the Dominican experience in the US.



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