

# Negotiating Latinidades, Understanding Identities within Space



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## INTRODUCTION

KATHRYN QUINN-SÁNCHEZ

By writing to self-define, through transgressing real and imagined borders, Latinos are transforming the world of letters into a multicultural, gendered landscape, while simultaneously changing how people of color are perceived. The negotiation of Latino identities within space—cities, universities, homes, or in exile, requires a profound comprehension of what space means in relationship to identity politics. In the words of the French theoretician, Henri Lefebvre, “Space is social morphology: it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism, and just as intimately bound up with function and structure” (94). Every aspect of our lives is dictated by space and the norms attached to each location. When discussing movement, Lefebvre writes: “Space commands bodies, prescribing or proscribing gestures, routes and distances to be covered” (143). The authors studied in this text consciously acknowledge their relationship to, confinement in and movement through space. And as literary critics ourselves, we acknowledge that Native Americans are confined to reservations, colonized peoples are forced to negotiate their identities in a space imposed upon them, while imperialism or globalization (in the form of hegemonic capitalism) reaches far and wide to infiltrate ‘foreign’ spaces and homogenize them. Moreover, when those in power consider someone to be a constituent of a subversive ideology, s/he becomes a target for forced submission or perhaps forced migration or exile. Refugees and political prisoners are labeled as such because they have refused or are unable to comply with unilateral conformity. From these evident realities, it seems logical to study the negotiation of Latino identities within space as it allows us to shed light on the complexity of Latino identity in this era where space shapes all of us.

This particular project is unique in that it includes works spanning sixteen years (1997-2013) that address the urgency with which Latino/a authors resist how access to certain spaces or movement through space—borders for example—has historically limited people of color in the United States. This study also places these authors in their rightful place alongside such well-known authors as Hinojosa, Anaya, and Rivera in the field of

Latino/literary studies. Authors studied include: Daniel Alarcón, Angie Cruz, Reyna Grande, Oscar Hijuelos, Erika Lopez, Ernesto Quiñónez, and Nelly Rosario. These particular authors were chosen because their works represent a specific aspect of individual identity that can be analyzed through the use of space as metaphor. In the twenty-first century USA, these Latino writers are teaching us how space affects them due to their status as immigrants or minority citizens. Rather than allow future generations to continue to live by what the dominant culture states as fact, these authors choose to self-represent and portray a more accurate version of Latino identity while simultaneously challenging institutionalized discourses.

Latina/o authors, similar to those within today's troubled regions, identify themselves and define their own identities rather than acquiesce to some "authoritative" source. Indeed, several of these authors represent the violence of their ancestral homes, including the terrorist Peruvian Shining Path, or the dictatorships of Trujillo (Dominican Republic) and Castro (Cuba). Even within the USA, the contentious border with Mexico and the urban spaces of our cities, allow for the pejorative labeling of newly and not-so-newly arrived immigrants by those who consider themselves to be ideal citizens. Naming, defining, and remembering remain political acts during war, implying both courage and danger. After the wars and conflicts subside, the novels testify that the pain continues, especially the pain of not belonging, of realizing the impossibility of returning home, as well as not knowing what the past or future may hold.

Unpacking social location by clearly discussing identity markers within space, allows each contributor to this volume to disentangle the intricacy within Latino/a subjectivities. Each literary character represents a unique portrayal of *Latinidad*, of living as bicultural, bilingual, and/or transnational with restricted access to the spaces that the Anglo, patriarchal US culture dominates and controls. Specifically, Oscar Hijuelos determines his character based on the experience of exile from his beloved homeland: Cuba. Ernesto Quiñónez' protagonist demands his piece of the pie, or place within the American dream by climbing the social strata through criminal means. Reyna Grande's characters' find their identities tied to the success or failure of a dance studio where culture, identity and economics are simultaneously negotiated. When the urban city becomes a metaphor for untamed violence, Daniel Alarcón represents the city/jungle as spaces that reflect two cultures that clash—the modern and the ancient, one left behind and one surging ahead. While on the islands, in New York City or the Dominican Republic, Angie Cruz and Nelly Rosario, invoke the space of the sea to portray the friction between



being in one physical space while longing to be in the other. Finally, Erika Lopez destabilizes the patriarchal, canonical road novel by deconstructing the stereotype with her protagonist who is a bisexual, motorcycling woman that travels across the US.

Each Latino/a author questions how outsiders view his/her identity as an immigrant. And while remaining “Other” within the Anglo dominant culture, each succeeds in self-defining through becoming the outsider-within. That is to say, the representational space of the novel enters into the discursive space to reconfigure the role of Latino/a “Other.” By rejecting the stereotypical norms and writing immigrant identities that reflect many different subjectivities, these authors educate their readers about the struggles of living as Latino/a in the USA. In short, the authors illustrate how space influences our ability to navigate and negotiate society, according to ethnicity, origin, language, religion, gender, and social class.

The preconceived ideas attached to space limit the ways in which space can be envisioned. In this edited collection, there are many types of space which are represented. Specifically, we see the role of exile, which prohibits one’s ability to return home; transnationalism, which encourages movement between national borders typically due to dual citizenship; the borderlands, which implies legal and illegal crossings between the US and Mexico; and finally, the open road as metaphor for normative, heterosexual masculinity. At issue in all of these representations is the role of freedom to self-define and travel freely across barriers that exist to deter entry into both physical and metaphorical spaces.

## Chapter Descriptions

### **Chapter One: “Transformative Currents: An Exploration of the Sea and Identity in the Works of Angie Cruz and Nelly Rosario”**

**Rebeca Hey-Colón**

The first chapter examines the relationship between the sea and identity in Dominican American writers Angie Cruz and Nelly Rosario. In their works (which take place in both the United States and the Dominican Republic), the sea serves as a spatial metaphor and an embodiment of nostalgia, one of the dominant themes in Latino and exile literature. For the Dominican Republic, however, the element of nostalgia is linked to trauma due to the scars of the Trujillo dictatorship. While these are not strictly considered novels of the dictatorship, remembering, reconstituting, and healing are central themes, which mirror the island’s political history, and the characters’ personal stories. Each individual interprets the sea

differently, a trait that highlights water's unique capacity for transformation, as well as its potential to generate multiple meanings. Through the examination of the sea, the novels serve to invoke a Caribbean Latino/a identity within the natural spaces, communities, and individual lives of *Let it Rain Coffee* (2005), *Soledad* (2001), and *Song of the Water Saints* (2003). Ultimately, it is argued that the sea is historically, politically, and culturally of great significance to these Dominican American writers.

## **Chapter Two: “Daniel Alarcón’s Lima: Articulation of Transnationalism through a Discursive and Geographical Space”** **Amrita Das**

While being one of very few Peruvian born U.S. Latino authors to attain international recognition, the transnational, Daniel Alarcón, has gained success in both Peru and the United States. The contemporary Latin American and Peruvian literary circles familiar with U.S. literary events have acknowledged the under thirty author as a novelty when his debut story “City of Clowns” appeared in *The New Yorker*, which led to his first book contract in the United States. Although born and raised in the US, Alarcón’s crossing back to Peru as an adult, was facilitated by the content and the tone of his texts, the representation of Peruvian themes, and specifically the city of Lima. The urban theme is the most common thread shared by Alarcón and his contemporary Peruvians, but what distinguishes Alarcón is the acceptance of a nihilistic approach to human existence within the urban space. This trait characterizes Alarcón’s work as a postmodern celebration of Lima, and by extension, all urban spaces characteristic of the unprecedented mobility of the twenty-first century. Alarcón writes Lima, (and Peru), as a space in which identities clash and new ones are created. Lima becomes a living organism that allows for a global representation of an imaginary city that would be recognizable to many around the world due to its urban center based on unstable growth and immensely rapid cultural metamorphosis.

## **Chapter Three: “Becoming a Bitch Forever: Charting Puerto Rican Bisexual and Lesbian Subjectivities in Erika Lopez’ Road Fiction”** **Marci L. Carrasquillo**

Erika Lopez’s novels engage with and challenge the myth of American mobility as masculine. In particular, an analysis of Jolene Rodriguez, the protagonist in *Flaming Iguanas: An Illustrated All-Girl Road Novel Thing* (1997) contests the representation of sexual and ethnic others by the dominant culture. By situating her character within the dominantly patriarchal space of the road—the highways of the USA—Lopez

deconstructs the normative heterosexual masculinity that accompanies our popular culture's portrayals of a national, masculine identity tied to the freedom of the open road. Indeed, this idea is prevalent in the film, of Ernesto "el Che" Guevara's trip across South America, in *Motorcycle Diaries* as well as the North American novel *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac. Lopez problematizes the masculine by permitting a bisexual female protagonist to play this role. Furthermore, Jolene as bisexual, functions to shatter the idea that freedom, sexuality, and citizenship belong solely to the heterosexual male. As such, Lopez's works betray the sexist, heteronormative road novels that portray the US according to the traditional, patriarchal norms. Lopez adamantly rejects that the road novel is representative. Indeed, through Jaslene Rodriguez, Erika Lopez broadens the definition of citizen, nation, and freedom to include all sexual orientations and all genders.

#### **Chapter Four: "Seeking Spatial Justice in Reyna Grande's Work"** **Angélica Lozano-Alonso**

With a given name like Reyna Grande, it is not surprising that this author is well aware of the impact of space on identity and this is evident in her two novels and her autobiography. In her two works of fiction, *Across a Hundred Mountains* (2006) and *Dancing with Butterflies* (2009) the use of space functions as a narrative strategy, both in shifting from one narrative voice to another, but also in plot development as her characters move from Mexico to the United States and from the United States to Mexico. Chicano critics, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, have theorized on the metaphorical idea of the impact of having a borderlands identity, but in both of Grande's novels, plot development centers on her characters illegally and legally crossing the US/Mexico border. These border crossings are essential to resolving the characters' search for autonomy. In *Across a Hundred Mountains*, Juana is desperate to know what happened to her father when he disappeared during or after his border crossing. Did he abandon the family? Die while crossing? Begin a new family? In Juana's search for her father, the US becomes an imagined space where she explores the alternative realities of what may have happened. When she finally answers the mystery of her father's disappearance, she is able to find the key to her self-empowerment. In *Dancing with Butterflies* the characters find freedom and power through dominating performative space while they dance in a Mexican folkloric dance troupe and celebrate their Mexican heritage. During the narrative, three of the four narrators face challenges that make them unable to dance. Eventually it is the return to dance and the movement of dance that empowers the women. For both

novels, Grande draws on her own experiences that are documented in her memoir, *The Distance Between Us* (2012). Like her, Grande's characters experience the pain of being left behind and having to cross the border illegally to reunite with unfamiliar parents. While some of the plot development can be considered predictable, the novels are noteworthy in their ability to give voice to the undocumented. In a unique twist, both novels include Chicana characters that seek refuge in Mexico, rather than in the United States. While the US characters cross freely into Mexico, there are devastating consequences. Using theories of space and power such as those proposed by David Harvey, Henri Lefebvre, Michel De Certeau, Edward Soja and Michel Foucault, this chapter explores the ways in which space is a visible manifestation of power, or lack thereof, for these women. Facing and overcoming such social issues as poverty, parental neglect, infant mortality, violence, physical and emotional abuse and teenage prostitution, these powerless women eventually overcome their difficulties and dominate their surroundings.

## **Chapter Five: "A Space of Their Own: Ernesto Quiñónez' *Chango's Fire*"**

**Michele Shaul**

Fire, creates the potential for new spaces and new beginnings, in Ernesto Quiñónez' *Chango's Fire* (2004). Specifically, Julio Santana, in pursuit of the American dream, employs his skills in arson to allow for an architectural renaissance in his very own neighborhood. This space, originally perceived as run-down, becomes the location of both a physical and a spiritual transformation for its inhabitants. Julio, in league with others, paves the way by literally burning down the deplorably kept buildings to cash in on the insurance. However, while the physical space improves and becomes more acceptable to the dominant culture attracting investment and a better profile, Julio begins to question his role. Ironically, Julio envisions how the dominant culture labels him; as a criminal, a thief, an arsonist, as the fulfillment of the Latino stereotype. Consequently, he comes to the realization that the American dream does not allow for one to have a criminal record. When a wealthier, whiter woman becomes his significant other, he repeatedly attempts to quit his arson activity to become worthy of her, with the intent of gaining her hand as his wife. However, the criminal acts have already tainted him. As he attempts to extricate himself from a criminal lifestyle, there are others that explain to him that he cannot back out now. Julio wrestles with the ramifications of figuring out in which direction his future lies: Will he acquiesce to their demands and continue his criminality or will he find a way to circumvent

the limits that both the dominant Anglo culture and his peers have placed upon him? Quiñónez writes to show the reader how Julio attempts to assert his newly acculturated Latino self, as he fights for a better way of life without getting arrested in the interim. While the role of space influences his physical surroundings, it also allows for him to imagine a better future for himself, thus complicating his choices, and his life as a Latino.

### **Chapter Six: “Oscar Hijuelos’ Hypothetical Homeland: *From Our House in the Last World to Thoughts Without Cigarettes*”**

**Jeremy L. Cass**

For Oscar Hijuelos, the Cuban island represents a homeland that no longer exists. The idea of returning afflicts his characters, yet, the Cuba of today is not the Cuba they visit daily in their minds. Hence, memory and nostalgia prove that the characters long for a reprieve that cannot be; the desire to return will never be fulfilled, it is impossible. Imagined space, therefore, allows for the searching that occurs within the characters’ minds, at once cathartic yet simultaneously resulting in homesickness, loss and hopelessness. The ramifications of the role of impossibility profoundly confuse Hijuelos’ characters. How to answer the question, Who Am I?, becomes an exercise in futility. In his memoir, *Thoughts Without Cigarettes* (2011), this nebulous notion of self, confounds the protagonist-narrator as he knows intellectually that he cannot locate what he searches for, yet he absolutely must travel this psychological path to become free of the heavy weight of his imaginary homeland that overwhelms him constantly. Psychological space, as a result of his exile, becomes the main protagonist of Hijuelos’ works. Hijuelos turns to the role of writing to instruct us in one method of surviving the loss of one’s origins. Through the constructed, imaginary space of literature, the self can transcend the spatial limits of exile. Since literature functions as representational space, this allows for an imaginary escape, a way to relieve the urgency of loss to a space where one is free to express, imagine, and write his own identity, allowing for a chance to return home.



## CHAPTER ONE

# TRANSFORMATIVE CURRENTS: AN EXPLORATION OF THE SEA AND IDENTITY IN THE WORKS OF ANGIE CRUZ AND NELLY ROSARIO

REBECA HEY-COLÓN

The Dominican presence in the United States has been especially strong since the latter half of the 20th century. Critics have described the 1980s as “boom years for Dominican migration,” (Sagás and Molina 15) a population increase that laid the groundwork for the emergence of Dominican Latino/a writers. Many know Julia Álvarez, who published *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* in 1991, becoming the first Dominican-American to publish a novel in English. This study, however, will focus not on the works of Álvarez, but on those of the newest wave of Dominican-American writers: Angie Cruz and Nelly Rosario.

Specifically, we will concentrate on the ways in which Cruz and Rosario integrate water and the sea into their literary projects. Their uses serve not only to expand the burgeoning conversation surrounding the role of the sea in the Caribbean, but also evidence that, even when removed from the Caribbean island scenario, the sea overflows into the pages of its writers. Furthermore, the sea’s persistence challenges and enriches the overwhelmingly urban picture that comes to mind when visualizing Latino/a literature. For many, New York City has become a member of the extended diasporic family, but we must not forget that this place in the north is also an island; the Hudson laps at its shores.

Working with Angie Cruz’s *Soledad* (2001) and *Let it Rain Coffee* (2005), as well as with Nelly Rosario’s *Song of the Water Saints* (2003) we will explore the following questions: How are water and the sea used by contemporary Dominican-American writers to illustrate the fragility and fluidity of identity constructs within the Dominican transnational

nation? In what ways do these uses connect to themes rooted in Dominican history? And finally, how do these uses connect to the larger conversations surrounding Dominican literary studies, and even Latino/a studies?

The answers to these questions lie in the sea's propensity to exalt the sensorial aspects of literature, creating an amorphous link to healing, trauma, and ultimately, transformation. Cruz's and Rosario's works elicit a high level of engagement from the visual, auditory, and olfactory senses of the reader, highlighting the sea's connection to the physical as well as the psychological. In their works, the sea is used to bridge the boundaries between the public and private spheres, fostering conversations that take place on multiple levels. Structurally, this is reflected in the genre of these novels, family sagas, which attests to migration's impact on a generational level and on the diaspora's increasing relevance in debates surrounding the national identity of many Caribbean nations.

In Cruz's and Rosario's texts, the sea becomes a metonymical emblem of the Dominican Republic, as well as of the Caribbean region. It serves not just as a marker of physical boundaries, but also subsumes the islands themselves. The protean sea has the capacity to surpass physical boundaries, promoting the fashioning of a regional identity rather than a national one. This opens the door to another point of expansion in the conversation between Caribbean literature (in all languages) and Latino/a literature, a move in tune with the circular migrations and the transnationalism that have, up to now, characterized the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Latino/a writers that incorporate the sea into their work fashion new spaces for identity and relation(ship)s to emerge, and the possibilities are as limitless as they are abundant. Through close readings of Cruz's and Rosario's novels, we will see how these authors craft characters that exemplify these new possibilities from a diasporic perspective, though they by no means exhaust them.

Healing and trauma, however, remain seminal components of Dominican-American literature. This can be traced to the massive impact of the Trujillo dictatorship, to the many Dominicans that went abroad fleeing the violence and repression of the regime, and to the latter generations that left the island due to the economic stagnation that enveloped the land after the dictatorship. In both Cruz's and Rosario's works, the shadow of Trujillo, who controlled the island from 1930 until his assassination in 1961, looms heavily. Yet, moving past trauma is one of the things the characters in their novels seek. Throughout this process, water lies at the crux, once again relying on its ability to encompass all that is good in the world, while also connecting to all that is bad and threatening.



The fact that both Cruz and Rosario are members of the Dominican diaspora is a significant factor to consider in light of their uses of water and the sea. Historically, much of the Dominican Republic's literary focus has centered on the question of land, specifically in regards to the tension of sharing it with a "menacing" other, specifically Haiti. This focus has led to the creation of national myths grounded in a past that glorifies the Taíno Indians (long exterminated) and the island's Hispanic and Catholic legacy. Hence, when speaking of the Dominican Republic it is impossible to obviate the connections between land-based discourses of land and *antihaitianismo* (antihaitianism), both of which are embedded in the island's literary production.

As a result of these prevailing discourses, Dominican-American writers are borne from a tradition that has instilled the message that the claiming of the land is of supreme importance to the establishment of a separate national (and racial) identity. Yet, water and the sea are integral components of both Cruz's and Rosario's works. This suggests that writing from the diaspora allows for the creation of broader, more fluid conceptions of the "nation," challenging existing stagnant categories and heightening national anxieties. In their works, these authors seek to insert the diasporic voice as an indispensable element in the depictions of 21<sup>st</sup> century version Dominican reality. They also propose a sense of nationalism that is concurrent with transnational iterations, expressing a desire to re-frame the Dominican nation.

### *Let it Rain Coffee*

Angie Cruz's 2005 novel *Let it Rain Coffee* presents the multigenerational story of the Colón family. When his wife dies, Don Chan is forced to leave his beloved Dominican Republic behind and move to New York to live with his only son, Santos, his wife, Esperanza, and their children, Bobby and Dallas. The early death in the novel sets the tone for the series of traumatic events that befall this family. Nonetheless, in spite of the heartbreak and disappointment they experience, the Colóns never abandon their search for their place in the world. Indeed, it might just be that searching *is* their place, echoing the reality of many transnational migrants.

When considering how a diasporic writer expands the concept of "nation," Cruz's construction of the figure of Don Chan floats to the top. He is the first character the reader meets, and he is a force to be reckoned with, even in his old age. One could say he is the patriarch of the Colón family. The image of a patriarch, however, is anchored in the notion of a

clear genealogy and on male authority, two things that have no home in the pages of Cruz's text, perhaps because they stem from dominant national myths in Dominican literature. The first one, the concept of a known and accepted genealogy, is null because Don Chan is an orphan.<sup>1</sup> At a young age, he is discovered washed up on the shores of the Dominican Republic. This moment, in which Don Chan's adoptive father reflects on how the sea gives life, is also marked by the experience of death many have found in its waters:

After many years of watching the sea ebb and flow, the way the color of the water changed with the mood of the sky, it was the first time he didn't bury bones. Throughout his life, he saw carcasses that washed up offshore from people who didn't survive their journeys to his land (Cruz, *Let It Rain Coffee* 95).

This passage presents a meta-Caribbean moment that fuses the Caribbean world with the Latino/a one through Cruz's use of the sea. Here, Cruz allows the sea to move beyond its superficial role as one of the main allures of Caribbean tourism and instead uses it to represent the cyclical nature of life. Just as the novel itself began with the end of a life, so too does a birth from the sea echo the many deaths that occur in its waters. The symbolism of this narrative strategy by Cruz is a testament to the circularity of the water's currents, to the circularity of human life, and to the circulation of migration itself, whether failed or successful.

At the same time, although in *Let it Rain Coffee*, Don Chan is found in 1916.<sup>2</sup> His "birth" in the novel connects tidalectically with many other events.<sup>3</sup> The Cuban *balseros*, the Haitian *bot pippel* and the Dominican *yola* phenomenon are all mirrored in this moment. Thus, her inclusion of Don Chan's character directly connects with other Caribbean experiences at large, creating a space for regional dialogue that expands into the Latino/a world, since for many of these voyagers the final destination is, in fact, the United States. With its uncanny ability to surpass the boundaries of time and space, the sea connects a migration that took place early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Don Chan's) to those closer to the 21<sup>st</sup>.

The fact remains, however, that Don Chan is literally a child of the sea. He has been expelled from its womb, alive, but without any information about his origins. Considering our previous statement on how Dominican American writers attempt to move beyond the national, Cruz creates a citizen of nowhere but also, of anywhere. By being born from the sea he could belong as easily to the Dominican Republic as to any other island. In other words, Don Chan's presence as the head of the Colón family resonates with the difficulty of establishing an autochthonous Dominican

identity, given the fact that the dominant theories are based on the erasure of “undesirable elements.” By having a “citizen of the sea” as the anchor of the Colón family, Cruz plays with the notion of a more fluid construction of Dominican identity, one that can encompass everyone, from those that wash up on the shores of the island to those that wind up on the shores of the Hudson. This move also destabilizes any sense of traditional “order and authority,” two concepts of supreme importance for the Trujillo dictatorship. In this sense, Don Chan’s “orphanhood” can be read as a way of resisting Trujillo and the future paternal legacy he would impose on the island and its citizens.<sup>4</sup>

Colonial history is also important when considering Don Chan, specifically regarding the impact of migration. While it is widely known that African slaves were brought to the Dominican Republic, the reality of Asian migration is much less commented. It occurred mainly for reasons of political instability in China but also because of the need for cheap labor (Sang 68). As of the 1987 census, there were 5,500 self-identified Chinese in the Dominican Republic.<sup>5</sup> When we learn that Don Chan is Asian in appearance, we see a clear nod to this island reality, as well as a desire to bring to the surface the various cultural, ethnic, and racial components of the Dominican Republic. Cruz’s strategy reinforces the centrality of the sea in transporting many of the island’s future inhabitants, highlighting the sea’s direct implication in facilitating (and determining) its genealogy. By being tied so closely to the sea and to the openness this conveys, Don Chan represents how this space and its affiliates infiltrate the boundaries of the constructed island, eroding its center and opening paths for divergent discourses.<sup>6</sup>

Still, the past haunts Don Chan. In the present time of the novel, he is an elderly man struggling with Alzheimer’s. His memory is a destabilized metaphorical stream of images whose ultimate north becomes a return to the Dominican Republic. His desire emulates the stance of many migrants, especially those who left not of their own free will, but out of necessity. Furthermore, since the 1990s Dominicans have been able to enjoy the benefits of dual citizenship, which has exacerbated the sense of a Dominican “revolving door” migration. Yet, when Don Chan’s wish for a circular migration is achieved, the end of his life is near.<sup>7</sup> His death cements his intermediary position between land and water, highlighting the essence of water in his life: “Don Chan could taste the sea, he could hear it. His ear full of water, his skin sticky to the touch, his veins on his arms, oh yes, look, the sea runs through my body, he told Dallas [...]”(Cruz, *Let It Rain Coffee* 267). Here, Don Chan identifies the sea as an element that has the capacity to take over his whole being: his ears, his

skin, his veins, and his sense of smell. His experience is seconded by Esperanza, who, contrary to Don Chan, never felt the desire to return: “Esperanza had forgotten how beautiful it was. The familiarity of the sea smell, the dense air, the taste of salt on her lips. The muscles around her neck immediately began to relax”(Cruz, *Let It Rain Coffee* 268). Through Don Chan and Esperanza’s opposing postures on migration and the homeland, Cruz posits an understanding of the sea that is visceral rather than intellectual. The sea and the body speak to each other, communicating in ways that connect to memories lodged in the deepest resources of smell, taste, and touch. It would seem that while land is emblematic to public life, the sea is essential to one’s inner being.

### *Song of the Water Saints*

Nelly Rosario’s 2003 debut novel *Song of the Water Saints*, however, tells a different story. In contrast to Cruz, this novel begins in the Dominican Republic during the time of the first US occupation of the island, in 1916. The influence of the United States, and of the outside world in general, is palpable from the beginning, dispelling any possible notion of insularism. The constant desire for travel and movement is one of the driving forces behind the text and one of its main characters (Graciela), tidalectically connecting the novel’s characters to the island itself and to its historical processes. These connections begin with the book title’s mention of water, linking this element to music and the senses.<sup>8</sup>

Culture is also of supreme importance, specifically in its marginalized expressions. This is conveyed surreptitiously through Rosario’s inclusion of the “water saints.” Though barely mentioned in the text, when the water saints do appear they are portrayed negatively, as inferior gods compared to those of Christianity. We learn this through a conversation between Graciela and Sol Luz, a Spanish nun doing missionary work on the island.<sup>9</sup> In response to Graciela’s curiosity about a globe, she says:

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. Sol Luz’s eyes became fixed stones and Graciela thought for a moment that she looked like a fish (Rosario 27).

Sol Luz speaks and acts like an institutional figure, living up to the connotations of her name. She labels the water saints mere representatives of popular beliefs that challenge established norms. For her, they are nuisances rooted in superstition, not in organized religion or scientific

knowledge, thus losing any validity. Yet, through her portrayal of a marginalized element such as the “water saints” as a seminal component of her text, Rosario indirectly incites a reconsideration of other excluded aspects of the Dominican (American) experience. In this manner, integrating the diasporic voice in the re-visioning of Dominican history and identity is indispensable. Water serves as an entry way into the process.

In spite of their presumed liminality, the water saints invade the text on multiple, even supernatural levels, cementing water’s central role in the novel. They nurture the possibilities of radical ways of thinking that go beyond the confines of authority. By conveying a sense of imagination and creativity, they become one of the main anchors of Rosario’s literary project: freedom. In *Song of the Water Saints*, the trace of water leads us on a journey to discover the “other” stories that make up the lives of the Dominican people, those that go beyond any “official” story. Through the water and its various streams, the margins seep into the center, creating a blurred but more inclusive version of the past. Water even goes as far as to give the novel its structure. Rather than being organized by chapters, it is divided into aquatic “songs.”<sup>10</sup>

The senses are paramount in Rosario’s text, especially considering it begins with the description of an image.<sup>11</sup> Evocatively, Rosario describes an erotic postcard from an “unknown” country (which we soon learn is the Dominican Republic, though the fact that the country is deemed as “unknown” can allude to the fact that many different places around the world serve the same purpose in the imagination of desire):

They are naked. The boy cradles the girl. Their flesh is copper. They recline on a Victorian couch surrounded by cardboard Egyptian pottery, a stuffed wild tiger, a toy drum, and glazed coconut trees. An American prairie looms behind them in dull oils.

Shadows ink the muscles of the boy’s arms, thighs, and calves. His penis lies flaccid. Cheekbones are high, as if the whittler of his bones was reveling when She carved him.

The girl lies against the boy. There is ocean in her eyes. Clouds of hair camouflage one breast.

An orchid blooms on her cheek (Rosario 3).

This description is rife with exoticism, one of the main attributes found in the literature and images of the Caribbean. The Egyptian pottery, the stuffed tiger, and the coconut trees leap out as markers of the “Other.” There is reference to Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean (respectively), all spaces that have suffered from the exploitation of colonization and

desire.<sup>12</sup> The quality of these images is also telling; these are cheap reproductions aiming to trigger a latent desire that has already been created. Rather than incite the hunger itself, the creator of this image profits from an existing discourse, feeding into a negative but lucrative cycle. The presence of these objects is meant to trigger reactions from the viewer, specifically viewers from the first world who have no first-hand experience with the metonymically (mis)represented world(s). These viewers then become consumers, and in a world ruled by capitalism, where there is demand, supply is never far behind.

The only “real” elements that appear in the postcard are Silvio and Graciela, though presented in a compromised and scripted light. Their nakedness, as well as their brownness (coppery skin), furthers the discourse of inferiority and exploitation in which the sense of desire that drives the image is rooted. Their presentation connects them to a fantasized indigenous past, echoing our previous discussion on the national and literary myths surrounding creative and intellectual thought on the island. The description’s emphasis on the height of Silvio’s cheekbones underlines the existence of his indigenous roots, even if he himself has never thought about them.

Graciela presents a different conundrum. While Silvio’s body is objectified through the description of his muscles and his genitals, literally reducing him to his physical body, Graciela’s anatomy is shrouded in mystery, indistinguishable from the island’s natural landscape: “*There is ocean in her eyes. Clouds of hair camouflage one breast. An orchid blooms on her cheek.*” Similarly to Cruz’s creation of Don Chan in *Let it Rain Coffee*, by blending land and sea, Graciela’s character becomes a palimpsest. She is one with the sea, reflected in her eyes, as well as with the sky (the clouds in her hair) and the land, (the orchid on her cheek). The peculiarity of her description, in sharp contrast with Silvio’s, foretells the conflicting relationship Graciela will have with everyone around her. She is a misunderstood woman, and part of the inability to understand her is precisely her affinity for the sea, for movement, and for exploration. Her yearning for freedom clashes violently with her social, economic, and gendered reality. At the same time, Rosario evokes the longstanding tradition of presenting the “patria” as a woman, feminizing the nation and thus allowing parental (male) authority figures to take charge of it. Thus, from the onset there is a tumultuous connection between the sea, nature, and Graciela. This first moment crafted by Rosario accentuates the importance of the visual in her text, bringing us back to the essential role played by the senses in Latino/a literature that engages with the sea.

The role of the sea is further underscored in the spaces Rosario selects to begin her narration. The book's first sentence reads: "Graciela and Silvio stood hand in hand on El Malecón, sea breeze polishing their faces"(Rosario 7). The Malecón is that quintessential space where the end of land and the beginning of water merge, creating a public space where people often gather, akin to a waterfront.<sup>13</sup> In places where a Malecón exists, it engenders an atmosphere where people of different social classes mingle. It also blurs the line between the public and the private. Graciela and Silvio are at the Malecón escaping from their responsibilities, playing in the water, and ultimately, making out. They are a young teenage couple in love/lust, fully immersed in themselves until they discover they have an audience. As a result, there is a sense of voyeurism in the Malecón. This connects to the sexual undertones present in the beginning of the text and also to the fact that the sea itself conflates the public and the private.

In no way do the public and private clash more violently than in Rosario's use of the Massacre River. While our discussion of *Let it Rain Coffee* centered on the fashioning of a more inclusive notion of identity through Cruz's uses of the sea, in her portrayal of the Massacre River, Rosario begins a conversation where water circulates around the trauma of history, inclusive/exclusive constructs of identity, the effects of these dysfunctional systems on Dominican and Dominican-American identity, and the ways in which Dominican-American transnational identity can create paths to counteract this discourse. These issues climax in Rosario's inclusion of the 1937 Haitian massacre perpetrated by the Trujillo Regime, who believed that: "Once the nation is identified with 'Spanishness,' a term that carries all sorts of cultural and racial baggage, then by extension everything that is 'black' and identified with Haiti becomes antinational"(Miguel 64).<sup>14</sup> In a country governed by this mode of thought terrible events were publicly sanctioned: "as part of the policy of 'Dominicanizing the border' in 1937 thousands of Haitians were murdered"(Miguel 65). The exact death toll is unknown, though a popular estimate is 15,000.<sup>15</sup> Yet, it is the setting of this catastrophe, the Massacre River, which is of particular significance to our discussion.

Interestingly, this body of water's connection to violence predates the 1937 massacre. It took place in colonial times, when the Spaniards slaughtered some pirate buccaneers here.<sup>16</sup> This act, perpetrated on the waters of the same river that centuries later would be stained with the blood of thousands of Haitians and Dominicans, is the first link in a chain that codes the Massacre River as an open wound for the Dominican Republic, specifically in regards to its construction as a "cohesive" nation. A cohesion that is problematic, however, because it relies on the exclusion

and intolerance of “threatening” elements, in this case, Haitians and Dominican-Haitians, and which is further complicated with the current presence of the “Dominicanyorks.”<sup>17</sup>

In his article “A World Destroyed, A Nation Imposed: The 1937 Haitian Massacre in the Dominican Republic” Richard Turits contends that the Haitian massacre of 1937 is an event that has seeped into the deepest folds of the Dominican Republic’s imaginary because:

The story of the Haitian massacre is also one of Dominicans versus Dominicans, of Dominican elites versus Dominican peasants, of the national state against Dominicans in the frontier, of centralizing forces in opposition to local interests, and, following the massacre, of newly hegemonic anti-Haitian discourses of the nation vying with more culturally pluralist discourses and memories from the past. It is also a story of how multiethnic communities and shifting, complex, or ambiguous national identities come to be perceived as a problem for the state. (593)

Turits’ reading of the 1937 massacre showcases the manifold effects of this event. Of particular importance is noting that this massacre was not just driven by irreconcilable binaries (Haitian/Dominican) but, more importantly, by internal conflicts and tensions within the Dominican Republic itself. Furthermore, its centrality in the discourse of Dominican identity inscribes the Massacre River (and therefore, water) as a pivotal element in the island’s history. The river is transformed into a powerful symbol of both union and rupture between two nations, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. In so doing, it takes attention away from the land and the problematic ideas rooted in it, forcing recognition of the ambivalences and cracks that flow between both nations. As a Latina writer, this event’s importance is magnified for Rosario. She, like the Massacre River, also saddles two pieces of land, the Dominican Republic and the United States, and attempts to fuse them together through the flow of her writing. As such, her inclusion of this event in *Song of the Water Saints* can be read as both a recounting of a traumatic moment in history and as a portrayal of the painful transition between a monolithic Dominican identity and the burgeoning desire (and simultaneous intolerance) of an identity that goes beyond the one promoted by the island’s patriarchal and colonial powers. Rosario writes:

The month of October opened with thirty-six hours of carnage in which drunken Dominican soldiers, on orders from Trujillo, took their machetes and built a dam of human bodies in the western Dajabón River. [...] The army had used machetes so that the Dominican peasantry could spontaneously participate in the massacre. Decapitations were



commonplace. And in the Haitian-Dominican border towns, the stench of human blood did battle with the air. Killings happened within Dominican families, with Haitian, part-Haitian, or dark-skinned relatives. (Rosario 181)

Curiously, Rosario uses the name of the border town of Dajabón to make reference to the river instead of its given name. Although Rosario's words leave no doubt as to the horror of this scene, her use of the name "Dajabón" instead of "Massacre" when naming the river can be interpreted as emphasizing the "border" aspects of this event and not just its violence. This is exacerbated by the fact that it was extremely difficult to establish any clear boundaries here; as she states, killings occurred within many Dominican families, turning the massacre not just into a Haitian genocide, but into a Dominican one as well. Within the novel, this event is experienced by Mercedes, the transitional character between Graciela and Leila, the two women in the text with the strongest ties to water, and also the two women most firmly rooted to the Dominican Republic and New York City, respectively. This further emphasizes the centrality of "borders" in Rosario's narration of this event.

Nonetheless, this quote also presents stagnation, specifically when Rosario describes that a dam is built with human bodies. Figuratively, the stagnation of the river echoes the oppression of the Trujillo regime. The fact that the waters cannot flow reverberates with the island's inability to move past this event until the emphasis shifts from the act of violence itself, and instead focuses on integrating this event into the nation's narrative, changing outdated and oppressive dialogues on race, ethnicity and identity. Precisely, these are all themes that the presence of the Dominican diaspora further complicates for the Dominican Republic. Still, healing can only take place through movement, when waters (and bodies) can flow freely again. In the text, this movement comes through the family's migration to the United States and Leila's integration of her great-grandmother's past into her present and her future. Thus, for Rosario, the nascent and ever-evolving Dominican-American identity is an intrinsic component of the healing and transformation of the national identity of the Dominican Republic, a pivotal part of which is contained in the waters of the Massacre River.

While Leila is not as well developed a character as Graciela, she has a significant connection to the spirit of her great-grandmother. Though they never met, both are strong-willed adventurous women. The main difference lies in the fact that Graciela lived in the Dominican Republic in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century while Leila lives in Washington Heights in the late 1990s.<sup>18</sup> Like Graciela, Leila wants to devour the world. She has

inherited the “ocean” that led her great-grandmother to her demise.<sup>19</sup> However, the changing times and more permissive currents of the Hudson allow Leila to come to terms with her thirst for adventure. Though she dabbles in a problematic sexual relationship with an older man, it is her connection with Graciela, which Leila labels “The Feeling” that ultimately speaks the truth she needs to hear: “*Never pretended to be a good woman. Never tried to be a bad one. Just lived what I wanted.[...] 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*” (Rosario 242).<sup>20</sup> This is the second to last paragraph in Rosario’s text, bringing Graciela’s voice back to the center, and cementing the connection between the sea, circularity, and legacy because “Graciela’s life provides a historical model for Leila’s nascent feminism and future understanding of her history”(Chevalier 54). Leila is an amalgamation of the women before her. A reconstituted spirit, she is finally living in a place where her freedom is a possibility, not in the “tight shoe” of the island. Graciela’s ocean can only be set free when it blends with the cooler waters of the north, allowing Leila to access the past in order to craft her future. Nonetheless, no matter what Leila ultimately winds up producing, what continues to be true is that the lives of Dominican-Americans are infused with the souls of those who never made it to the shores of New York but who travel with the currents of the water saints. For Rosario, transnationalism is aquatic.

### *Soledad*

However, is the space for freedom always situated in the north? Of the three novels in this study, perhaps the one that offers the most intricate uses of water and the sea is Angie Cruz’s 2001 novel *Soledad*. From the onset, Cruz’s novel is sonorous, tactile, and visual, appealing to the senses. The initial pages place the reader on New York City’s A train alongside Soledad, our protagonist, as she makes her way to Washington Heights to visit her ailing mother. Movement, one of the ways in which the senses are called to action in this text, is everywhere. Movement is life, it is growth, it is escape, it is migration, it is water. As we have discussed, in a diasporic community such as the Dominican one, movement is circular because of the constant back and forth between the island in the Caribbean Sea and the island on the Hudson. However, circular movement is everything Soledad does not want. She yearns to take an art internship in Spain, to leave her past and her family behind.<sup>21</sup> In other words, she is rebellious, but hers is a rebellion rooted in self-deception. As much as she

yearns to move forward, the forces she refuses to reconcile with hold her hostage. Hence, at the beginning of the novel Soledad has an antagonistic relationship with her surroundings, which simultaneously extends to her relationship with water.

When Soledad steps out of the train, Cruz's portrayal of the city enraptures us.

As soon as I arrive at 164<sup>th</sup> Street I'm attacked. The smell of onion and cilantro sting my eyes. I start to sneeze, the humidity is thick, sweat beads drip on the small of my back. Hydrants erupt, splashing cold water over the pavement" (Cruz, *Soledad* 13).

Within the next few lines, we have mention of the sounds of the city, specifically, the merengue blaring out of car speakers, creating a Washington Heights that is alive with sights, smells, and sensations. It is an overwhelming scene, endowing the city with the capacity to become larger than life, transforming it, in Soledad's eyes, into a hostile almost apocalyptic place. Chaos reigns. Soledad's reaction to it is telling. As soon as she is exposed to the elements of "home" her eyes sting, she begins to sweat, and she has a sneezing fit. Here, Cruz uses Soledad's body to tell us what is happening in her mind and heart: through her physical allergic reaction we glean a deeper understanding of the animosity she feels towards this place.

This quote also marks our first mention of water in the text, and of Soledad's relationship to it. Water is represented through humidity, sweat, and erupting hydrants. Unequivocally, it is coded as hostile, which, according to Bachelard, links it to a masculine gender. Curiously (or not) the humidity, the smells, and the chaos are elements that will later be brought back to the forefront when the characters travel to the Dominican Republic, though for Olivia, Soledad's mother, they have opposite meanings. In this sense, there is a chain of memory led by sensation that is replicated from the island of Manhattan to the island in the Caribbean, and the continuum by which it travels is water.

Soledad also makes an important reference to the nature of Dominican-American life in Washington Heights that speaks to her view on migration:

It's no wonder I avoid this place. It's always one dreadful thing after the other. If it's not my mother, it's the chaos, the noise, the higher pitch in people's voices. I need earplugs. In the eighteen years I lived with my mother, my family moved in and out of each other's apartments, trading beds as if they were playing musical chairs. They ran across the street from my grandmother's apartment to my mother's apartment, back and forth,

forth and back, front doors wide open, revolving, with neighbors and family coming through from D.R. One day I thought I had my own room, the next day I was sharing my room with three little cousins who belong to Tío So-and-so who just arrived from some campo I hadn't heard of. (Cruz, *Soledad* 15)

The instability of Dominican-American life is unsettling for Soledad. Rather than thrive on the constant movement that surrounds her life, Soledad is suffocated by lack of consistency. Fluidity and change, two of water's main characteristics, are antagonists for Soledad because of the severe disconnection she has to her family, her anchor. Unable to weather the storm, as soon as she can she leaves Washington Heights. Nonetheless, her troubled relationship with water follows her. This quote illustrates the conflicting nature of transnationalism. While some can desire mobility, for those who did not seek to emigrate it can become a curse rather than a blessing. In this manner, *Soledad* explores a different face of the diaspora, one that initially yearns to disconnect itself from its referent island rather than foster attachment to it.

Soledad's hostility towards water and its iterations is punctuated by a water balloon attack when she arrives in Washington Heights: "And just when I think I'm going to make it home safe a hard splash of water falls from the sky and hits me in the head. Children begin laughing, circling around me. They're welcoming me to hell" (Cruz, *Soledad* 14). Though we do not know it at the time, the image of having something fall from a building is a powerful one. We later discover that Soledad's father dies this way. Here, Cruz establishes a direct connection between water and trauma. Not only does Soledad have a visceral negative reaction to being back in Washington Heights, a reaction that is as physical (through stinging eyes and sneezing) as it is emotional, but she is also forced to confront, and to an extent, relive the moment of her father's death in this scene. As we continue to follow the trace of water in Cruz's novel, the water balloon attack leads us to consider the last night Soledad spent in Washington Heights.

The relationship between Olivia and Soledad is one of the epicenters of the text, but it is filled with jagged edges. Far from ideal, mother and daughter are, at their best, estranged, at their worst, enemies. After the death of Soledad's "father" Manolo, things become even more difficult between the two, the breaking point of which happens over a glass of water. Here, water becomes a metaphor for the nonexistent union between mother and daughter, a union that Olivia has felt since Soledad was a child, perhaps exacerbated by the fact that Olivia did not breastfeed Soledad, and in this way failed to establish a "fluid" connection with her.

Olivia is dumbfounded by Soledad; her independence is isolating and feels like a slap in the face to her.<sup>22</sup>

The insufferable tension between mother and daughter reaches a screeching crescendo the evening Soledad moves out. At this moment culture also plays a major role, since being close to family is a deep value in the Latino/a world. Soledad, however, has been counting down the days to her departure. Olivia, sensing this, tries to assert her non-existent claim upon her daughter by asking her to take a glass of water from her:

She poured me a glass of water. I had never refused my mother. Not really. When she gave me something, I would take it to avoid arguing with her. Even if I threw it out later. But that day I wasn't thirsty. I was bloated with anxiety, fearing what would happen when I opened my mouth. I pushed the water aside. (Cruz, *Soledad* 17)

This quote underscores Soledad's difficult relationship with water. Here, water evokes the notion of accepting the role of obedient daughter, an idea so toxic for Soledad that the mere presence of it causes her to be "bloated with anxiety." Thinking back to her reaction when she was hit with the water balloon, Soledad's relationship between, water, trauma and fear is reinforced and grounded in her personal relationships again conflating the public with the private.

But is Soledad's problematic relationship with water due to the fact that she does not have the sea as a referent? In Cruz's novel, there is a running trend between water, memory, and the Dominican Republic. For example for Doña Sosa, Olivia's mother and Soledad's grandmother, the sound of water is a trigger: she often leaves the faucet on in her apartment because listening to it reminds her of the ocean.<sup>23</sup> This behavior on behalf of Doña Sosa is particularly curious given her name. In Spanish, the word "sosa", or "soso", means "lacking in salt." Specifically, it refers to the way salt brings out the flavors of food. Something that is "soso" is bland and flavorless. Thus Soledad's grandmother misses the "salty" essence of the sea and attempts to bring it back into her life through sound and cooking:

She dips a spoon in the water and decides it's salty enough. She says it should be salty like the sea. And if I don't remember how salty the sea is, then maybe it's time I go and find out. That might require a trip to the Dominican Republic (Cruz, *Soledad* 73).

This incursion into Soledad's thoughts reminds us that the experience of water is completely sensorial and personal: it engages sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch. In this sense, it can be compared to Soledad's experience of Washington Heights, which is also mediated by the senses.

Like her mother, Olivia feels nostalgia for the Dominican Republic. While Soledad was born in Washington Heights and experienced the sea only sporadically when she went back to the island, for Olivia, water is a way of returning to a past where innocence existed and a better life was possible. To her, the sea is a symbol of freedom and dreams; its scent takes her back to a time before she was forced to become a prostitute, wound up marrying an abusive man, and ended up in NYC with a daughter whose father's identity would elude her forever. This is why, when she enters the comatose-dream state in which she exists in the novel, and which is the reason Soledad returns to Washington Heights, she often dreams of being free and flying. This portrayal of unencumbered movement brings us back to the freely circulating currents of the sea, not the stale water she smells like when she is "sick."<sup>24</sup> In order to live, Olivia needs movement, which is precisely the most problematic aspect of water for Soledad.

Gorda, Olivia's sister, is another woman with an interesting relationship to water. She is the main representative of superstition and the spirit world in Cruz's text, a realm that becomes especially significant given the novel's end.<sup>25</sup> When Olivia falls into her "coma," Gorda mops her sister's floors with Agua Florida (holy water) because she believes evil spirits are holding Olivia hostage. Though unorthodox, this approach is close to the truth since Olivia and Soledad go to the Dominican Republic to visit a spiritual cave with powerful healing waters. Olivia states: "*I want my ears to catch the wind and carry my dreams into the clouds and let them rain over me so I can cleanse my spirit and start again*" (Cruz, *Soledad* 229). Olivia's desire highlights the cyclical nature of this experience as well as its reliance on water, connecting to the tidalectic nature of the Caribbean currents and their emphasis on process.

Throughout the novel, the differences between Olivia and Soledad are underlined. Yet, towards the end we are presented with a moment that links them. Significantly, it takes place in the ocean:

[Soledad] let me carry her into the ocean and then screamed as soon as the hair around her shoulders kissed the salt water. [...] I told her nothing could hurt her in the water. [...] When Soledad cried, I saw her eyes, the color of cinnamon sticks, turn a new-leaf green like my own. (Cruz, *Soledad* 233)

This moment reinforces Soledad's tense relationship with water, which distances her from Olivia, for whom the sea is a safe space. Nonetheless, the moment Soledad cries, something happens. Through the salt water produced by her own body, her tears, her eyes change color, becoming the same green hue present on Olivia's face. Ultimately, it is through