



Introduction

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Source: *Callaloo*, Vol. 23, No. 3, Dominican Republic Literature and Culture (Summer, 2000), pp. 819-820

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3299665>

Accessed: 22/09/2013 21:42

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INTRODUCTION

by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and Consuelo López Springfield

Among the literatures of Latin America and the Caribbean, that of the Dominican Republic, despite being the oldest in the New World, is nonetheless the least familiar to international audiences. The island (or its half of the island it shares with Haiti) has been torn by political strife since it gained its independence early in the 19th century. The salient features of its 20th-century history have been a bloodthirsty dictatorship and failed attempts at democracy. It is not surprising, then, that its rich cultural production has been overshadowed by the notoriety of its political strife. The earliest confrontation between the Spanish conquerors and indigenous Americans took place on its soil; it was in its gold-strewn streams and incipient sugar plantations that the African slaves in the Americas first toiled; it waged repeated wars for independence from Spanish colonialism and Haitian domination in the 19th century only to start fighting anew in the 20th century against American neocolonialism and U.S. Marines.

Yet these very struggles are at the core of its vibrant literature and art, providing its salient themes and motifs. From its very origins in the 16th century, Dominican literature has articulated, in path-breaking ways, the full spectrum of the Caribbean experience. Its writers chronicled both the beauties of a newly discovered world and the horrors ushered in by conquest, colonization, and slavery. They articulated the struggle to forge a national identity out of the uneasy amalgamation of elements from a dominant colonial past and the remnants of peoples destroyed or transculturated. They gave voice to the rich and evocative peasant culture whose values offered a viable alternative to the European-centered culture of the elites. Contemporary Dominican literature, particularly the short story, a genre in which Dominican authors excel, has addressed most eloquently the complexities of race and gender that have been the legacy of colonialism and slavery.

In the 20th century, the literature of the Dominican Republic has been the locus of resistance against dictatorship and neocolonial exploitation. Pedro Mir, one of Latin America's most outstanding and least known poets, wrote with passion about a peasantry rendered landless by the corruption and greed of dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo and his henchmen. Juan Bosch's remarkable short stories chronicled the burden of hunger and misery inflicted on the peasantry by the military's control of a countryside they had despoiled. Bosch followed this literary denunciation with a political activism that led to his election as president of the country as an avowedly socialist candidate—a tenure cut short by the U.S. Marine invasion of 1965. Bosch's interweaving of literature and leftist politics provided a model for literary activism

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emulated by many contemporary Dominican authors from Aída Cartagena Portalatín to Pedro Vergés and Julia Alvarez.

The collection assembled here seeks to offer a broad sampling of the richness and variety of Dominican literary and cultural production in the last three decades. From the works of established, seminal writers like Aída Cartagena Portalatín and Manuel Rueda to the writings of the younger authors just beginning to make their well-earned mark abroad like Ángela Hernández Núñez and José Alcántara Almánzar, we have sought to present a sampling of the diversity of themes and approaches that characterizes contemporary Dominican literature: the enchanted landscape and rich lore of the mountains of the central Dominican mountain range; the perpetually-strained relations between Dominicans and their Haitian neighbors to the west; the nuances of race in a society where skin color has been a powerful determinant of personal and social opportunity; the continued impact of Trujillo's legacy; the repercussions of the American invasion of 1965 and the crippling of the Dominican left; the development of a Dominican literature of migration and exile following the Dominican diaspora of the 1980s and 1990s.

In compiling the materials for this issue we have benefited from the generous assistance of Daisy Cocco de Filippis, Silvio Torres-Saillant and the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, Ángela Hernández Núñez, and Margarite Fernández Olmos. We are most grateful to the many contributors to the volume for their generosity, enthusiasm for the project, and remarkable patience.