

**Afro-Dominican American Women Writers: Gender and Race in
Angie Cruz's *Soledad* and Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints***

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Abstract

In the novels by Afro-Dominican American female authors, Angie Cruz's *Soledad* (2001) and Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints* (2002), I argue that gender and race intervene in the representation of the Dominican diaspora in the United States through transnational migratory experiences. I suggest that Cruz and Rosario employ a matriarchal lineage to recuperate women's agency in their novels of the Dominican diaspora, *Soledad* and *Song of the Water Saints*, to offer an alternative perspective of transnational experiences. They develop female characters, be it in the Dominican countryside or in Latino urban spaces of New York City, that are often marginalized, exoticized, or forgotten in the official discourse of the history of Hispaniola.

Keywords

Dominican Republic, transnationalism, race, gender, diaspora

Contemporary fiction of the post-2000 period by writers of the Dominican diaspora in the United States brings to light the importance of gender and race matters in the context of transnational migrations between the Dominican Republic and the United States. By taking into account the conflicted historical relationship between the Dominican Republic and Haiti for example, one can begin to engage in critical conversations regarding Dominican diasporic writers and their African ancestry in the United States to situate a global multi-ethnic identity. Since the Haitian occupation of the Dominican Republic in the nineteenth century, the US occupations in 1916 and 1965, the Trujillo dictatorship from 1930 to

1960, the massacre of black people on the Dominican-Haitian national border in 1937 (a decree based on race rather than national identity that affected citizens of both nations), migratory patterns have developed in the construction of a Dominican diaspora. Even though racial discrimination may have been legally abolished in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and the United States, institutional discrimination based on race, in conjunction with national identity and socioeconomic background, continues to plague disempowered people of color as they migrate across national borders.¹ In the novels by Afro-Dominican American female authors, Angie Cruz's *Soledad* (2001) and Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints* (2002), I argue that gender and race intervene in the representation of the Dominican diaspora in the United States through transnational migratory experiences.

In the post-2000 period, two important women authors of the Dominican diaspora, Angie Cruz and Nelly Rosario, are concerned with how migrations across the US/Dominican borderlands have affected families, particularly women. This generation of authors which also includes Dominican American Junot Díaz and his Pulitzer prize-winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) offers insightful commentary regarding the dynamics of gender and race matters because they form part of a double diaspora that consists of transnational migrations from Africa to the Caribbean to the United States.² In other words, these women authors engage their African heritage as an important component in the historical recovery of genealogy. Unlike Díaz though, I suggest that Cruz and Rosario employ a matriarchal lineage to recuperate women's agency in their novels of the Dominican diaspora, *Soledad* and *Song of the Water Saints*, to offer an alternative perspective of transnational experiences. They develop female characters, be it in the Dominican countryside or in Latino urban spaces of New York City, that are often marginalized, exoticized, or forgotten in the official discourse of the history of Hispaniola.

1 In "The Tribulations of Blackness," Silvio Torres-Saillant provides an overview of Hispaniola history that eventually led to the independences of the Dominican Republic and Haiti. In *Why the Cocks Fight*, Michele Wucker also follows a similar trajectory in this historical context. In "Voices from Hispaniola," Ginetta Candelario engages writers who descend from both nations in a lively critical conversation.

2 In "The Dominican Diaspora Strikes Back," Heredia offers a definition of double diaspora in relationship to migrations from Africa to the Caribbean to the United States in the context of the Black Atlantic.

Soledad

Born and raised in Washington Heights, New York City, Angie Cruz is the first author of the Dominican diaspora to locate this historically significant Dominican neighborhood on the literary map of American letters in her first novel *Soledad*. This work explores how a young Dominican American woman artist in her twenties living between neighborhoods, Washington Heights and the East Village, in the late twentieth century deals with gender and race matters as much in the Dominican Republic as in the United States. While Cruz focuses on the development of the protagonist Soledad (or loneliness), she also takes into consideration her genealogy through the family's migration from the Dominican Republic to the United States.

Through the representation of a matriarchal genealogy in *Soledad*, Cruz illustrates how the transnational borders can lead to disruptions on local as well as global levels. Soledad's family consists of her mother Olivia, her father Manolo, her aunt Gorda, her cousin Flaca, and her grandparents, Doña Sosa and Don Fernando, all of whom live in Washington Heights. While the grandparents have spent most of their lives in the Dominican Republic, Soledad and her cousin Flaca form part of the Dominican diaspora, raised and educated in the United States. The mother Olivia and her sister Gorda represent the middle generation who are first generation immigrants to settle in the United States. Torres-Saillant observes that Cruz has "populated the novel with very powerful women: Olivia, Gorda, Doña Sosa, Carmel, even Flaca, low-income urban Amazons. One finds them putting up a courageous fight against adversity" (125). In *Soledad*, Cruz explores the context of transnational migrations of Soledad's family who were displaced from their homeland due to economic constraints and the repercussion in the daily lives paying particular attention to gender.

On a more global scale, Cruz also critiques the cultural and economic imperialism imposed by European nations and the United States that affects marginal people, especially women like the mother Olivia from *el campo* (the countryside) in *Soledad*. As mentioned earlier, the US occupation of the Dominican Republic in 1965 by Marines and tourism brought on by world nations had a direct economic and sexual impact on Dominican women. The need for economic employment motivates Dominicans to leave their homeland for the United States or to work in

whatever means necessary to survive. In the novel the character of Olivia was coerced into prostitution by her family in the Dominican Republic. When Soledad returns to Washington Heights to care for her mother who is in a trance, or coma, she discovers a notebook with a list of men, mainly of European nationalities, which alludes to the customers that Olivia had when she worked as a prostitute in the Dominican Republic. At this time Soledad begins to question her paternity and suspects that Manolo, her mother's husband, may not be her biological father. Soledad starts to understand Manolo's anger because he may have felt betrayal by Olivia owing to the previous men in her life. When Olivia met her future husband Manolo on the island, she still believed in hope and a better future so she followed him to the "promised land" for Dominicans in Washington Heights, unaware that her dreams would be constrained as she became a victim of domestic violence. Within these patterns of transnational migrations and cultural displacements, critic Torres-Saillant suggests that the unacknowledged history of race (or blackness) is as much a factor in understanding communities traveling from the Dominican Republic to the United States as are economic factors.³ I would add that gender can also help understand the particular circumstances of immigrant women such as Olivia who may find themselves at the crossroads of historical/economic circumstances beyond their control.

Gender and the Dominican Diaspora

By reconfiguring gender relationships in *Soledad Cruz* alters the family structure by having the women take more active roles and controlling their destiny despite the socioeconomic limitations placed upon them as Dominican urban working-class women. After the abandonment of Flaca's father Raful, the death of Soledad's father Manolo, and the death of the grandfather Don Fernando, Soledad and her female relatives undergo a reversal of roles as her Aunt Gorda, a *curandera* (a folk healer) and Dona Sosa become the physical, emotional and psychological care takers of the family. Unable to deal with the death of her husband Manolo who she believed she pushed from their apartment window, Olivia goes into a

3 In *The Tears of Hispaniola*, Lucía Suárez further explains that the migration to the United States does not always benefit unskilled Dominican immigrants because they continue to live in poverty and in a state of economic dependency on the mainland that may be worse than that of the island.

trance, or a kind of coma, and no longer speaks. With her healing powers, her sister Gorda decides to do a *limpieza* (a spiritual cleansing) of their home to kill off the bad spirits (the ghosts of men from her past) that haunt Olivia, but she later recommends that they visit the Dominican Republic to completely be rid of the bad demons. Olivia must return to the island, the symbolic site of where the exploitation of her body and mind began, to be able to face these demons. This form of healing practiced by women who originate from the Dominican countryside often provides an alternative cure to what Western medication offers. After the death of her husband, Doña Sosa must also learn to be on her own after serving her husband her entire life which is not an easy task for an elderly immigrant woman.

In the meantime, Soledad and Flaca, the daughters of Olivia and Gorda, respectively, represent the youngest generation of the Dominican diaspora who differ from their mothers and grandmother because they are directly tied to mainstream American culture through the educational school system and undergo a different process of learning about their gender identity as Dominican Americans.⁴ Furthermore, they have multiethnic peers like Soledad's Chicana lesbian friend Caramel and Flaca's Haitian American friend Cati in New York City which means that they transcend national boundaries at the social level. In the Dominican diaspora, Cruz illustrates how the formation of new friendships between adolescents leads to transnational alliances that permit community building to combat racial ostracization and gender limitations. If we recall the character of Cati, it is important to note her Haitian heritage. Cruz connects certain cultural practices in healing that are similar between Dominicans and Haitians. In fact, Cati's mother claims that the Haitian "stuff" is far better than the Dominican form of healing, insinuating that a certain rivalry in Vudu is

4 According to Milagros Ricourt in *Dominicans in New York*, "Dominican Americans are a group of individuals that are becoming aware that they are a permanent community in New York City. Dominican Americans are second-generation Dominicans, naturalized individuals, and adults who migrated to the United States as children who feel they belong in New York City. They do have an identity of being Dominican but more commonly and accurately of being Dominican-Americans. Not all Dominicans, however, share this identity. Many Dominicans are 'new immigrants,' Dominicans with less than five years of residency in the United States. New immigrants usually have more loyalties to the Dominican Republic than the United States, and they still dream of returning to their homeland. Other immigrants are those who have more than five years of residency in the United States, yet aspire to maintain a dual identity, with loyalties to both the Dominican Republic and the United States" (2).

at work. It is no small coincidence that this character would point to this detail of heritage because historically many Haitians, who immigrated to the Dominican Republic, came to work the land and settle on the Dominican side of the transnational border, eventually raising families.⁵ In this friendship between Cati and Flaca, Cruz acknowledges the racial and social intermixing between Haitians and Dominicans that transcend the artificial national borders set up by governments because these two groups share something deeper, a cultural heritage as descendants of another diaspora: mother Africa.

In this generation of Dominican Americans, Cruz constructs two models of possible alternative lifestyles available to young women of the Dominican diaspora in the characters, Soledad and Flaca. As young women, both females struggle to achieve freedom from their overprotective mothers who threaten to send them back to live with their relatives in *plátano land* in the Dominican Republic, to teach them a lesson about the hardships in life if they misbehave (17). Since Soledad has more experience in working to be able to live independently, she cannot regress to the dependency of many women of lower socioeconomic background on the island. The difference in age between the cousins may also reflect the maturity levels between the women and the options available to them. While Flaca is a teenage adolescent, Soledad has already completed art school and finds herself living on her own outside of the Dominican community. This independent experience gives Soledad insight into other possibilities and options available to her. In addition, Cruz develops a competitive discourse between the cousins Soledad and Flaca as both fall for the same man, Richie, the Latin jazz player neighbor who also exhibits a different kind of masculinity. As a male of the Dominican diaspora, he is a good listener and does not try to control women, but rather gives them their space. Unlike the domestic violence experienced by Olivia and the abandonment in Gorda's situation, Soledad finds in Richie a man who treats her with respect and appreciates her as a person, not as a victim of objectification. Since he is of a younger generation, perhaps Cruz is commenting that gender roles do change once traveling transnationally.

5 In her highly acclaimed novel *The Farming of Bones* (1999) Haitian American author Edwidge Danticat portrays frankly the situation of Haitian families who live at the border of the Dominican Republic and their tragic fate. Because of their race, and skin color, Haitians were not welcomed by Dominicans and thus, were treated inhumanely.

Cruz demonstrates cultural and generational disparities between daughters and mothers accustomed to values from the Dominican homeland where daughters know their place and do not adopt liberal ways like their female counterparts in the United States. Even though *Soledad* begins with a young Dominican American female who wishes to move away from her neighborhood, Washington Heights, to assimilate into mainstream American circles, her return to her immediate home in Washington Heights to help her family care for her mother, becomes an important lesson in her life. As her politically correct Chicana friend Caramel reminds her, “Soledad, our mamás are our mamás. You know what I mean? It’s a life law. We must honor our mother, our great-grandmothers, no matter what. It’s all one big cycle of events” (90). Caramel provides advice, friendship and almost serves as Soledad’s alter ego and spiritual sister with a third eye, looking after her. Cruz comments on how Dominicans in the US can build a community beyond biological ties and come to one another’s rescue as if they were living on the island, a cultural feature that is quite different from the individualistic values of a US system that can often divide people into separate quarters. The loyalty that the young female friends have for one another transcends biological and transnational ties because they form an alliance of their own as if they were family.

In *Soledad*, Cruz astutely builds a matriarchal lineage across US/Dominican national boundaries through the spoken word of poetry. Soledad becomes an interpreter/translator of the written word to help heal her mother which exemplifies the power of art. On the recommendation of her friend Caramel, Soledad manages to reconnect with her mother and perhaps, even heal her through poetry. She says:

So that’s what I do. I spend time with my mother and read to her. But no longer do I read the trashy stories out of magazines. I read poetry. Caramel was the one who gave me the collection of poetry to read to my mother [...] It was her mother who taught her how important it is to collect words, so she’s always prepared to say something beautiful [...] So my coming over and reading poems to my mother about life, death, love and loss has become this ritual for all of us. My grandmother likes me to read the same poem

over and over again so she can memorize it.
When she finally memorizes a poem, we give her
the stage so she can have her own recital (169).

As the female members in her family participate in this communal activity, Olivia gradually rejuvenates and becomes a child again as she begins playful fights with the other women by shooting water from a straw. The grandmother, being older and wiser, refuses to partake in these childish games. Soledad reflects: “*Están locas?* My grandmother is yelling. Who’s gonna clean this up, eh? But we are laughing so hard, even my mother is hiding her face in her pillow trying to make herself stop. Yes, Gorda is right, my mother is getting better” (170). In this example, Cruz demonstrates that Dominican women across generations can form a transnational community and begin to make their own histories by taking control of their lives.

Dominican Immigrants and the Diaspora Return to the Island

In *Soledad* Cruz provides a more nuanced portrait of the transnational immigrant experience by returning to the homeland, thereby disrupting the traditional pattern of cultural assimilation.⁶ Cruz represents an important journey Soledad and Olivia take as they return to the Dominican homeland to seek a resolution for Olivia’s mental and spiritual state and vanish the ghosts/spirits of the men that Soledad cannot eliminate. Instead of perceiving this voyage *south* as a relaxing vacation, Soledad and her mother become stressed about this return home because it has been a long time since they were in the Dominican Republic and many things have changed. Yet, for Olivia it is where she feels a sense of “home.” Soledad says,

And when I surrender to the warmth of the
water, I feel the past, present, and future become
one. My mother becomes the ocean and the sky,
wrapping herself around me. I can’t remember
where I am or where I am going, but when my
mother’s photograph flips over I see this window
to another world. Her eyes stare back at me and

6 In the chapter “Angie Cruz’s *Let It Rain Coffee* (2005): A Diasporic Response to Multiracial Dominican Migrations,” Heredia also analyzes the significance of the family’s return voyage to the Dominican Republic as a paradoxical experience of welcome and estrangement.

Afro-Dominican American Women Writers

I can hear the high pitch of my mother's scream.
It makes the water lift itself into a wave (227).

Since Soledad is only able to see the immediate consequences of her actions, at first she does not understand her mother's ties to her homeland on the island, but as they return to cure her mother she slowly recognizes the importance of having a Dominican heritage through a literal return to water in nature which can be symbolically linked to a return to the womb, and thus, embrace and appreciate her mother. As a woman writer of the Afro-Dominican diaspora, Cruz's *oeuvre* continues the legacy of her ancestors through the memory of the body in this last powerful image to end the novel.

Song of the Water Saints

In the novel *Song of the Water Saints*, Nelly Rosario chronicles the migrant experiences of a Dominican family in the context of US occupation of the Dominican Republic through the Trujillo dictatorship.⁷ In doing so, Rosario critiques the interference of the US on Dominican/Haitian relations and then, the impact of Trujillo's dictatorship on the Dominican economy that led to the consequential immigration to the United States. Rather than rely on a single narrator to recount the genealogy, Rosario uses an omniscient narrator to represent the lives of four generations of women, including Graciela, Mercedes, Amalfi, and Leila, who must struggle against different kinds of oppression in their particular social contexts on the island and in the mainland.

Preoccupied with violence on the bodies of marginal men and women during moments of civil unrest in Dominican history, Rosario explores the effects of US intervention on the marginal voices of Dominicans. She begins with the feisty character of the great-grandmother, Graciela, who lived during the first US occupation of the Dominican Republic in 1916. At the young age of twelve, Graciela and her boyfriend (and future husband)

⁷ According to Eric Roorda in *The Dictator Next Door*, Trujillo receives his training in military strategies and tactics during this period which eventually prepares and trains him to be president and to control the Dominican Republic. Despite the US attempts at diplomacy through the Good Neighbor Policy, Trujillo managed to avoid this agreement. In fact, he was not even court-martialed and further he was even pardoned after being accused of rape.

Silvio become victims of tourist exploitation as an American photographer, Peter West, uses their bodies by encouraging them to pose sexually for photographs he will sell to Americans and Europeans, or Western eyes.⁸ On a larger scale, the metaphor of young Dominican bodies for tourist consumption, the exotic and erotic of the island, suggests a feminization of the Caribbean as a prostitute who sells her sex for the gratification of others. By calling attention to this physical and sexual exploitation of Dominican bodies, Rosario contests the US's Marine presence on the island during the first occupation. Rather than have the young Dominicans, Graciela and Silvio, fall for the victimization by the *yanquis*, the youngsters take the coins for compensation given to them by West and then, destroy the camera lens that will objectify them. Though the United States may invade the island, Dominican youth resist this colonization by taking back their bodies signaling that they must fight US imperialism politically and sexually. Rosario demonstrates the contradictions of the US's role in Dominican affairs. Rather than bring order and protection to the citizens on the island, in reality the US Marines bring chaos as they take advantage of women, exemplified by the black woman who is raped at the beginning of the narrative. However poverty-stricken Dominicans may be, Rosario cautions how the economic inequality between nations has interconnected the global and local levels of transnational migrations. Because the US occupied the island, they have forced a migration and as a consequence, Dominicans must combat feeling like foreigners to be respected with dignity.

By tracing the matriarchal lineage in *Song of the Water Saints*, Rosario constructs the character of Graciela as a determined and independent individual who will not be held down by convention in marriage or motherhood. Although she marries the fisherman Silvio and has a daughter, Mercedes, she complies with this traditional path to escape patriarchal abuse by her father who uses corporal punishment if his daughter is disobedient. The fact that Silvio is away for six months at a time and does not return at one point, makes Graciela restless at home. Therefore, she begins to seek comfort in the company of a toy maker, Casimiro, who helps raise her daughter. Because he does not maintain consistent employment, Graciela

8 In "Alternative Visions and the Souvenir Collectible in Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints*," Victoria Chevalier provides an excellent discussion on the symbol of photographs and the visual in *Song of the Water Saints*.

must work as a washerwoman to support her daughter. She realizes that her subordinate domestic role is not the lifestyle she seeks and leaves her daughter and Casimiro in search of other opportunities. Rosario examines how working-class women during these times barely had control over their bodies because they had little to say about their choices in a patriarchal society. Graciela had to make the best of her situation, even if it meant transgressing social limitations placed upon her. Since she was a child she showed an interest in a globe which serves as a premonition for the travel around the Dominican Republic that she will undertake.

In *Soledad*, Rosario unveils how the imbalance of power is manifested in the linguistic discrepancy, sexual exploitation and financial inequality between Europeans and Dominicans. On her way to Santiago by train, Graciela meets a European of German-French background, Eli Cavalier, who immediately finds her attractive. Though brief, Rosario illustrates how this relationship is instrumental in understanding gender and race in this context. Although Graciela refuses to remain a destitute individual and takes steps to improve the quality of her life, her future does not take a positive turn with Cavalier. Even if Cavalier is immediately drawn to Graciela, he fetishizes her gender and race. He collects photographs of black women and implies that he has slept with them, making him a consumer of Dominican women's bodies. It is only through her physical body that Graciela matters to Cavalier. Rather than remain an exploited victim, Graciela leaves Cavalier to resume her role as mother and wife back home. Rosario complicates the portrait of gender because women like Graciela must undergo harsh trials and tribulations to attain autonomy within limits placed upon them and beyond their control. Before achieving their goals, they are punished in a patriarchal and racist society and thus, they must suffer the consequences. Unfortunately, Graciela contracts syphilis from Cavalier, which causes her to die in the end.

Nonetheless, in the next generation it is the daughter Mercedes, who inherits Graciela's independent spirit and legacy of transcending her social boundaries. She ameliorates the position of women, especially the working-class women of color, to a certain degree, through her intellect and love of numbers.⁹ While her mother Graciela, her extended maternal

9 In Angie Cruz's "In Conversation with Nelly Rosario," and in Nelly Rosario's, "On Becoming," both authors acknowledge the relevance of black identity and empowerment for the Dominican diaspora, particularly women.

family and her mother's significant man, Casimiro all raise Mercedes, it is worthwhile to note her relationship with the Syrian storekeeper, Mustafá, which begins in her childhood. Since she was four years old, Mercedes ran errands for her mother at the local store owned by Mustafá. On the one hand, Graciela is grateful for his generosity for allowing her to buy items on credit, especially considering her precarious financial situation. On the other hand, Graciela suspects that he may be seducing or taking advantage of Mercedes as she grows into a blossoming teenager at the age of twelve. Little does the mother realize that Mercedes is learning about Mustafá's business by how to manage money, entrepreneurial skills that may secure a future for her daughter to become financially independent. Mustafá points out: "Too bad you don't know how good that girl is with numbers" (Rosario 141). Until this point in the novel, Rosario has illustrated the vulnerable situation of women, who are often portrayed as objects of exchange, with minimal access to agency, voice and their bodies. As an outsider and widower, Mustafá passes down his entrepreneurial skills to Mercedes as if she were his daughter and eventually, leaves his business to her. In turn, she becomes a more clever business person than he, exemplifying that intelligence and innovation transcend gender limitations. With the next generation, a new consciousness emerges with respect to women's autonomy and intellect, thereby, altering the patterns of physical and psychological abuses they experience in the Dominican Republic.

When Mustafá asks Mercedes to look after his store or kiosk while he goes away, she not only learns to be responsible and trustworthy, but she also learns how to negotiate the politics of the time, the Massacre of 1937, so that she and her husband Andrés can survive in the face of police brutality, torture and the disappearance of people under Trujillo's regime.¹⁰ When Rosario constructs Mercedes's public persona, she says, "For the last seven years, many-Mercedes included-feigned devotion toward the man-god [Trujillo], whose portrait was required to be hung in every household" (Rosario 180). Even though Mercedes may not agree with the politics of Trujillo, she had to give the impression and appear that she was in accordance with him because rumors and secrets spread about intellectual

10 See Danticat's short story, "1937," for another rendition of this event from the Haitian side. The Massacre of 1937 of at least 15,000 Haitians in the Dominican Republic under Rafael Leónidas Trujillo's dictatorship (1930-1961) is an atrocious and unforgivable example of genocide in the 20th century that should be remembered to commemorate the forgotten victims.

and professional people “disappearing”—in reality “disappearing” became a code word for torture and murder, for verbalizing the slightest critique of his regime, strategies or tactics. As a shopkeeper, she had to find survival strategies because Trujillo’s government supported and enforced gradually an *anti-haitianismo* attitude among Dominicans regardless if their immediate neighbor shared the island.¹¹ Rosario observes:

Mercedes’ fear during Mustafá’s absence was magnified 18,000 times with news of the genocide of Haitians living on the border between Dominican Republic and Haiti. 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 of damn of human bodies in the western Dajabón River. Reports filtered into the kiosk by word of mouth; the news arrived all the quicker with the many terrified Haitians seeking refuge from the horror in a *yanqui*-owned sugarmill a town away (Rosario 180-181).

Rosario further emphasizes that “Killings happened within Dominican families with Haitian, part-Haitian, or dark-skinned relatives” (181). This example demonstrates that race and color determined if people in the Dominican/Haitian borderlands were going to survive regardless of nationality. At this time, Mercedes also reflects on the Haitian boy Mustafá had accused of stealing when she was a child. She is concerned about Mustafá’s welfare because he has disappeared and is accused of associating with Turks, who do not have a formidable reputation among Dominicans.¹² Clearly, the politics of nationalities and races on the island have serious implications if one associates with “the wrong crowd” during the Trujillo regime. However, Rosario further notes that racism and genocide were interlinked as determining factors in the massacre that they permeated

11 In *Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic*, Ernesto Sagás gives a definition of anti-Haitianism and the debates surrounding its origins.

12 As for the Turkish presence, Rosario often refers to this immigrant group as owners of sugar mills in the Dominican Republic which began during the first US occupation in 1916 (31, 106). Dominican laborers did not trust the Turkish bosses because they were foreign and they reported any suspicious insurgent groups to US authorities (32).

bloodlines and broke a sense of trust and loyalty even among family members.

Through the character of Mercedes, Rosario engages in the possibilities for women to become more autonomous by negotiating politics and managing their own businesses, enabling them to depend on themselves rather than the traditional role offered to them under patriarchy. In the end, Mustafá leaves his kiosk to her which exemplifies another kind of transnational alliance because they are not biologically related. Mercedes, furthermore, marries a decent man, Andrés. Unlike the female lineage in her genealogy, she does not wish to be a passive wife and therefore, expects her husband to be respectful and loyal to her. Mercedes exudes an omnipotent authority that illustrates strength of character. While she suffers many years in attempts to become pregnant, she finally does have a son, Ismael and a daughter, Amalfi. Rosario consciously focuses on the women in the family to show their strengths and flaws in the construction of this matriarchal lineage and their desire to own and reclaim their minds and bodies.

In the next generation of women, Mercedes's rebellious and independent daughter Amalfi becomes a single mother due to her relationship with a lawyer, Porfirio Pimentel, who has no interest in her or their baby, Leila. Her brother Ismael, named after Mustafá's father, also plays a significant role in family affairs because he actively seeks visas for his family to immigrate to the United States for better economic opportunities. Even though the US may no longer occupy the Dominican Republic physically, it left an economic impact causing a migration and displacement of people to the north. Rosario implies that the Dominican Republic cannot accommodate all of its citizens and expect them to survive financially in a nation that Trujillo left bankrupt after his assassination in 1961. In many respects, this event leads to the large transnational migrations of Dominicans to New York City. She notes that in the 1980s Dominicans were the largest immigrant group in New York City, most of whom settled in Washington Heights, similar to Soledad's family in Cruz's novel in the previous section. But not all Dominican immigrants decided to pursue the American Dream. By refusing to join the family's exodus from the Dominican Republic to settle in *Nueba Yol*, or New York, Amalfi exhibits independence, including renouncing motherhood and raising her daughter Leila, similar actions to those of her grandmother Graciela (198).

In the last generation represented in *Song of the Water Saints*, Rosario illustrates a consistency in female fortitude in the character of Graciela's great-granddaughter, Leila, raised by her grandparents, Mercedes and Andrés, who perform the role of guardians, and on occasion by her traveling uncle, Ismael. Raised and educated in Washington Heights in the 1990s the largest Dominican community in the United States at the time, Leila embraces a new vision as far as gaining independence and achieving an education for women of the Dominican diaspora is concerned, endeavors similar to the protagonist Soledad in Cruz's novel. Leila is an epistemophile, lover of knowledge, and treats men equally, eliding their advances, if she so desires. In fact, Leila exhibits such a strong sense of determination that she becomes sexually active at a young age and seeks men without paying attention to boundaries. For example, she becomes involved with a married man, Miguel, whom she claims is "too busy providing for his family to be polyamorous" (225). She also forms part of a community with girlfriends and engages in social activities like attending merengue concerts and seeks male companions without much parental / guardian supervision. Clearly, the lifestyle in the United States for urban female teenagers from the Dominican diaspora transforms from Graciela who relied on men in the Dominican Republic to Leila's independent spirit. Rosario suggests that for this younger generation of women, more options are available for them to decide their own futures. In some respects, Leila resembles her grandmother Mercedes as far as developing her mind is concerned. She is also interested in biology, the study of life, which symbolically contrasts with Trujillo's regime that ended life in the massacre. Despite her rebellious nature, such as running away from home to experience freedom, Leila reflects on her family life as she waits for the train. Rosario says, "Leila missed Mercedes and Andrés, Ismael and Amalfi, and even the great-grandmother [Graciela] she's never met [...] She unpinned Mamá Graciela's crucifix from her bustier and put it in her mouth and was overcome with a desire to love them, to make their lives happy before they all turned to leather, then ash underground" (242). Similar to Cruz, Rosario's memory of the ancestors is just as strong in the diaspora. Through the character of Leila, Rosario anticipates the need to build community and celebrate life with mind and body because one never knows when death may strike unexpectedly as witnessed in the genocide and other social injustices during Trujillo's dictatorship.

In conclusion, the novels by Angie Cruz and Nelly Rosario have shown two distinctive perspectives on the impact of gender and race on the Dominican diaspora through transnational migrations. These women authors urge us to pay attention to the physical and emotional consequences emanating from these experiences caused by questions of empire, occupation, and displacement. By telling their stories, the authors recover marginal voices in history to understand the process of healing the scars on women's bodies and in their minds. In sharing narratives of survival through a genealogical construction, Cruz and Rosario reclaim women's agency to show that in spite of several forms of oppression, women of African descent in the Dominican diaspora can set the course of their future through their agency and voices.

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