

## “Home is where theatre is”: Performing Dominican Transnationalism

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In spite of representing one of the fastest growing populations of Latinos in the United States, a survey of recent literature on Latino playwrights and performers suggests that Dominicans have yet to make a home in the Latino theater community.<sup>1</sup> In constructing a genealogy of Dominican performance in the United States, one might cite two contrasting female pioneers, María Montez (1912-51) and Ilka Tanya Payán (1943-96), the former, yet another “tropical bombshell” in the Latina performance tradition, Universal Picture’s “Queen of Technicolor” and star of more than 20 adventure films, and the latter, an actor-turned lawyer and human rights activist killed by AIDS. Notable male figures include Rolando Barrera, who in the 1940s staged European classics in Spanish in New York City’s Master’s Auditorium, and Mateo Gómez, who has worked in commercial stage and film vehicles since the 1970s (Torres-Saillant and Hernández 128; Ventura). Although there is ample evidence of Dominican actors and writers working in New York City today, most agree that a Dominican theater movement has never coalesced around an exceptional individual or a stage of its own.<sup>2</sup> Foundational Mexican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican theater projects have carved a space for Latino theater in the U.S. cultural landscape, while the “New Latinos” — Colombians, Dominicans, Salvadorans — arriving in large numbers since the 1980s and 1990s enter this ethnic space less apt to form a separate theater company rooted in national identifications.<sup>3</sup> Today, for example, it is no surprise that the actor, composer, and lyricist of Puerto Rican descent, Lin-Manuel Miranda, played the Dominican character Usnavi in his Broadway musical hit *In The Heights* (2008), while a Dominican actor, Francis Mateo, played the Puerto Rican nationalist character Mario in the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater’s 2005 production of Roberto Ramos-Perea’s *Malsasangre: La nueva emigración*

*puertorriqueña* (1987).<sup>4</sup> In addition to the pan-Latino casting, the stories staged in these works favor a Latino diaspora perspective, for they intertwine Cuban, Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Mexican migratory experiences and problematize notions of “home” by questioning the unidirectional migration narrative of assimilation.

Rather than dwelling on the apparent absence of a playwright or director who might serve as catalyst for a Dominican enclave theater in the United States, however, this essay reasons that a transnational approach to Dominican performance reveals the presence of a wealth of theatrical activity that engages with Dominican-U.S. migration. The four pieces analyzed here — *Por hora y a piece work* (1994) by Elizabeth Ovalle, *Ay Fefa, Where is the Wind?* (1994) by Zaida Corniel, *Nuyor/Islas* (2003) by Chiqui Vicioso, and *Dominicanish* (2000) by Josefina Báez — will show that for transnational migrants “home” can be conceived of as pluri-local and mobile. Likewise, we might consider Dominican theater as a multi-sited transnational practice in which authors, actors, and audiences make temporary homes for displaying bodies and discourses not always recognized by the majoritarian culture of the nation-state.<sup>5</sup> Anthropologists Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc succinctly define transnationalism as “a process by which migrants, through their daily life activities and social, economic, and political relations, create social fields that cross national boundaries” (22). The Dominican Republic figures prominently in the literature on transnationalism, since “the large size of the migration flows, and the relatively short period time in which they occurred caused a large transformation in Dominican society, making the Dominican case a paradigmatic one for the study of the rise of transnationalism” (Itzigsohn et al. 318). Contemporary Dominican writers and performers such as Josefina Báez, Frank Disla, Waddys Jáquez, Claudio Mir, and Chiqui Vicioso clearly are staging new ways to imagine Dominican identity as deterritorialized, diverse, and in flux. For these artists, both the artistic processes of production and reception are embedded in a field of relationships that simultaneously links them to two nation-states. Like the characters in their plays who perform the social scenarios of migration, the playwrights and their creative endeavors are psychically and materially invested in more than one geopolitical space. As a result, their work can be easily overlooked, since it does not fall easily into the categories of a minority U.S. Latino theater or a national Dominican theater. I argue that we must attend to transnational Dominican performance, because its engagement with difference and exclusion and its challenge to hegemonic notions of

citizenship encourage new thinking about how twenty-first century Latin/o American theater artists intervene in a cultural politics that, in a globalized world, transcends national borders.

Just as diasporas have always been transnational, the theater has always moved across local, regional, and national borders. From the more modest reach of itinerant players, community-based theater projects, and experimental intercultural performances, to national theater productions and blockbuster musicals exported for international consumption, theater has continuously traveled and circulated ideas that assume different critical consciousnesses in new contexts. What distinguishes contemporary diasporas in the age of rapid movement of bodies, cultures, and above all, capital, “is the intensity and reciprocity of the ties between emigrant or exiled populations and their countries of origin” (Flores 22). To speak of the creation of transnational networks or communities is to collapse “aquí” and “allá,” which depending on the transmigrant’s temporary vantage point is the homeland or the host land, into a common, yet multi-sited social field. The cultural work of Dominican theater artists who move between the island and the U.S. addresses both locations and helps imagine a transnational Dominican community. In his recent study *The Diaspora Strikes Back: Caribeño Tales of Learning and Turning* (2009), Juan Flores shifts the focus of much transnational analysis from economic remittances, and their social and political consequences on the sending societies, to what he calls “cultural remittances” (44). Much contemporary migration is characterized by circular “counterstreams” of return migration — physical or socioeconomic, temporary or permanent, forced or optional — to the homelands (Flores 39). Flores writes: “By means of return and circulatory migration and multiple conduits of mediated and direct communications, cultural customs and practices, ideological orientations, forms of artistic expression, and ideas of group identity acquired in diaspora settings are remitted to homeland societies” (44). While Flores looks to music and youth culture for examples of cultural remittances, I turn to the specific performance activity of theater, which has yet to appear on the radar screens of most Dominican cultural analyses. As I have noted, theaters and performers travel, and though its cultural remittance may not be as pervasive as the mass market of music and fashion, the performance event offers a unique setting where new styles and ideologies are “rehearsed” in front of a collective body of people who may identify or disidentify with them.

Staging scenarios of migration is part of a counterstream that exerts pressure to expand notions of national identity. Transnational diaspora life,

observes Flores, “necessarily stretches the meaning of national belonging by disengaging it from its presumed territorial and linguistic imperative, and de-centering it in relation to any putative ‘core’ values or markers of greater or lesser ‘authenticity’” (45). Studies on migration spanning the humanities and the social sciences have extended the geographic and linguistic boundaries of Dominican national culture and have illuminated the many ways in which the diaspora has contested elitist, hispanocentric, and paternalistic official constructions of *dominicanidad*.<sup>6</sup> In the area of cultural and literary studies Silvio Torres-Saillant has been an insistent voice in placing migration at the center of the Dominican national imaginary. He argues in *El retorno de las yolas: Ensayos sobre diáspora, democracia y dominicanidad* (1999) that whether or not they voyaged to the U.S. on rickety boats known as *yolas*, all Dominican residents abroad are survivors of a perilous journey, a forced migration provoked by the state’s failure to provide social and economic security for the vast majority of its population (424). Yet the discourse on migration that has emanated from the island has rarely acknowledged state responsibility for the exodus, and in fact has reacted defensively by portraying migrants, at best, as traitors and, at worst, as stereotyped “Dominicanyorks.”<sup>7</sup> The cultural remittance or “retorno” referred to by Torres-Saillant is not the nostalgic return to the homeland; rather, it is a transnational lens through which to view the island *and* the Dominican community abroad.<sup>8</sup> It is a critical gaze directed at reconceptualizing Dominican identity from the perspective of the lessons learned from the diaspora (38). The performance texts *Por hora y a piece work*, *Ay Fefa*, *Where is the Wind?*, *Nuyor/Islas*, and *Dominicanish* embody Torres-Saillant’s “diasporic perspective” to varying degrees. In what follows, I will consider the “politics of representation” in the dramatization of return migration. The stories of return I will analyze briefly here juxtapose contradictory discourses on migration and in large part refuse to construct binary nativist/diasporic positions on *dominicanidad*.

These pieces, all written and performed by women, constitute examples of Dominican transnational performance not only because they explicitly treat the theme of migration, but also because each author’s creative process and vision is generated in a social network that spans two nation-states. The transnational character of their work helps explain why these and other playwrights and performers are neither considered central to Dominican national culture nor are included in studies of U.S. Latino theater. Nevertheless, *Stages of Life: Transcultural Performance and Identity in U.S. Latina Theater* (2001) by Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporta-Sternbach provides a useful

framework for posing preliminary questions about Dominican transnational theater. In this study, the authors call “politics of representation” the process by which “playwrights dismantle and undo dominant stereotypical representations at the same time that they revise and rearticulate new ways of seeing” (4). In the same way Torres-Saillant’s diasporic perspective creates a space for countering negative representations of Dominican migrant identity, plays can negate the Dominicanyork stereotype through stories that reveal how the migrant community is comprised of Dominican men and women from various regions and social backgrounds who have migrated for different reasons at discrete historical junctures, and who have lived the diaspora in diverse ways: as ethnic enclaves in the Northeast, as returnees to the island, and as Dominican migrants who continue to circulate.<sup>9</sup> Gender informs migration as well, and the female protagonism of the plays studied here heightens awareness of the Dominicanyork label as a masculinist construction. Unlike the images of young Dominican men returning to the island in caskets, victims of drug violence disseminated by the press and films such as *Nueva Yol* (Dir. Ángel Muñiz, 1993), the plays portray stories of return migrations in which the outcomes for the female protagonists are open ended.

The common denominators of Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Cuban theaters identified by Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta Sternbach — “migration, nostalgia, ethnic memory, transcultural identity and home” (48) — are salient for Dominican theater as well, though in response to its own migration experience. The return event depicted in the plays analyzed here can be understood as one of the “stages of life” outlined in the authors’ theory of transcultural subjectivity. They argue that “at specific moments of cultural crisis, identities are reevaluated, revised, reformed, and transformed,” and that the ongoing process of negotiating identity represents the core dramatic action in Latina theater and solo performance (9). Nonetheless, in the context of transnationalism, the concepts of home and return must be read differently. Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta Sternbach’s study speaks to earlier migration narratives of assimilation and multiculturalism/diaspora, whereas my focus on Dominican migration is framed by the current master narrative of migration, transnationalism/globalization.<sup>10</sup> For example, in *Stages of Life* the authors discuss the theme of home as follows:

the search for “home” is crucial in the process of establishing a bilingual, bicultural Latina/o identity, both for new immigrants as well as for those generations born on the mainland of the U.S. Since the 1980s, in the theater, as in other literary genres, the mythical return

to the homeland becomes a rude awakening from those expected utopian or imaginary spaces. This painful but necessary process of returning to one's ethnic and cultural roots as well as geographical origin helps to consolidate and establish a Latina transcultural identity. (Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta-Sternbach 48)

To establish a bicultural and bilingual home in the U.S., however much this transcultural identity is continually negotiated, represents a sort of stop point or *dénouement* to the drama of identity. Return migration, by contrast, extends this drama and multiplies homes and identities. Upon return, the identity and home forged in the U.S. is scrutinized from the perspective of Dominican national culture; conversely, the returnee evaluates what once was home, and what it means to re-make a home there.

As the scholarship in *Migrations and Mobilities: Citizenship, Borders, and Gender* (2009) indicates, women's movement across borders is rarely a question of a single individual; rather, their mobility constitutes "a nodal point in a network of relationships" that involves dependents and partners (13). The motives for migrating and returning are conditioned by both this network of relationships and U.S. and Dominican Republic economic interdependencies. Similarly, women's conceptions of their social and economic roles are informed by family relationships and by different notions of gender roles in both societies. Homecomings, notes migration studies scholar Anders H. Stefansson, "often contains elements for rupture, surprise, and perhaps, disillusionment" (4). The affective power of this social scenario inevitably evokes theatrical metaphors such as the "drama of return." Undoubtedly, shifting understandings of gender roles add to these tensions.

Elizabeth Ovalle's social realist play, *Por hora y a piece work* underscores the anxieties regarding the unprecedented growth in migration during the 1990s that played out in the public sphere. The play premiered in Santo Domingo in 1994, a year after Ovalle had returned from a four-year stay in New York City, where, like many other Dominicans, she held working class jobs in supermarkets and factories (Coronado).<sup>11</sup> Perhaps due to her experiences and the fact that island discourse on migration was at its most damaging in the early to mid-1990s, the play does little to attenuate negative media representations of migration, and, in effect, serves for Santo Domingo audiences as a cautionary tale that details the dangers of abandoning the homeland. The Dominican jury awarding the prestigious Casa de Teatro competition seems to have been receptive to this message, for it awarded the play first prize in its annual competition.

The action takes place in a work space and, at first glance, seems to be about arrival and adaptation rather than return because it tells the story of a recently arrived *campesina* named Juana who takes a job at a garment factory in New York City. The workers are Dominican, but there is little sense of solidarity; rather, Juana discovers a hierarchy based on their regional origins and mode of arrival, length of time in the U.S., and legal status. In this regard, the play does highlight the complexity of Dominican migrants as a social group. Through the workers' daily conversations, we intuit that the burden of survival erodes most efforts at building camaraderie. They speak of New York as a hostile and dangerous urban space, of the ways to acquire legal status and to maneuver the welfare system, and of the pressures to perform at work, where the boss makes sexual advances and constantly threatens to impose sweatshop conditions by paying by the piece rather than by the hour. The workers also emphasize the struggle to subsist in New York, let alone the imperative to provide material goods for family back on the island and to save enough money to be reunited, whether in the U.S. or by returning to the Dominican Republic.

Ovalle captures the idiosyncratic speech of urban and rural lower class Dominicans with great realism, but the brief, one-act play loses some credibility in the overwhelming number of "realistic" details that cast migration in only a negative light. Much of women's dialogue about their hardships rings true, but the male characters are underdeveloped and simply reify stereotypical Dominican gender categories. These characters include Sr. Recio, the heavy-handed social climber boss, the requisite drug dealer shot in front of the factory, the intellectually empty and style conscious "cadenu"/Dominicanoyork, Manuel, and the effeminate lottery-seller, Fifo, whose gay identity is signaled by his difference. These are precisely the types stigmatized by island residents as not-authentically Dominican, who, in a Santo Domingo theater might be met with disparagement or even laughter, whereas the problems discussed by the women might be received with a measure of sympathy.

The theme of return enters at the play's climax, when migration officers seize the factory and deport the undocumented workers. This is a *deus ex machina* moment, since Juana's young daughters, who had just arrived from the island to be reunited with their mother, instantly reject New York and wish to return home: "Allá está mi abuelita, mi gato tito, la gallina jabá y hasta una hortaliza que hice con mamá, me gusta más allá, quiero estar allá, allá" (36). "Allá" (The Dominican Republic) signifies family, land, and a whole host of values that contrast with what the play has presented as the

world of “aquí” (New York). Like her daughters, Juana identifies with the land: “mire yo soy muy pobre aquí y en mi campo, pero por lo menos que si sembraba 10 matas de batata, iba a conseguir 50 batatas y son más” (37). Fortunately, deportation means free tickets home. The return in this play thus marks a moment of cultural crisis in which the protagonist disidentifies with a diasporic identity and reaffirms traditional constructions of *dominicanidad* by linking territory and authenticity. The untold story is how Juana and her daughters experience reterritorialization. On the one hand, one might assume that the family’s short-lived experience in New York spared them from the stigma of returning to the island with “costumbres” acquired abroad, but on the other hand, their brief stay did not permit any accumulation of cultural or economic capital that might equip Juana to face innovatively the conditions that forced her original migration.<sup>12</sup> In other words, Juana’s return migration may just be a stopping point on a migration circuit fueled by economic inequities.

Zaida Corniel’s bilingual poetic monologue, *Ay Fefa, Where is the Wind*, takes the theme of return a step further than Ovalle’s play and dramatizes the very moment of arrival home after a thirty-year absence.<sup>13</sup> The return scenario unfolds as the expected welcome home party for Fefa fails to materialize and she is left alone to deliver a poignant and increasingly inebriated monologue in which she grapples with the reality that even at “home,” she continues to be in a state of cultural limbo. This liminal state is reinforced by the bare stage, which features a set of trunks, and at one point, a doll house. “Home” has become as portable and transient as luggage, and both the trunks stuffed with material goods and the toy house signify the economic forces and desires moving mass numbers of people around the globe.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the monologue, Fefa’s mother intermittently joins her onstage, repeatedly asking in Spanish if she has found the wind. The mother has died, and Fefa is tormented by not having been able to return to the island before her death. In this piece, there is to be no reunion with the mother, a figure for the *madre patria*.

The image of young Fefa running in pursuit of the wind with her arms making a windmill motion establishes her as a quixotic dreamer, but in her migration story we see the pull of economic opportunity and the push of the 1965 political crisis as the main triggers for her migration.<sup>15</sup> In countering reductionist portraits of Dominican migration experience, it is important to note that Fefa’s urban and middle-class origins contrast with Juana’s poor rural background and desperate and illegal journey to the United States in *Por*



*hora y a piece work*. Both protagonists, however, are single mothers. In the United States, Fefa's personal dream of becoming a singer quickly becomes sidetracked by the reality of supporting two sons on her own, but she does achieve the American dream of financial security by working at a factory that makes symbolically significant pacifiers. The monotonous job of checking the quality of pacifiers invades her dreams. In one, enormous pacifiers overtake her room and melt: "My breath was getting short. I screamed mamá, mamá. Then a pacifier shut me off" (9). Haunted by her break with her mother/land, economic success is only a pacifier, or a false mother that satiates the desire for money, but does not nourish the soul.

Although Fefa was not able to satisfy her personal aspirations —"I think that my arms could not find the right wind" (9) — she is able to retire in the Dominican Republic in relative style. As she sits alone and contemplates the contents of a doll house, however, we wonder if achieving material success was worth the crisis of identity she now faces. From the moment she lands in Santo Domingo, it is evident that she is not perceived as Dominican: a customs officer tells her she does not look very Dominican, a money changer immediately identifies her as someone with dollars to exchange, and a taxi driver tries to overcharge her as though she were a foreigner. The overwhelming anonymity she feels is very similar to an immigrant arriving in a new land: "I was confused among the crowds that were waiting for families and friends. I was looking for a familiar face but there were too many faces and I didn't recognize any of them. Nobody seemed to know me" (6). While Fefa may insist that she never spiritually left the island, and that she has not changed, the hurt of not being welcomed home launches her into adopting an outsider perspective: "Mierda, this is what you call a Banana Republic. I don't know why I have to come back. I must be crazy when I thought about this. Here people don't respect the line, the traffic is a mess, black outs all the time. I better go back where I came from" (10). Fefa is forced to reassess what was previously a given, that "home" is identified with land and birthplace.

Too often transnational identity is invoked to celebrate nomadic and hybrid identities without recognizing the vulnerability of this identity position with respect to the dominant cultures in the sending and receiving nation-states.<sup>16</sup> "Aquí" or "allá," Fefa is perceived as a foreigner. The potential communication represented by the telephone in New York — receiving a message, she says, "is like an invitation not to kill yourself" (6) — turns out to be a similar lifeline in Santo Domingo. The phone rings, and Fefa answers, explaining that she's Fefita, "la hija de la Toña," back from New York. It ap-

pears that the call is just a wrong number, but the stranger on the other end of the line stays on and inquires about any U.S. goods Fefa might have to sell, and Fefa, desperate to talk to someone, animatedly begins listing items. In this final moment, how Fefa will negotiate her transnational identity is left unanswered, while the economic interdependence of the island/diaspora relationship is made abundantly clear. However, unlike the first play, Fefa's financial situation is not likely to motivate a remigration. Instead, the play's drama of return displays what Sefansson identifies as the "mismatch between the imagined and experienced homecoming" (8), which "can be more difficult and emotionally destabilizing than leaving home and settling in a new part of the world" (8). If Fefa cannot find a fit in her new/old home, one outcome could be rejoining her adult children in the United States, that is, returning to her old/new home.

In Chiqui Vicioso's 2003 play *Nuyor/Islas*, the protagonist is in a slightly different stage of return, since she is settled in a returnee community.<sup>17</sup> Like the previous monologue, loneliness is central to the protagonist's return experience to the Dominican Republic. The play's title references different levels of insularity such as the islands of Hispaniola and Manhattan, the spaces of insularity or isolation experienced by migrants and returnees in both locations, and the solitude of old age. The play accomplishes what Margo Milleret has pointed out as a rare occurrence in Latin American theater, it grants visibility to an aging woman (159). Moreover, it gives Doña Ramona the play's sole speaking role. Her monologue, however, is really a dialogue with a silent interlocutor who she thinks has come to collect payment. The unspoken dialogue is significant because, similar to the voice on the other end of the line in *Ay Fefa*, the presence of the bill collector adds the implicit perspective of the islander. In both instances, telephone conversations evoke a desire for more dialogue between the island and the diaspora.

We can only assume that the bill collector tolerates the lengthy, rambling conversation because Doña Ramona's mix of charm, good humor, and pathos makes him a captive audience. Doña Ramona is a compellingly contradictory character. She brought traditional elitist Dominican notions of race, class, and gender to New York, and she seems anxious to reassert them in front of a non-migrant national who understands that she has economic power but lacks social status for having migrated. She reiterates, for example, that in New York she always maintained her status as a classy lady from a good family and distanced herself from her fellow Haitian factory workers. These assertions ring hollow, nevertheless, in the context of her relationship

with her daughter, who she hoped to groom as a Grace Kelly, but who chose to emulate the looks and activism of Tracy Chapman. When Doña Ramona lived in New York, her socially conscious daughter pointed out that all Dominicans are racialized in the U.S: “todos los dominicanos somos negros y que a los gringos les importa un carajo si eres Báez o Viccini” (70). Now residing in the Dominican Republic, Doña Ramona admits: “Ella siempre tuvo la razón. Tanto fastidiar con los haitianos y ellos son tan pobres como nosotros y nosotros somos los haitianos de Nueva York” (76).

New understandings of race, class, and gender are some of the lessons that form part of the cultural remittances of the diaspora that “return” directly and indirectly to the island. Vicioso’s play includes more examples of cultural exchanges and forms of hybridity than the first two pieces. It also avoids portraying the island population as entirely traditionalist or trapping it in a nostalgic gaze. For example, even though the non-migrant character in the play does not speak, we can surmise from Doña Ramona’s conversation that he is not the typical male that she might remember from the 1960s: he is not overly macho, he does not practice a religion, and he does not eat meat. Food constitutes a cultural signifier, and ironically, it is Doña Ramona, the returned migrant, who delights non-migrant locals with “authentic” *pan de agua* no longer made on the island (69). Conversely, in New York, the play shows that Dominicans and their cultural impact extends beyond the labor force. Doña Ramona’s *gringo* boss would jokingly chide her for eating a sandwich, yogurt, and salad for lunch, while he longed for the delicious rice and beans that she would make with Dominican ingredients bought in New York *marketas*. Doña Ramona’s obvious loneliness and isolation in a returnee community, however, suggests the ambivalent and marginal space afforded to return migrants who embody hybrid subject positions.

The returns performed in Ovalle, Corniel, and Vicioso’s plays embody varying degrees of cultural remittance, and, as I have suggested, varying probabilities of rediasporization. In these plays, hegemonic views of Dominican identity as homogenous and territorially bounded contrast with alternative diasporic perspectives, but the experience of return contains and complicates both positions. The politics of representation Ovalle’s *Por hora y a piece work* provide the least amount of space for a dialogue, for the play does little to question entrenched positions on *dominicanidad*. The monologues by Corniel and Vicioso, by contrast, place audiences in a more complex interpretative position and, like the one-sided conversations in both plays, invite a two-way exchange on the problem of transnational identity.

Josefina Báez's solo performance piece *Dominicanish* (2000) takes a more drastic step and forces such a conversation by bombarding the spectator with verbal and visual references to migratory experiences that cross at least three national borders as well as intra-ethnic boundaries.<sup>18</sup> By way of conclusion, I will briefly examine *Dominicanish*, a spoken word poetry/dance performance text in which Báez poetically and gesturally recreates her immigration to New York City and her subsequent movements within the city, return trips to the Dominican Republic, and visits to India.

Unlike the previous migration scenarios in which the protagonists leave the U.S. and return home to the Dominican Republic, in *Dominicanish*, the home to which the author/performer returns is New York City. In the text's preface Báez defiantly states: "Yo soy una Dominican York. Y esta condición me otorga una infinidad de estímulos constantes y variados. Enriqueciendo my cultura personal en formas inesperadas" (7). On the one hand, "una Dominican York" identifies a particular U.S. Latina identity and suggests that her drama of identity has been making a bicultural home in New York. Indeed, one of the text's stories of migration is the artist as an adolescent adapting to North American culture, especially the experience of learning English. On the other hand, Báez's statement suggests that her bicultural condition uniquely positions her to be open to the world of cultural influences surrounding her, implying that her identity can never truly be fixed and is always on the move. This dynamism is reflected in Báez's simultaneous recitation of her poem while in constant motion as she performs steps and hand gestures from the Southern Indian dance tradition of Kuchipudi. The text itself also performs motion, for each page of *Dominicanish* features a small image of Báez in the lower right corner that varies slightly. Quickly flipping the pages animates the image, imitating the dance movements one sees in the performed version of the text. The reader thus views the text and a dance performance as well as reads it; moreover, the graphic arrangement of the words, much like a list, defies the linear process of reading from left to right and encourages the reader to look from top to bottom as well. Although *Dominicanish* is clearly the most "Latino" text included in this study, Báez's tale of migration does not end with the formation of a transcultural Latina identity; rather, it is one narrative thread included in the performance of the multidirectional movement of transmigrants and of the ties — cultural, political, economic — they maintain with more than one nation-state.

Similar to Corniel in *Ay Fefa*, Báez alludes to the political unrest that motivated Dominican migration in the mid-1960s:

One way to Santo Domingo  
 Exchange today 12.50  
 Trips to the airport rest in peace  
 Balaguer leave us the fuck alone leave us alone (23)<sup>19</sup>

The reference to the Balaguer regime that pushed Dominicans to leave their country is linked to their return, the one-way tickets back to the Dominican Republic. The multiple “trips” to the airport suggests that the one-way flights end up to be round trip journeys. The invective against Balaguer in English, followed by a reference to a march “to take back our streets” underscores the speaker’s location in the U.S. and her investment in politics both there and in the Dominican Republic. As we will see in the quote below, “here” is the host land and “there” is the homeland, and although repeat return trips help sustain transnational connections, they also foreground the impossibility of returning to one’s origins and to the creation of a transcultural identity:

I went back there on vacation  
 There is La Romana  
 Here is 107<sup>th</sup> street ok  
**Tú sabes inglés?**  
**Ay habla un chin para nosotros ver si**  
**tu sabes**  
 I was changed they were changed he she it  
 Were changed too

...

Back home home is 107 ok  
 Full fridge full of *morirsoñando* con minute maid  
 To die dreaming of a maid in a minute (31)

The phrases in bold represent the voices of non-migrant Dominicans and capture Báez’s experience of being treated as a tourist or an outsider in her home country, while at the same the phrases sounding like a grammar lesson indicate that all the participants in the return visit scenario have changed. That the speakers are interested in finding out how much English Báez knows reflects more than curiosity on the part of the non-migrants, it reveals how the cultural influences like language return to the island and make an impact on national culture. For Báez, there is no going back to a supposed authentic Dominican culture, but there are ways sustaining links with the homeland. In New York, a Dominican fruit drink, *morirsoñando*, is still made, but with Minute Maid orange juice. The play with the words “minute” and “maid” reveal the asymmetrical power relationships governing transnationalism,

and remind us of the vulnerable socioeconomic and legal status of many Dominicans in the U.S., but the linguistic creativity of the poetic voice and the improvised version of *morirsoñando* also suggest strategic adaptation and resistance.

Báez's dominance of English in the context of the U.S. performs transnationalism differently than it does during her return trips to the island. Learning English is depicted, at first, as awkward and painful and by the end, as liberating. The text, as a whole, is a celebration of "Dominicanish," Báez's Dominican Spanish-inflected English and her hybrid, "sort of" Dominican identity. Caught between the bilingual students and the North Americans, young Báez had no "homeroom" at school where she could feel comfortable (32). She notes that "Hablo como Boricua / Y me peino como Morena" (43) and arrives at celebrating her Afro-Latina roots not through formal education but by means of the alternative school of popular music. She finds teachers and texts in the album covers and songs of groups like the Isely Brothers and soon she is "Frequent flying to the dictionary grooving it" (30) and going on a "Tour of idiomatic expression" (35). At the same time she finds a language in the soul music of the 1970s, her body also moves to the Latin beats of Dominican New York-based musician Johnny Pacheco: "Suerte que la 107 se arrulla con Pacheco" (107) and balladeer idol Fausto Rey.

Sports, too, along with language and music, forge racially-inflected transnational socio-cultural sensibilities. In the following segment, in which Báez affirms her black identity, I argue that she alludes to Chico Escuela, a role played by Garrett Morris, the first Afro-American actor to perform on the television sketch comedy *Saturday Night Live*:

Discos del alma con afro. Con afro black is  
beautiful. Black is a color. Black is my color.  
My cat is black.  
But first of all baseball has been very very  
very good to me (26)

Between 1975-80 Morris played Chico Escuela, a Dominican baseball player for the New York Mets, who helped Jane Curtain with the nightly news broadcast. His English was limited, and the running joke was for him to insert the accented phrase "baseball has been berry, berry good to me" whenever he was unsure of how to respond to the newscaster's questions. The gesture of remembering Chico Escuela is important — he may have been the only Dominican character on American television in the 1970s, and he may have been the butt of what might be perceived as a racist joke, but above all I

think Báez's recuperation of this character is a playful reminder that the cross fertilization of U.S. and Dominican cultures is nothing new.<sup>20</sup> Baseball has long been a transnational sport with deep roots in the Caribbean. Today, U.S. major league baseball is indisputably transnational—players from Asia and the Caribbean diaspora bring money, skills, and styles across borders and perform for television viewers all over the world. While baseball has been “good” to minority athletes by creating social and economic advancement, at the very end of her monologue Báez claims that “I have been good to baseball too” (49), suggesting that Latino talent has transformed major league baseball in positive ways. By extension, one woman's story performed in *Dominicanish* illuminates how the cultural remittances of Dominicans and Dominicanyorks have enriched both U.S. and Dominican cultures.

The four performance pieces discussed here stage women on a transnational U.S.- Dominican migratory circuit who return home, in each case, at least temporarily. Living across physical and cultural boundaries involves transmigrants in acts of imagining, moving, creating, and remembering homes, physical places that signify one's sense of national, cultural, and social belonging. In each text, the characters who return are engaged in claiming and being claimed by two nation-states, a paradoxically vulnerable and empowering position that informs how they articulate their concepts of self and society. Likewise, the creators of these stories have lived a transnational life in different ways, ranging from Ovalle being the most permanently situated in the Dominican Republic to Báez choosing New York for her home base. A transnational lens highlights the particularities of the Dominican migration experience and is useful in unpacking the politics of representation in constructions of *dominicanidad*. Not only do Dominican plays about migration counter stereotypical images of Dominican identity, they articulate new ways of understanding the meanings of national belonging. In *Dominicanish*, Báez claims, “Home is where theatre is” (37). The artistic endeavor of theater is an act of home-making. The collective speech and action of the theater forges a site of visibility and constitutes an exercise in participating in a multilocal public sphere. Envisioning contemporary Dominican theater as transnational focuses our attention on the margins of both U.S. Latino and Latin American theater traditions and it calls us to imagine new audiences, new critical approaches, and new practices in arts funding. Just as real life transmigrants labor to be recognized as full citizens and compel us to form new understandings of political and personal belonging, the creative projects

of transnational theater artists oblige us to reassess the national and ethnic categories in which much artistic production has been bound.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, excellent and wide-ranging studies such as Caridad Svich and María Teresa Marrero's *Out of the Fringe: Contemporary Latina/o Theater and Performance* (2000), Alicia Arrizón and Lillian Manzor's *Latinas on Stage* (2000), Luis A. Ramos-García's edited volume *The State of Latino Theater in the United States: Hybridity, Transculturation, and Identity* (2002), and most recently, Jon D. Rossini's *Contemporary Latino/a Theater: Wrighting Ethnicity* (2008). Casting a wider net beyond theater and performance studies, one discovers that Julia Álvarez and Pulitzer Prize winner Junot Díaz are the only U.S.-based Dominican authors who appear in anthologies of Latino literature with certain frequency.

<sup>2</sup> An account of Dominican theater in New York City is a project yet to be completed by theater historians. As a point of departure, we might note how theater projects created expressly to develop Latino playwrights and actors, such as Miriam Colón-Valle's Puerto Rican Traveling Theater founded in 1967, contrast with today's theater scene. In the late 1990s, for example, Dominican theater practitioner Roy Arias founded the company Teatro Estudio Internacional, which was housed in the Times Square Arts Center. The space was hailed in the press as the only Dominican theater in New York ("Se inaugura"). Indeed, one of the stages was named after Ilka Tanya Payán, Arias's former mentor, and the theater did produce some works with Caribbean themes (A.B. Lugo). However, as the name might have foreseen, "Teatro Estudio Internacional" never became a Dominican theater. The space is now advertised as "Roy Arias Studios and Theatres," which offers dance classes and rents the stage venues for rehearsals and performances (Roy Arias web site). A Dominican theater company in New York City will probably never develop, which makes the task of theater historians all the more challenging.

<sup>3</sup> Studies by the Mumford Center indicate that since 1990, the number of New Latinos has more than doubled, from 3.0 million to 6.1 million (Logan 1), and that this population is growing more rapidly than Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans, the traditionally largest groups. The total Dominican population, for example, grew from 596,700 in 1990 to 1.1 million in 2000, representing an 89% percent growth rate (Grieco 4). In the context of New York City, this meant that 1 in 5 new immigrants to the city was Dominican, which represented a 50% increase over the rate of the previous decade (Torres-Saillant and Hernández 150).

<sup>4</sup> Obviously Latinos of different origins have always collaborated in the theater, I simply wish to point out that the growing frequency of Latinos performing each other coincides with a heightened consciousness of a new politics of identity/difference in a global context.

<sup>5</sup> As the conclusion will make clear, my article title references a line from *Dominicanish*, though it also has resonance with Sharon Magnarelli's book title, *Home is where the He(art) is: The Family Romance in Late Twentieth-century Mexican and Argentine Theatre*. However, associating home and theater in my study is meant to underscore the notion of forging a transnational public sphere; that is, I am not focusing as sharply on family relationships as a metaphor for nation or on changing dramatic representations of family as Magnarelli does in her book and I do in mine on Cuban and Puerto Rican drama.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, studies by Ernesto Sagás and Sintia E. Molina, Peggy Levitt, Sherri Grasmuck and Patricia Pessar, Silvio Torres-Saillant, and Jorge Duany.



<sup>7</sup> In public discourse, Dominicans who have lived abroad have been referred to variously as *Dominicanyorks*, *Dominican Yorks*, *Dominicans*, and *cadenu*. Each label carries the stigma of exclusion, and to varying degrees, they are linked to class pretensions and criminal activities. Based on interviews with residents of Santo Domingo *barrios*, Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof teases out the different meanings of the terms:

*Dominicanyork* referred to a suspect place, and in its shortened version *dominican*, to the English language pronunciation of the national marker, *dominicano*. But *cadenu* referred specifically to cultural artifacts, to symbols of consumer power. Gold chains stood in for the accusation of drug dealing, and more broadly for the foreign-inspired class pretensions of Dominicans with no real cultura [sic]. (230)

<sup>8</sup> Torres-Saillant explains that his title references Max Henríquez Ureña's essay "El retorno de los galeones" (1930) which pointed out how the modernist movement paradoxically "llevó su fuerza renovadora de América a España a España a aquella imperial Iberia que había venido a la región con sus poderosas naves durante la conquista (1963:25)" (393).

<sup>9</sup> Although 57.5% of Dominicans in the U.S. live in New York, other states with large numbers of Dominicans include New Jersey (12%), Florida (9.9%), and Massachusetts (6.8%) (Grieco 18). Dominicans have also migrated to areas of the Dutch Caribbean, Venezuela, Holland, and Italy, as well as, in particularly large numbers, to Spain and Argentina. See, for example, the depiction of Dominican women migrants in Spain in the films *Flores de otro mundo* (Dir. Iciar Bollain) and *Princesas* (Dir. Fernando León de Aranoa, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> For Anders H. Stefansson, the earlier conceptualizations of migration neglect the study of the practice of homecoming (5). He writes that in the context of transnationalism/globalization, "The stress on symbolic homelands as sources of diasporic identity has given way to a focus on the many concrete global ties that immigrants often maintain with their countries of origin" (7). In the context of my play analyses, the instances in which the protagonist either returns permanently or at least for visit, constitute a physical homecoming and a potential cultural encounter.

<sup>11</sup> Since graduating from the Escuela de Arte Dramático de Bellas Artes in 1987, Ovalle has had a productive career as an actor, director, and playwright. Her work touches upon current social problems. She was nominated for a Premio Casandra as best actress for her performance in *Alerta roja* (2001), a monologue she authored about women with AIDS, and most recently, she wrote and performed in *Conmigo no* (2007), a piece about domestic violence. She also has held leadership positions in the theater section of the Dominican Secretaría de Estado de Cultura.

<sup>12</sup> Flores reviews Francesco Cerase's classification of various kinds of return migration. A "return of innovation" would signify a returnee who would carry social change — values, lessons, skills — back home to help resolve problems in the sending country (35). I question whether the character Juana would have this kind of "successful" return. The city/country binary constructed by the play highlights the utopian return to the land and omits any suggestion of how a single mother's return migration to a rural, patriarchal world might signify a loss in whatever small social gains Juana achieved in New York.

<sup>13</sup> The piece premiered in 1994 at the Dance Theater Workshop in New York City. It formed part an emerging minority artist project called "Out the Shadows" directed by George Emilio Sanchez. Corniel is an actress, creative writer, and journalist. She lived in New Jersey from 1991-94, where she worked on a health project interviewing Hispanics and African Americans about health related topics. During this period, she collaborated with Claudio Mir and Frank Disla on a number of artistic projects. In the mid-1990s, she returned to the Dominican Republic and taught theater classes, worked as a journalist, reporting notably on arts topics in *Contemporánea*, *Mirada al Arte*, and *Ventana*, *Listin Diario*'s cultural supplement, for which she also served as editor. She has returned to the United States and is working on a doctorate in literature.

<sup>14</sup> The large amounts of luggage that have become a ubiquitous image of Dominican migrants has been the subject of caricature, but Torres-Saillant insists that the enormous suitcases would be better seen as the social burden the migrants carry for their nation-state's failings (30).

<sup>15</sup> After the 1965 Guerra de abril, a brief civil war in which the constitutionalists who supported the democratically-elected government of Juan Bosch were defeated by the U.S.- backed conservative forces, the authoritarian regime of Joaquín Balaguer rose to power. Migration, for the moment, became an outlet for ridding the country of dissident leftists.

<sup>16</sup> Sociologist Luis Guarnizo describes Dominican migrants as “subaltern to and excluded by the dominant cultures in the nation-states involved” (52). See his study documenting the many ways returnees suffer discrimination, such as their exclusion from prestigious business and social associations.

<sup>17</sup> The most established of the three authors included in this essay, Luisa Angélica Sherezada “Chiqui” Vicioso (b. 1948) has dedicated her life’s work as ambassador, sociologist, educator, and creative writer to the vindication of women’s rights. She is the author of the first piece of feminist criticism in the Dominican Republic, *Algo que decir: ensayos sobre literatura femenina* (1981) and more recently *El teatro dominicano: Una visión femenina o de género* (2003). In the late 1990s, Vicioso made her first forays into the theater, winning the national theater prize in 1997 for *Wish-ky Sour*, a play about women and alcoholism. *Nuyor/Islas* has been staged in numerous venues in the Dominican Republic, and was published in 2006. My analysis is based on a version found online and published in anthology of Latino writers, which seems to differ in some details from the version Vivian Martínez Tabares comments on in her article on Vicioso.

<sup>18</sup> Josefina Báez is a poet, dancer, teacher and activist who immigrated from La Romana, Dominican Republic, to New York City in 1972, when she was 12 years old. She has been performing the experimental pieces *Dominicanish* and *Apartarte/Casarte* primarily in the New York City area since the mid-1990s. Báez presents a unique case of transnationality because her work adds a layer of hybridity from her extensive experience studying dance in India. I will focus on India in the transcultural universe created by Báez in a longer study.

<sup>19</sup> All quotes reproduce the spacing and style of the original.

<sup>20</sup> The sketches aired live on *Saturday Night Live* have always pushed the envelope of sexual, political and racial humor. In the case of Chico Escuela, I think the dynamic with the female newscaster played by Jane Curtin served mainly to parody the stereotype of the dumb male athlete. For example, in response to Chico’s bungled sportscast Jane Curtin replies: “[genuinely enthusiastic] Great job, Chico. I’m glad that we haven’t hired just another stupid ex-jock sportscaster....” (Weekend Update). Of course, Chico’s lack of English skills may just make him appear stupid. In fact, during the broadcast cited above, Chico wrests control of the script by tossing out the North American sports of football and hockey and focusing on baseball and self promotion. However much we may laugh his expression, he is the star of the segment.

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