

"En tiempo puro": The Search and Discovery of Territory in the Life and Work of Aída Cartagena Portalatín

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It is difficult to attempt a critical study of any given writer from the Dominican Republic. Economic problems restrict the publication of works and criticism, and few books are readily available to the population at large. Marcio Veloz Maggiolo critiques the current situation:

No puede haber comunicación entre escritor y su pueblo cuando un libro tiene que ser vendido a precios super elevados. Los escritores somos una especie de faisán sagrado al que el diente del pueblo no puede acercarse; y somos, igualmente, víctimas de una burguesía que, nacida de la noche a la mañana, no tiene plena conciencia de lo que vale el arte. (qtd. in Cocco de Filippis 10)

Many Dominican writers thus become frustrated and leave for the United States, France, or any other country where they can write and publish with greater ease.

Dominican women, like their female Caribbean counterparts, face additional obstacles as writers. Sexism presents itself in several ways, from the never-ending work of household chores (restricting the amount of time women have to write) to the reluctance of male critics to take seriously any literary work written by a woman that relates to the "feminine." José Alcántara, a Dominican critic, describes women's writing in stereotypical ways:

La poesía escrita por mujeres dominicanas se ha circunscrito frecuentemente al ámbito doméstico. La mayoría de nuestras poetisas no va más allá de las pequeñas

explosiones de júbilo o desencanto que sacuden sus corazones durante los años juveniles. . . . Inconsistencia y fragilidad han sido características de esa poesía. . . . (Estudios 269)

It is because of this type of prevailing perspective that the majority of Dominican critics consider worthy of their attention only three women from their country: Salomé Ureña de Henríquez, Carmen Natalia Martínez Bonilla, and Aída Cartagena Portalatín. These three have had the dubious honor thrust upon them of being granted a place of distinction in the Dominican literary canon for supposedly superceding the private spaces of "mere" feminine intimacy to produce "powerful" and "manly" verses. Consequently, any works by these women that suggest the valorization of a feminine space are usually received with disapproval by mainstream male critics, who echo Alcántara's criticisms of inconsistency and fragility.

Criticism of Aída Cartagena Portalatín (1918-1994) can be divided into two "camps." On one side are the "traditionalists," who believe that her best poetry was written in the forties, while she was part of a literary group which published the journal *La poesía sorprendida*. On the other side are the "radicals," who regard the "second phase" of her poetic life, which began in 1967 with her book, *La tierra escrita*, as the best (Vicioso 33). Neither side has created a new focus of critical analysis. Previous criticism of poetry written by women in the Dominican Republic has only been modified, that is, praising their

more "aggressive" public poetry while ignoring or belittling "intimate" personal works.

Sherezada Vicioso describes these two camps in more detail. While "traditional" critics praise the early poetry of Portalatín for its "dryness" and "strictness," with the appearance of *La tierra escrita*, "radical" critics exalt the abandonment of "intimism" in favor of a poetry of social utility (33-36). What the two sides have in common is that they fail to see Portalatín's work as a continual poetic trajectory. Rather than praising her work in its entirety, these critics isolate certain stages in her poetic career and then give those particular stages their "stamp of approval." The praise from both camps generally calls attention to what Portalatín supposedly "abandoned" in her creative process during a particular stage. For example, a youthful exuberance or directness is left behind to pursue the "serious" poetry of "La poesía sorprendida" movement, or the last vestiges of feminine intimacy are negated in favor of poetry with a more social, public theme in *La tierra escrita*.

Couched in approving words, these forms of criticisms mirror closely what Mary Louise Pratt has termed the "panic" experienced by those who are in power in society when confronted by a more marginal member of that society.¹ Critics, when confronted by such an extensive and varied work such as that of Aída Cartagena Portalatín, in their panic reduce the heterogeneity of the work with homogenizing theories in order to fit it more conveniently into the space of the literary canon. What these theories inevitably do is eliminate what is distinctly "other" about the work. In the case of Portalatín and so many other women writers, this "otherness" is their own femininity. It is not surprising, then, that the negation of their own sex results in "la esquizofrenia, la angustia o la soledad" (Vicioso 37)—and sometimes all three at once—in the woman writer.

To revive women's writing in the Dominican Republic and relegate it to a more proper "place"—however inconvenient for the dominant culture—it is necessary to initiate a new school of criticism established "por mujeres, para mujeres, si las mujeres así lo sienten o creen necesario" (Vicioso 38). Many Dominican female critics, such as Vicioso and Cocco de Filippis, have already taken steps in this direction. I will add to this critical base, taking as a point of departure Caren Kaplan's article, "Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse." I will show four poetic stages in the life of Portalatín: searches, discovery, and the shaping of her own literary space, a space that is not defined exclusively as feminine or masculine, Caribbean or European, but which is all-encompassing, stretching from the "universal" spaces of the margins to the very center ruled by a dominant culture.²

Kaplan first notes that those who do not belong to the dominant culture possess a technique that enables them to move between the dominant uses of language or means of expression and the specific versions of their marginal experience. This technique has been named "oppositional consciousness" by Chela Sandoval; as Sandoval explains, it consists of "the ability to read and write on multiple levels" (qtd. in Kaplan 187). When this ability of movement comes in contact with ideologies of the dominant culture, it destabilizes them. Kaplan explains: "This writing dismantles notions of value, genre, canon, etc. It travels, moves between centers and margins" (188). The effects of this process of deterritorialization are a combination of a distancing between signifier and signified—which further alienates the writing from the dominant discourse—and the creation of a new conscience and community. The resulting new territory takes into itself the life of the margin and the marginalized and

all of the abilities and expressions of that space. Kaplan says that this territory is not "a room of one's own, not a fully public or collective self, not a domestic realm—it is a space in the imagination which allows for the inside, the outside, and the liminal elements of in-between" (197).

It is not difficult to see that literal and figurative travel is necessary in order to locate and create a borderless territory such as the one described above. Kaplan discusses as examples of this life experience two women writers, Minnie Bruce Pratt and Michelle Cliff, who discover, through travel, that the homes to which they were accustomed maintained restrictive ideas regarding their own identities (193–95). When Pratt was expelled from her Southern conservative home for being an "out" lesbian feminist, she began to discover the real "home" that she lacked through exile. Cliff returns to the country of her birth (Jamaica) to fill in the gaps in her identity which her immigrant family insisted that she forget. The decision to question one's place of origin begins the movement between center and margin. With this movement, the writer can claim as "home" a vast heterogeneous territory.

Like Cliff and Pratt, Portalatín traveled to find the identity that her original environment could not provide. Born in the small Dominican town of Moca in 1918, her first voyage took her from the countryside to the capital city of Santo Domingo. Here, she hoped to have the opportunity to write, an opportunity she would have lost had she stayed in Moca. Soon afterwards, in the early 1940s, she began to write poetry for the group and literary journal "La poesía sorprendida."

A great deal of controversy surrounds this point in Portalatín's life, as almost every critic has a different idea regarding her role in this literary movement. While some critics, mostly female, argue that Portalatín had a pivotal role in this group, male

Dominican critics such as Nestor Contín Aybar or current president Joaquín Balaguer, who have written about "La poesía sorprendida," mention Portalatín as, at best, being influenced by the ideas of the journal's group. Many do not mention her at all. Vicioso believes that the inclusion of Portalatín in this group was gradual, and almost everyone agrees that the original founders were five men: Alberto Baeza Flores, Franklin Mieses Burgos, Mariano Lebrón Saviñón, Freddy Gatón Arce, and Eugenio Fernández Granell.

The position of the "La poesía sorprendida" itself in Dominican literary society is also the source of debate. Such critics as José Alcántara assert that the literary group was a marginalized minority under the totalitarian regime of Rafael Trujillo (*Los escritores* 195). However, as is usually the case in a dictatorship, going too much against the grain of the *trujillato* resulted in death. The *sorprendistas* had to proceed with caution and confront the regime only indirectly; therefore, they hesitated to ally themselves with groups that directly opposed Trujillo (Céspedes 89). This extreme caution contributed to the use of symbolic language and indirect references, contributing to what Alcántara has termed a "teoría de ocultamiento" (196).

However, the male members of "La poesía sorprendida" also had extensive connections with important members of the dictatorship, as well as with the previous dominant bourgeoisie (those that were in power until 1930), which suggests that the group was in a relatively safe position (Céspedes 121). The *sorprendistas* thus maintained an innocent face before two categories of intellectuals—one supportive of the regime, and the other covertly waiting for a return to power. Though not in direct collaboration with the dominant ideology of the time, the group was not as estranged from the regime as some critics would have us believe. Inaccurately

portraying the *sorprendistas* as marginalized and persecuted allows the group to receive literary praise in the post-dictatorship Dominican Republic.

The privileged position of "La poesía sorprendida" perhaps allowed Portalatín to be more expressive in her work than she might have been without the support of a literary group. However, much of her poetry during this period contains a persistent tone of frustration and alienation, often masked within the rhetoric of a romantic conflict. "Having refused to marry or to emulate Dominican female role models of the time," explains Cocco de Filippis, "Portalatín faces a period of great uncertainty in her life..." (12). Rejecting the traditional feminine space, Portalatín attempts to assimilate herself into the almost exclusively masculine literary space of Santo Domingo. Just as totalitarian repression had an obvious effect on Portalatín's poetry at this time, her marginalization as the only female member of the *sorprendistas* can also be seen.

In "Víspera del sueño,"³ the indirect depiction of a world at rest, presumably post-dictatorship, is evident:

"Por algo soy yo
y no otro"—Nietzsche

"Ahora va de viaje. Que
no regrese nunca a la
trémula orilla donde viven
sus ojos"

Tierra se hará silencio,
risa no harán los hombres para que me
haga eterna,
llanto no harán las piedras para que me
haga eterna.
Mi sangre se ha herido y se parece al
fuego;
abímate en olvido, sueño alma tu sueño;
la luz es sólo sombra,
es víspera del sueño. (1-7)

The poem's surrealist-influenced language mirrors the symbolism and "theory of secrecy" of "La poesía sorprendida."⁴ Its galactic imagery calls attention to the *sorprendistas'* advocacy of "lo universal," although this conception was limited by an Hispanophilic, Eurocentric perception. But we also see elements of the "first search" in Aída's life. This "dreaming dusk" or "sleeping dusk" is a time of change, just as dusk designates the change from day to night. The dusk is also a time of rest for humanity after a long and painful journey. Portalatín tells us later in the poem that a "Mundo de pies cansados / descansarán. La sed de los recuerdos / tendrá lluvia de olvido" (15-17). It is a moment of silence, marked by hearing and seeing the signs of stones, sand, and sea. It evokes an apocalyptic and eternal dream from the earth to the sun and stars. The quotes which precede the poem indicate that this time and space can be found only after a journey.

Elements of the author's first search can be seen in Portalatín's other *sorprendista* poems. The sea appears several times as an unlimited space for loss and discovery, a feared and perpetual presence of island life. The goal of finding a perfect time, a "nueva conversar" ("De luna y mármol" 5) is cast out like a hopeful net upon the maritime images. The use of the future tense and the imperative mood in many of her poems seems to indicate that she is waiting and urging something to appear in her life. The search for territory can be painful, as the last strophe in "Mi mundo el mar":

Quando la espalda se
abre como túnica de maíz, el que va sin
pupilas al sol no puede beberlo. Cree
que solamente dejan huellas sus huellas.
Todo atrás.
Raíz. Hojas. Sombras. Nada. (6-11)

After "La poesía sorprendida" was forced to dissolve in 1947, Portalatín left the country

Y puedo escuchar y gritar conmigo
irremisiblemente viva,
porque viva es la voz de las verdades. (1-15)

Here, Portalatín "finds herself in that territory which is no territory, the border, the fringes, . . . at the door of a new beginning" (Cocco de Filippis 13). Directing herself to an unknown "you," the poetic subject speaks of how she has awakened to negate at last the immobile language that this person has given her. She says that she can listen and yell from the true space where she now resides. This space depends on "cosas pequeñas" (21), which instead of ascending the hierarchical ladder, spread about uncontrollably like "árboles ardidos" (24).

It is the support of and solidarity with this smallness that allows the subject to displace traditions that no longer define the territory she creates. The "you" of Portalatín's poetry, once a recipient of romantic desire and frustration, is now, in "Estación en la tierra," someone who belongs to this rejected and rejectable part of the world, and she invokes this "you" with condescension. The place that has replaced her former world exists at the end of the road, "en tiempo puro" (55). The loss of feeling and the revelation of nature being "al revés de su corteza" (58) correspond to a process of deterritorialization, where "meaning and utterances become estranged" (Kaplan 188). Kaplan also points out that "This defamiliarization enables imagination . . . to express another potential community, to force the means for another consciousness and another sensibility" (188). In "Estación en la tierra," traditional culture and language are now "experiencia ajena" (6) in relation to the poetic subject's space. However, the discovery of this space would not have been possible for Portalatín if she had not had the initial experience with "La poesía sorprendida"; therefore, that element of dominant culture will be present even in

this new territory. The resulting space, then, is grounded in all times and all territories. Only with an absence of divisions between "dominant" and "marginal" can a new territory be constructed.

Vicioso says that in poems such as "Una mujer está sola" and "Estación en la tierra," Portalatín had the opportunity to create her own literature, but did not achieve it (37). As the "radical" critics affirm, after the publication of "Una mujer está sola," Portalatín's poetry pays more attention to social problems. However, what both Vicioso and the "radical" critics fail to notice is that, far from re-integrating herself into a dominant literary discourse, Portalatín maintained and even expanded the "deterritorialized" voice that she had created in the fifties. In the following years, she spoke not only of herself, but also of all beings not spoken for by the dominant discourse. As a *mulata* woman of the developing world, Portalatín possessed a series of "selves" deemed unacceptable and unmentionable by the Dominican upper-middle class of that period. It is not surprising, then, that after establishing her own voice in the "territory which is no territory" (Cocco de Filippis 13), she begins to listen and yell with those that share the margins with her. Ivelisse Pratts Ramírez explains that:

Aída hizo causa común con los pobres, con los campesinos, con los "condenados de la tierra." Y eso era necesario en mi país, donde por tantos siglos de historia se ha escrito en primera persona de singular, y por supuesto en masculino, dejando en la sombra ese gran protagonista que es el pueblo al que se liga Aída. . . . (16)

In "Memorias negras," Portalatín laments the senseless massacre of sixty-seven black Africans in Sharpeville, South Africa on March 21, 1960:⁵

era tanta la lluvia en shaperville
 la nube cerró el ojo
 para no verse mojar los cadáveres
 era tanta la muerte en shaperville
 la lluvia se tapó el oído
 para no oírse caer sobre cadáveres
 (22-27)

Choosing a subject outside her own country and culture demonstrates the expansion of Portalatín's poetic space. It is a space that encompasses international borders so that the author may voice her grief at tragedy worldwide. Shaping the metaphor of rain/tears around graphic descriptions of machine-gunned corpses, Portalatín poetically approaches the experience of her fellow victims of racism and ignorance. The language of this poem is simple and evokes human speech, punctuated as it is by cries of mourning expressing the wordless frustration felt before a world of inequalities. The tone of rage in "Memorias negras" shows Portalatín's discovery of the right to her own voice, for it is confidence in her poetic space which enables her to speak so honestly.

Armed with this new confidence, Portalatín frees herself to bring up a variety of subjects considered controversial by Dominican middle-class society. In her "Elegía Segunda,"⁶ she acknowledges the African roots of Dominican society, which her countrypeople have long denied having:

MI MADRE FUE UNA DE LAS
 GRANDES MAMA
 del mundo.

De su vientre nacieron siete hijos
 que serían en Dallas, Memphis o
 Birmingham un problema racial
 (Ni blancos ni negros). (1-5)

Published in 1967, this elegy tosses aside all of the euphemisms and excuses that the dominant Dominican culture has used to

explain its heritage. Portalatín, unlike her literary and political predecessors, does not praise an imaginary Taíno Indian heritage that was wiped out decades after the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors. Instead, she admits that she is a *mulata*, and with this declaration forces the Dominican people to acknowledge the African part of them that they reject.

Armed with this information, we see that the poem "Memorias negras" reflects a personal grief for Portalatín, as the slaying of blacks, in effect, kills half of herself. The poem's cry, "They assassinated Africa again," reflects not only the actual massacre, but also the figurative death of the African element that has occurred by way of the racial self-negation in Dominican culture. The frustration that Portalatín feels as a result of the deaths in South Africa is intimately connected with the identity she has constructed, and which she does not wish to see destroyed.

Portalatín's defiant voice speaks not only of woman and race, but also of her self-conception as a writer. "Elegía novena" is a requiem dialogue held by members of society supposedly after Portalatín's death:

SE ACABARON LOS
 ESCANDALOS.

La fábrica de oro de la musa de Aída
 afinó sobre el mapa de su Media Isla
 este REQUIEM
 para una mujer de pie
 con una mina explosiva en la mano.

¡Calla sabio insolvente!
 Ella era una gatita inofensiva, despierta
 o dormida
 detrás de su cristal anónimo.
 Allí sufría por la densa multitud
 estrangulada
 por los ambiciosos, los oportunistas,
 los roedores
 y los limpiasacos de los altos políticos

de turno.
Detrás de aquel cristal instalaba su
propio Tribunal
para descorchar lo que se le ocurría.
Era una mujer sin disfraces de
fantasmas,
sencillamente una mujer blanda, pero
capaz de disparar la flecha,
de golpear en pleno blanco el centro
del corazón
de un culpable o traidor. (Letanía:
PERDONADLA SEÑORES.)

¿Y NADA MAS. . . ? (1-18)

The poem encompasses a cacophony of voices, speaking at once, alternately praising and belittling her life and work. On the margins of this multitude of voices is a subject that offers sardonic commentary on the dialogue:

Este es el REQUIEM que ningún
poeta escribirá para ella.
Esta es su respuesta a los que le
quisieron poner membretes
ideológicos.
(22-23)

Shifting between rationalization, emotion and the rhythmic repetition of phrases, "Elegía novena" contains astute observations on the Dominican literary world rejected by Portalatín. The poem's irony comes increasingly to light given the fact that this same world now exalts her with open arms as an important literary figure. However, it does so only by reducing the multitude of voices which characterize her work in its entirety to a few "crucial" phases such as the *sorprendista* or "socially-oriented" phase.

For this reason, Portalatín refused to confine herself to the limited spaces offered by the dominant literary culture of the Dominican Republic. Her literal and figurative journeys took her far from the

literary requirements of the *sorprendistas* into a new territory where her true voice could be expressed without reservation. The discovery and shaping of this territory gave Portalatín the confidence to speak purely, with the voice of a woman (versus that of a literary figurehead), and to force to the surface the problems of sexism and racism that her society had repressed. Though her death in the summer of 1994 marks her physical absence from the world, Portalatín's "deterritorialized" voice will continue to speak to all those who search for a world beyond the confines of center and margin, opting instead to reside in the realm of the limitless.

Notes

¹I have taken the terminology and theory regarding dominant society's attempts to homogenize heterogeneous works from Pratt.

²My constant references to "dominant culture" allude to a feminist-based definition of dominant culture as that which is male, European, and heterosexually biased. It is "dominant" only by continued perpetuation of the belief in its superiority to other, more "marginal" cultures. Nevertheless, the conception of a dominant culture continues to exist in cultural and literary studies, though it is not necessarily diametrically opposed to non-dominant ("marginalized") cultures.

³Except where indicated, poems are taken from *Del desconsuelo al compromiso/From Desolation to Compromise: A Bilingual Anthology*.

⁴Olivera notes that the *sorprendistas* were "afines al surrealismo" (213).

⁵More information on this subject can be found in Reeves.

⁶This poem and the subsequent poems quoted in this article are taken from *La tierra escrita. Elegías*.

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