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The Port of Santo Domingo: Tidal Debris, Metal Pollution, and the Perils of Poverty where the Caribbean Meets the Ozama

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On the occasion of the 37th Annual West Indian Literature Conference held at the University of Miami in 2018, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert engages an ecocritical analysis of Santo Domingo's fraught environmental history in dialogue with Dominican writers and artists.

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One of the earliest descriptions of the port of Santo Domingo predates the city's foundation and comes from Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo's *Natural and General History of the Indies*, written between 1526 and 1548. The site of a small Taíno village led by a cacica or female chieftain—"so fertile and beautiful, with such an excellent river and port" (I: 52)—it lured the struggling Christians from the failed northern enclave of Isabela through the promise of gold and the indigenous populations' generous offer to share their resources at a time of crisis for the vulnerable Spanish colonists. The resulting uneasy entente—rooted in a trans-cultural love story that produced two children but would not survive past the early stages of its cross-cultural experiment—quickly turned to gold lust and the imposition of the forced-labor system of *encomienda* on the generous host village. The Spaniards would quickly take control of the full expanse of the sprawling Caribbean Coastal Plain and build a city cocooned between the Ozama and Isabela Rivers, with the mouth of the Ozama becoming the city's bustling port. Within a few years, it would absorb the Taíno village that had offered the starving Spaniards shelter—its members vanishing into oblivion through war, disease, forced labor, or self-exile—and the beautiful site would become known as the first seat of European colonial rule in the New World and its first official port, the oldest continuously inhabited European settlement in the Americas, and the destination for the first shipment of African slaves to the New World. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Santo Domingo is currently the largest city in the Caribbean by population, with some 3.8 million people in its metropolitan area.

I am interested in the port of Santo Domingo as an ecotone, a term used in ecology as an abrupt transition space between "two adjacent, different and homogeneous community types, producing a narrow ecological zone between them" that can be defined primarily by its dynamism, by the strong fluctuations in its "ecological conditions and their causes (i.e., natural or anthropogenic environmental change, invasion or alteration of species present)" (Chamorro, 203). A feature of landscape ecology that examines the patterns and interactions between communities, ecotones provide a fruitful framework for understanding complex human interactions in colonial contact zones, offering a scientific perspective or paradigm that can be applied in situations where radical transformations in ecological conditions are the result of abrupt changes in human societies. Such are the conditions of the port of Santo Domingo as an ecotone at the time of the fateful 16th-century encounter between Europeans and the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas. Such, I would argue, are the conditions of the port of Santo Domingo today, as the precarious circumstances of the marginalized poor living in this early contact-zone ecotone face the threat of the rising seas that are the result of anthropogenic climate change. In recent years, this transition zone has emerged as the focus of significant literary and artistic responses to climate change in the Caribbean region, some of which I examine here.

The port of Santo Domingo—already a biological ecotone—became a cultural and racial border zone with the arrival of the Spanish colonizers. Its early colonial transformations, violent and radical, echoed the rapid ecotonal changes now exacerbated by the growing impacts of both pollution and the rising sea levels that are the consequence of climate change. Oviedo describes the river during the early years of Spanish-indigenous sharing of the zone as abundant with fish of all sorts and home to communities of manatees that the indigenous population hunted sustainably, according to archaeological studies of the middens of the area. The waters were praised for their purity and fresh taste, especially those of the waterfalls feeding into the river, which as it neared the sea became too contaminated with sea water for drinking. The banks were lined with a broad variety of fruit trees and marked by the frequent songs of birds and the harsher tone of parrots. Oviedo notes the transition of grasses that are characteristic of ecotones, as well as the gradual transformation of fresh into sea water and the techniques of the indigenous population for hunting manatees, a familiarity that suggests a transitional period of co-inhabiting the land. The Spanish settlers had explored both the Isabela and Ozama rivers and its tributaries and had noted the intricate water network and its use by communities inland to bring produce to the communities settled near the port area in exchange for fish, manatees, and other coastal sources of protein. They also noted frequent crossings between the east and west bank of the river that suggested an early form of water-taxi.

Image 1: Zerahias Polanco, *If I Leave Here I Die*, Panel #2 (2018). Courtesy of the artist.

Five hundred years later, we turn to the work of a young Dominican painter, Zerahias Polanco (1997-), to gauge the fate of this first successful European settlement in the New World. In her work *If I Leave Here I'll Die* (2018), a 4-part polyptych that won Polanco the prestigious Eduardo León Jimenes Prize, she explores the lives of the slum communities that have developed along the banks of the Ozama since the 1960s—the communities where she grew up and still lives—and which she describes as:

... slums that have grown on the banks of the Ozama river, of ravines, with topographies damaged by landslides. These landscapes shaped mainly by the variegation of houses built very close to each other, generate some anguish at the thought of a storm or a hurricane. The main function of a home (providing shelter to its inhabitants), in these neighborhoods is not necessarily fulfilled. The roofs are broken, and tied with wires to the slats of the houses and then covered with a canvas held by a few pieces of blocks 'just in case it rains,' in a tropical country. My life experience makes me think that the way of living, of inhabiting a place, is one of the main reflections of the human being. (*Catálogo* 246–247).

Polanco's work speaks to us of the radical transformation undergone by the land between the Ozama and Isabella Rivers as it faced what environmental historian Elinor Melville has called an ecological revolution, "an abrupt and qualitative break with the process of environmental and social change that had developed in situ" (12). The banks of the Ozama River constituted an ecotonal area marking the boundary between the river and the Caribbean Sea, a boundary quickly transformed by rapid environmental and social changes, some of them devastating to the biological and human communities that had thrived in place before the arrival of European settlers. Today, it is home to deeply endangered communities of the poor threatened by the increasing impacts of climate change.

The cities of the Caribbean, Santo Domingo perhaps most prominently given its size and geography, face significant climate-change impacts in the coming decades, particularly from rising sea levels. The region's coastlines, as Brian Fagan argues for island chains around the world in *The Attacking Ocean*, find themselves acutely "vulnerable to the ocean and its whims in ways unimaginable even one or two centuries ago" and are facing chronic issues like coastal erosion and persistent flooding "not as an abstract problem for the future, but as a sobering reality" (163). Santo Domingo is facing climate related challenges quite similar to those of other major cities in the Caribbean region—San Juan, Havana, Kingston, Cartagena—cities with populations of near or over a million people with critical infrastructure like airports, thermoelectric plants, water management facilities, and major highways located along the coastline. Their rapidly deteriorating reef systems are increasingly vulnerable to bleaching events caused by rising sea temperatures, threatening their fisheries and their food security; increasing coastal erosion is endangering vital tourism infrastructure. Like Santo Domingo, they have high concentrations of the poor living precariously in floodplains or on unprotected hillsides prone to mudslides. With precarious access to fresh clean water, they are also at high risk of food insecurity.

For the roughly 400,000 people living precariously along the banks of the Ozama River, their proximity to the river and its port exacerbates their vulnerability. These are Santo Domingo's poorest, most marginalized populations, pushed by rapid urbanization to vulnerable riverside land, where they live in substandard housing in overcrowded neighborhoods with limited access to electricity, sewage treatment, and other city services. These communities—La Barquita, Guachupita, 27 de Febrero, among others—face a worrisome spectrum of environmental hazards linked to the improper disposal of solid waste directly into the river and the intensification of hurricanes and other weather events related to warming water temperatures. Persistent flooding exacerbated by rising sea levels threatens lives and property and brings residents into dangerous contact with the rivers' highly polluted waters, bearing harmful bacteria from raw sewage and toxic concentrations of metals like thallium from untreated industrial runoff, which drastically impacts local wildlife and quality of life and health for local human, fauna, and flora ecologies along the river. As one sensationalistic report in the Dominican press describes the conditions of those living along the river banks, "diseases, parasites, squalor, and vermin are omnipresent in those areas" ("Ambitious"). The bed of the Ozama, moreover, is below sea level, so as tidal flooding and coastal erosion from storm surges grow ever stronger due to climate change, the sea penetrates deep into the Ozama's watershed, its salt-water infiltration adding to the population's exposure to flooding and further contaminating the already deeply compromised fresh-water supply. Former Environment and Natural Resources Minister Ernesto Reyna confirmed the vulnerability of the riverbank population as one of the nation's "huge challenges" in its "efforts to adapt to climate change,"

arguing that “this impoverished sector of the population ... is highly vulnerable to cyclones, heavy rains and other extreme climate events” (“Cimate Change”).

In its *Dominican Republic Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment Report* of 2013, USAID concluded that “many of the communities most susceptible to flooding are newly established, temporary settlements of recent migrants to the city—people with limited economic means and assets. NGOs are helping them meet their needs, including improved community organization and representation, assistance with receiving basic services, and improving livelihood options” (Caffrey et al. 57). Community-based organizations have been formed in these neighborhoods to lead efforts to improve hygienic conditions, work together to demand access to clean water and stable electric services, and improve disaster risk preparedness. Moreover, as Rafael Osiris de León concludes in his report on “Urban Waters in the Dominican Republic,” the flow of urban waters in Santo Domingo ... “is becoming increasingly reduced [by climate-changed induced drought] and contaminated by direct discharges from inhabitants who lack basic sanitation, and untreated discharges from industries near rivers and streams, which paints a worrying picture for the present and future of urban water in Santo Domingo” (267). Benjamin Pettit, a photographer chronicling the community of La Barquita as it faced leaving its riverbank emplacement, argues that “while it emits only 0.06% of global greenhouse gases, the Dominican Republic is nevertheless suffering the dramatic consequences of the worldwide increase. In the past 50 years, 248 disastrous climate events such as hurricanes, tropical storms, floods and droughts have hit the Caribbean alone” leaving populations like those living along the Ozama in a heightened state of vulnerability (Cornet).

The level of resilience of Santo Domingo’s riverside population—i.e. “the magnitude of shock the system can absorb and remain within a given state, the degree to which the system is capable of self-organization, and the degree to which the system can build capacity for learning and adaptation” (Folke et al. 437)—is low and how they fare in coming environmental crises will ultimately depend on the responses they elicit from government and civil society. Their plight can serve as a point of entry into a discussion of the limits of our quest for environmental equality under current regional legislation and market forces—and can highlight the role of writers, artists and scholars in addressing climate change and environmental justice concerns that have often been ignored or neglected by government.

Recent scholarship on artistic and literary responses to environmental crises and climate change has underscored the importance of narrative in facilitating much needed changes in perspectives and approaches. In “Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of the Commons,” Patricia Yaeger writes of the crisis that has emerged through the transformation of oceans—and I would add, port cities—into capital, calling for an “oceanic ecocriticism” that can draw on “narratives in a state of emergency, a crisis that demands unnatural histories written by unnaturalists who limn the fleshy entanglements of sea creatures, sea trash, and machines” (529). Her call for “narratives in a state of emergency” is echoed by Ursula Heise in *Imagining Extinction*, where she argues that “public engagement with endangered species depends on these broader structures of imagination, and individuals’ paths to conservation engagement become meaningful for others only within these cultural frameworks. Ultimately ... biodiversity, endangered species, and extinction”—and in our context, the climate-change-related vulnerabilities of the population living along the Ozama River—“are primarily cultural issues, questions of what we value and what stories we tell, and only secondarily issues of science” (20).

For Dominican writers like José Alcántara Almánzar (1946-), the foremost Dominican short story writer of his generation, the deterioration of the Ozama represents the most radical transformation the city of Santo Domingo has undergone throughout the centuries, but most specifically in the 20th-century. The city, where he has lived all his life, is central to Alcántara Almánzar’s fictional world. He captures its transformation from a “small, clean, tree-covered, silent city ... divided by an Ozama River not yet turned into mud and death” into a chaotic capital of hallucinatory noises and delusions in stories of random urban violence and political persecution (Alcántara Almánzar, “Breves”). From his earliest short stories, Alcántara Almánzar has shown his abiding interest in social and economic marginality as the consequence of both Santo Domingo’s rapid urbanization and the fixation of its governments and institutions on protecting the interests of the middle and upper classes at the expense of the welfare of the vulnerable populations of the rural immigrants to the city among which he grew up.

In his fiction, Alcántara Almánzar addresses the problems of forced displacement as a permanent condition for some of the city’s poor and most marginalized populations, among them young people with radical political ideas vulnerable to political violence and Haitians and undocumented Dominicans of Haitian descent, many living in dilapidated shacks prone to frequent flooding along the now deeply polluted Ozama

River, and those whose land has been confiscated for constructing luxury homes for the middle classes. He experienced the ruthlessness of urban renewal through his own family's displacement and loss of his childhood home as part of President Joaquín Balaguer's "brutal project of urban remodeling" (Benítez Morales 205). In his short story "Uno," his fictional rendition of his mother's distress at losing her home, he expresses his own recollections of the quality of neighborhoods like Villa Francisca and of the pain of watching the ruins of his old house after demolition:

The lieutenant gave the order half an hour later. The crew went into action and started to tear down hovels full of people. The bulldozers charged against the shacks. People came out running and screaming in the midst of the noise and the dust cloud, but the workers continued pummeling walls, whacking away left and right, deaf and dumb to the popular clamor ... The engineers returned at dusk. There was nothing left and that pleased them. Where there had been a miserly *barrio*, there was only an empty terrain, immense, dusty, uniform. The engineers congratulate the lieutenant and took him out for a few drinks. (*Testimonios* 12, my translation)

Carmen Benítez Morales, in her excellent study of Alcántara Almánzar's relationship with the city of Santo Domingo, describes this process as leading to "the complete disarticulation, the marginalization of the barrios" like Villa Francisca, where Alcántara lived from birth to his early manhood, and "the trampling of its inhabitants" (205). In "Una noche inconclusa" (An Unfinished Night) from his collection *Testimonios y Profanaciones* (Testimonies and Profanations, 1978) he writes of those living on the river's edge, "flooded by the river at every storm," in a space where life and death "wrestle each other at every turn," a "marshland they can't abandon despite it all because they have nowhere else to go" (Alcántara Almánzar, *Testimonio* 126).

The "disarticulation" of the *barrio* where Alcántara Almánzar grew up of which Benítez Morales writes mirrors the disarticulation of the mutilated body of the protagonist of his story "Rumbo al mar" ("Seabound"), from his 1973 collection *Viaje al otro mundo*. In the grotesquely drawn "Seabound," the disintegrating corpse of the narrator floats down a deeply polluted Ozama River towards the sea—a victim of political persecution whom others among the most marginalized try to rescue in vain.

The waters of the Ozama River have brought me this far. This voyage has not been the result of an act of will; neither was the mode of travel my own choice. My journey down the river's murky waters has met some unforeseen obstacles. I fell into the water, propelled by a violent shove, in a cold and muddy part of the river, which kept me from immediately drifting away ... I floated swiftly on the river's brownish surface ... I glided down river alongside tree trunks, rotten leaves, broken-down boxes, useless pieces of wood, and remnants of garbage that floated easily in the same direction I was heading: rusted juice cans, empty bottles of rum, newspaper pages, plantain peels and I don't know what else. It wasn't the best of company, but we had begun our journey together and I had no choice in the matter. (*Where the Dream Ends*, 261)

Alcántara Almánzar's concern with the vulnerability of the population of Santo Domingo in the face of violent political repression, rampant environmental pollution, and ultimately climate change (see "Bad Omen," his 2007 short story on rising sea levels) is echoed in two art projects from 1995 and 2001 through which Dominican artist Rosa Tavárez (1939-) has chronicled this vulnerability. Tavárez, the first artist from the Dominican Republic included in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and winner of the 2017 National Art Prize in the Dominican Republic, has been addressing ecological issues and climate change since the 1990—a very early concern with the impact of environmental degradation in the Dominican Republic. Titled "Diálogos Ecológicos" (Ecological Dialogues) and "Ecos del Grito Ecológico" (Echoes of the Ecological Cry) her two projects use submersion, the fragmentation of the human body, dismemberment, and the oblivion of the submarine to convey the distress of environmental deterioration and climate change as they impact the land, sea, and the human population that depends on them. Firmly placed in the Ozama River/Caribbean Sea ecotone, these paintings engage a long history of environmental transformation in the space where the river meets the sea.

Deeply committed to bringing attention to climate change, in these series, like in paintings such as "Calentamiento Global" (Global Warming, 2008) Tavárez's palette is dominated by an endless variety of reds and blues, colors through which she conveys urgency and evokes rising temperatures. The intense redness of her vision of climate change underscores her concerns about air temperatures—which have risen noticeably

in the Dominican Republic through the last three decades, while the fragmentation of the body in many of her canvases (missing arms, floating heads) preclude positive action, pointing to inaction and impotence as related social and political problems. Evocative of the sea, her blues become patches of endangerment that accentuate the marooned quality of her human figures, who float, drown, seek to draw air.

Image 2: Rosa Tavárez, *Calentamiento Global* (*Global Warming*, 2008).

Tony Capellán (1955–2017) is similarly concerned with notions of “invasion” of the sea through the proliferation of local plastic debris in his native Dominican Republic, focusing, however, on the “narratives” embodied in plastic objects he sees as “evidence” of the loss and sorrow of poverty and economic marginalization. The focus of his installations, from *Mar Caribe* (*Caribbean Sea*, 1997) to *Flotando* (*Floating*, 2013) is debris he has recovered from the beaches of the capital city of Santo Domingo, especially from those near the mouth of the Ozama River. Capellán engages these lives lived at the mercy of the tides amid clear indications of rising sea levels as—in Stefanie Hessler’s own reading of Brathwaite *tidalectics*—“dissolving purportedly terrestrial modes of thinking and living, attempting to coalesce steady land with the rhythmic fluidity of water and the incessant swelling and receding of the tides” (31). The objects Capellán collects and arranges into what he calls “stories, metaphors, visions” are those washed away by floodwaters from these endangered people’s homes into the Caribbean Sea, where the currents return them to its shores at high tide, its “gift” to the artist. They first claimed his attention because they were not (like the plastic debris featured in Sánchez’s paintings) the kinds of objects you would put in a plastic trash bag but useful objects dragged away by the floods—perhaps beloved objects whose loss could be felt, objects perhaps missed, mourned. Through their incorporation into Capellán’s installations, these “eloquent materials” become “visions about the reality of these people, but also visions that encompass many countries, many situations similar to those of the Dominican Republic, in the same geographical area” (Capellán, “Poetics of Relation”).

For Capellán, the proliferation of plastic debris on the beaches of Santo Domingo speaks as eloquently to the viewer about environmental pollution as about the environmental vulnerability of a population that has been doubly displaced; he has described the flip flops that make up *Mar Caribe* as encompassing the stories of those who used to wear them—“farmers without land who migrated to the city where everything has been taken from them and sealed off by barbed wire” and who live now at the mercy of a river and a sea who invade their makeshift dwellings at will, taking away meager possessions and needed everyday implements ... combs, buckets, cups, plates, toys. As art, they “reaffirm and deconstruct our idea of the Caribbean” (Capellán, “Poetics of Relation”). As Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues, “we may interpret Capellán’s installations in terms of creating not a colonial archive but rather a site of witnessing, rendering the ‘secret’ of wasted lives visible to the more privileged classes who benefit from both the labor and sacrifices made by the undifferentiated poor” (110).

In the wake of artists like Capellán and Tavárez, younger artists like Zerahias Polanco and José Morbán are beginning to articulate the ways in which the coastal and riverbank spaces and communities that feature in their work are coping with rapidly changing environmental conditions. For Zerahias Polanco, who has always lived in the riverside communities of the Ozama and values the strong sense of community and identity that its residents have drawn from them, the *barrios* have served as an inspiration for her riveting project, *If I Leave Here I’ll Die*. Morbán (1987-) has been working throughout the last decade on two projects featuring Santo Domingo’s urban coastal landscapes, which he envisions as central to the discourses of social, political, and environmental justice in the Dominican Republic.

Polanco approached her award-winning project, *I Leave Here I’ll Die*—initially conceived as her thesis project at the Altos de Chavón art school—through her own living experiences as filtered through a series of interviews she conducted with residents of the communities in which she herself had grown up and which had nurtured her artistic vision—27 de Febrero, Guachupita, Los Guandules and Gualey. Her questions centered on the length of time her subjects had lived in the communities; why they remained despite the multiple burdens of living with problems of crime, uncollected garbage, and uncertain access to electricity and drinking water amid the risk of frequent flooding from the highly-polluted river waters; and on what other living alternatives they had considered. The elicited narratives on which she would anchor her approach to her polyptych.

What emerged from these queries was a deep sense of community that made the prospects of a managed retreat from the threatened neighborhoods sponsored by government agencies and international NGOs a divisive option. Managed retreats, which have emerged as the preferred solution to address the multiple problems associated with existing communities along the banks of the Ozama, are the coordinated movement of communities away from areas facing natural hazards, particularly from those areas threatened by rising sea levels. In Ozama River neighborhoods like La Barquita, these efforts have led to incipient climate adaptation projects aimed at relocating the neighborhood’s most vulnerable families to higher ground. La Barquita—like most communities along the Ozama—is a “maze of metal shacks ... that cascades down a hillside to the river’s floodplain” (Lewis). Its neighborhood association, which has organized among other things, systems of flood alert and refuge at higher grounds for those having to leave their homes in a flood emergency, is characteristic of the solidarity that has led to plans to create a Nueva Barquita, a new neighborhood away from the water that will include several apartment buildings, a high school, clinic, church, and shopping strip. Polanco’s project seeks to speak particularly to this sense of community, to what she describes as a “closeness” developed over shared experiences facing hazards and through the communities’ efforts to organize into political and social action to address common threats.

Image 3: Zerahias Polanco, *If I Leave Here I’ll Die* (2018).

For Polanco, what she conceives as a long-term project whose first manifestation is the 4-part polptych shown above, the work is rooted in memory, in remembered animated conversations or *tertulias* held in open community spaces that punctuated the multiple reasons for remaining in the riverside *barrios* despite the hazards (which included strong winds that sent sheets of galvanized zinc flying off precarious roofs, as well as frequent inundations). A cherished memory is that of an oft-repeated exchange between her grandfather and grandmother in response to his complaints about loud noise coming from a neighboring business: exhorted by her grandmother to move away if he found the noise too disturbing, he would respond with the phrase that gave the series its title, “If I leave, I’ll die” (Paravisini-Gebert, interview). These foundational collective memories rooted a sense of belonging nurtured through political action that included strikes to protest the lack of reliable electrical service and water, to demand public services like garbage collection enjoyed by citizens in more prosperous communities, and to demand access to community health care. The population’s collective identity, exercised through political action, has been boosted by a series of successes that have led to greater safety, a lowering of crime rates, more stability in government services, and now a number of managed retreat projects that promise to improve living conditions but which require the displacement, and in some cases the separation of established communities.

Of these managed retreat projects, the best known is that of La Barquita. Benjamin Pettit’s climate refugee photography project in La Barquita, which began as an assignment for Agence Française pour le Développement (AFD), portrays the re-settlement of a riverside slum community into a housing project erected via a government program that was initiated by president Danilo Medina around 2012. Laurence Cornett, writing about the resettlement, points to how Petit’s series documents both sides of the river, “from the semi-ruins of La Barquita when the community was still living there, to the brick towers of La Nueva Barquita, after they moved in. Parallels and contrasts arise from such a juxtaposition, offering a nuanced perspective on assisted displacement ... Moving into their dry, concrete home will spare these communities yearly devastating floods,” Cornett writes, “but it also means renouncing their lifestyle. In La Barquita, as their previous “barrio” will be remembered after its imminent destruction, families had a rural life. They had to keep their foot or hand on the ground while sleeping to check the rising waters, but children were spending days by the river and men were gathering on the occasions of tense traditional cockfights” (Cornett). Abdelillah Hamdouch and Andiel Galvan, in an in-depth analysis of the development of the Nueva Barquita community as a model for further interventions, point to “a missed opportunity to create institutional and technical capacities among relevant actors for similar future projects” in a project that “could have been the opportunity for more ‘transformative’ outcomes in terms of participation and empowerment” had it not been for what they call “the particular traditional political culture and context in Santo Domingo, characterised by Presidentialism and Authoritarian decision-making processes” (Hamdouch and Galvan 41).

Zerahias Polanco shares Hamdouch and Galvan’s misgivings about the impact of these managed retreat projects on the riverside communities in which she grew up given that they require that the population retreat from the river. The centrality of the river in *If I Leave ...*” echoes its centrality in the lives of the members of the communities. The four panels that compose the series, which represent the four communities in which she has lived, also guide the viewers’ gaze from the panoramic view of the cascading makeshift dwellings that make up the river communities as they move down to the Ozama’s floodplain in the first panel to a close view of the specificities of the accumulation of precarious housing in the fourth. Multiple shades of grays and muted greens predominate across the four large canvases of her complex urban landscape, but it is the blocks of vivid colors—and particularly the vibrant use of white—that helps us see how the poverty and variety of the materials and the density of the houses on the canvas speak to poverty and overcrowding as salient elements in the landscape. These communities at risk, she wants to underscore, are placed directly on the river as their essential setting, where the accumulating plastic debris on the shore, the rusting vehicles, the ubiquitous cement blocks of unfinished construction become vital elements on the canvas. Her relationship to the river is deep and historical and her ongoing project (impacted in 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic, where the Dominican Republic leads other nations in the Caribbean in number of cases and mortality rates) is to convey through art the many important processes the river has undergone, from being an area of recreation for the poor—she recalls the celebration of swimming challenges that took participants from La Ciénaga to Los Minas—to “a place of risk and chaos” (Paravisini-Gebert).

Image 4: Domingo Liz, *Mujer con Espejo* (*Woman with Mirror*, 1976). Juan Manuel Portela Bisonó Collection.

In her efforts to rethink the river as a former place of leisure and joy, and to vividly convey—as she does in *If I Leave Here I'll Die*—its lingering luminosity and beauty, Polanco has found a kindred spirit in Dominican painter Domingo Liz (1931–2013), whose work she discovered while in the midst of her own project and upon whom she looks as a “brother” in her approach to the river. A painter based in La Ciénaga and deeply familiar with the struggles and joys of the riverbank communities, he chronicled the deterioration of the landscape along the banks of the Ozama River for four decades, earning the title of “the magician of the Ozama” for a lifelong work that captured the cumulative complexity of the history of the slums that grew along the river’s banks in the 2nd half of the 20th century, chronicling the transformation of a once green riverside belt into a precarious pile of tumbling houses leading down to a highly polluted river. Playful and mordant simultaneously, Liz deploys a child’s perspective to reveal the cumulative history of rural migration to the city through the inescapable accumulation of shacks and peering eyes that preclude privacy and (in *Woman with Mirror*, see above) through the mirror’s capacity to reveal the neverendingness of the tangled webs of housing through which the individual—colorful and vibrant—can still revel in her uniqueness.

A running leitmotif of Liz’s work—one which echoes the concerns expressed by Polanco in her own approach to the Ozama River communities—is the profound disillusionment with the political and economic elite’s indifference to deterioration of the “forgotten river” and the plight of those living in the tangled web of precarious housing where “so many lack everything” (Paravisini-Gebert, “Polanco”). Santo Domingo’s government—mired in its inadequate response to always looming political crises—has been woefully slow in responding to recommendations of climate change adaptation—a lack of preparation glaringly evident to the communities along the Ozama. Artists and writers, in their turn, have focused on the aquatic nature of the city of Santo Domingo, whose “infrastructure of fluid communication” underscores the ubiquity of water as the city’s most important environmental element. The written and painted chronicles of the city’s signature river call attention to the transformation of areas of swamp, mangroves, marshes, and wetlands into working and lower middle-class neighborhoods, those most threatened now as they are at or slightly below sea level. They offer us a glimpse into acute urban vulnerabilities that will make climate change adaptation a most challenging task for the Dominican capital.

José Morbán’s engagement with the Santo Domingo ecotone is of a different nature, as it comes through his interest in both the geometric envisioning of the city’s coastal landscapes—an exploration of ‘the visual

elements of my current city, Santo Domingo, especially the horizon, architecture and vegetation,” as seen in his series *Paisajes* (*Landscapes*, 2011–2017)—and in revisiting flawed renditions of Dominican history drawn from the nation’s iconic photography archive. *Dominican Dreams* shows “moments from the country’s past” taken from vintage photographs that allow the artist to revisit and resignify paradigmatic moments from the nation’s troubled history. Associating the notion of *Dominican Dreams* with a “wistful” kind of “idealized nostalgia” for a version of national “history as better than it was,” the series highlights “the way the country has worn a mask in the last century, hiding behind images and propaganda that sells its flaws and problems as power and success” (Kahl). The paintings that constitute the *Dominican Dreams* series follow a research process that brought Morbán to the National General Archive in search of photographs that captured emblematic aspects of national history or culture. The purpose was to revisit the photographs through paintings that would critically question how we read these static markers of history, drawing on the anonymity of the human subjects and concentrating on their actions and their economic, political (and I would add, environmental) consequences (see Castillo).

Image 5: José Morbán, *Dominican Dreams*, water diptych, Casa Quién Gallery (2018). Courtesy of the artist.

I am interested here in a water-focused diptych from the *Dominican Dream* series—*Ozama, 1910* (2015) and *Güibia (c. 1943)* (2018)—“twinning” images connected thematically through water. *Ozama, 1910* was not initially conceived as part of a diptych. Its source photograph interested Morbán because of its depiction of the Ozama River in 1910, roughly a century before the painting was conceived. It allowed the artist—given his interest in the observation of urban landscapes—to reflect on the profound changes undergone by the river in the hundred years that had elapsed since the photograph was taken. The original photograph was horizontal and focused on the river as landscape; Morbán recomposed the image vertically, in part to break away from the usual horizontality of western landscape painting, but primarily to focus vertically on the activity taking place in the river—in this case the transportation of goods from the interior of the island to the markets in the city. Its “twinning” with *Güibia (c. 1943)* responded to two different concerns—one practical, the other thematic. *Ozama, 1910* was the only horizontal painting in a group of square canvases, which made its placement in the *Dominican Dreams* exhibit at the Casa Quién Gallery in December 2018 awkward, suggesting the need for a second vertical canvas to accompany it (Paravisini-Gebert, “Morbán”). Thus, *Güibia* was created as its “sister” painting, with the intention of linking the paintings thematically and

geographically to the river and the spot where the river enters the sea. This linking gives us a diptych that points roughly to the two borderlines of the river/sea contact zone, marking the transitional boundaries of the port's ecotone. Independently—but particularly together—they lent themselves to ecocritical readings focused on important aspects of the ecotone's recent environmental history.

Morbán's own assessment of the series underscores the importance of maintaining the connection to archival photography, given that "peoples have come to recognize their history through black and white photography, conferring upon them a historical worth that legitimizes them."¹ To this foundational image he adds "muted colors (pastel, tertiary, ocher and earth), preserving the photographic referentiality and concentrating on the subjects represented—and their acts or poses—in search of an atmosphere that serves as an immersive element." The muted palette, he argues, "helps to build a better narrative that illustrates the temporal distance of the original reference and adds a new dimension to the piece." This temporal distance is evident in *Ozama, 1910*, where Morbán places the daily tasks of peasants unloading their produce from their small boats in the realm of what he has called the Dominican people's "penchant for nostalgia and the sterilization of our history."

Image 6: José Morbán, *Ozama, 1910*. Courtesy of the artist.

The original black and white photograph—which Morbán had retrieved from an old internet archive—had been featured by Dominican historian Bernardo Vega in his 2014 book *Me lo contó el Ozama* (The Ozama Told me the Story) as representative of the many canoes that brought merchandise from rural communities

¹ All the quotations in this paragraph come from a now-replaced statement on the *Dominican Dreams* series in José Morbán's website. His website can be found at www.josemorban.com/.

along the Ozama and Isabela rivers to the Mercado Ozama-La Playa, the most important market for rural products—produce, meats, live animals, honey, beeswax, cacao, wood, charcoal, and *cuaba*—in the city (Vega 87–100). These products were transported in shallow canoes whose materials and construction techniques followed pre-Columbian indigenous models, linking the transportation of goods from the interior in the early 20th-century to vessels and products described by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo in his 16th-century natural history as characteristic of indigenous market commodities in pre-Columbian society, chief among them the ubiquitous *cuaba*.

Ozama 1910 captures the river's commercial activity when it still represented a fairly unpolluted contact zone between rural and urban areas with ties to deep historical practices. Yet this commercial activity was already linked at the time when the original photo was taken to environmental degradation, as it depicted peasants unloading their cargoes of charcoal and *cuaba* (the long-burning bark of the Hispaniolan pine, *Pinus occidentalis*), used as kindling and for torches since pre-Columbian times. The Hispaniolan pine is an endemic species on the island, one closely related to the equally endemic Hispaniolan crossbill (*piquituerto* de la Española or *Loxia megaplaga*), which feeds exclusively on its seeds. As a result of persistent and barely restricted deforestation in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, both the pine and the *piquituerto* are now listed by the IUCN as endangered, their populations severely fragmented given continuing decline in area, extent, and quality of their habitats.

The second painting in this diptych, *Güibia*, c 1943, as Morbán has explained, is based on a photograph by Kurt Schnitzer, a Jewish physician who arrived in Santo Domingo as an exile from Austria fleeing Nazi persecution in 1938. An interest in photography led to him producing more than thirty thousand photographs of life in the Dominican Republic between 1939 and 1943, when he left to settle in the United States. Chance led to his becoming the personal photographer to the Trujillo family, a privileged position that made him “an exceptional witness of an era” and opened a space for him to develop photography as propaganda (Kahl).

Image 7: José Morbán, *Güibia* (c. 1943). Courtesy of the artist.

This enigmatic painting shows a large and anonymous group of men in the foreground against the backdrop of an abstraction of a marine landscape. Its title identifies it as the once very popular Santo Domingo beach, an iconic place of leisure along the eastern edge of the city's Malecón, now associated less with beauty and leisure than with pollution stemming from the Ozama River. At the time the original photograph was taken the beach was at the height of its popularity, as it had become a much-favored leisure spot for both the general public and for Trujillo's elite; the beach facilities were divided quite clearly by class, with the Casino de Güibia providing the regime's elite with elegant premises for bathing, dining, balls, and gatherings of all sorts (See Sánchez Columna). The split composition of the painting sets up an unusual power binary—the in-your-face masculinity of the Trujillo regime (animated, vibrant, chaotic, and above all, male) against the serene but steely power of the sea, which both contains and isolates the regime's space. The minimalist built space of the painting evokes one of the multiple concrete terraces encroaching upon the beach, built to facilitate leisure—bars, dancing floors, cafés—the best known among these that of the Casino de Güibia, designed by influential architects Guillermo González and José Antonio Caro. These terraces were also part of a system of seawalls built in a futile attempt to contain the power of the sea assaulting the city's coastline—a latent power serenely contained in *Güibia* (c. 1943). Throughout the middle decades of the 20th-century the Dominican government had built a series of seawalls that proved unsuccessful to repel the power of the sea or to prevent the other environmental threat to the beach, that of bacteria and debris flowing into the beach from the Ozama River. José Alcántara Almánzar writes about the futility of these efforts at containing the sea attacking the Santo Domingo coastline in his short story "Visiones al amanecer" (Visions at Dawn), published in 1989 in *La carne estremecida* (Trembling Flesh), where he speaks of how the sea had destroyed the breakwater built to protect the coastline at the mouth of the river between the Santo Domingo Obelisk and Güibia beach in less than three decades—"only some unstable and slimy rocks remained of the imposing breakwater of his childhood, constantly swept by waves that carry the daily filth of the Ozama River" (Alcántara Almánzar, *Carne* 121, my translation).

The inclusion of *Güibia* (c. 1943) in the December 2018 exhibit of the *Dominican Dreams* series—and its creation in preparation for the exhibit—took place against the backdrop of a disturbing invasion of the beach in July of that year by what the press called "endless waves of garbage ... an astounding 1,000 tons of debris" that flowed onto the Güibia beach from the Ozama River after Hurricane Beryl had caused more than ten inches of rain to fall over the city in less than twenty four hours" (D'Estries). It had been long known that the "lost" beach, as the Dominican press labeled it, was contaminated by very high levels of raw sewage, heavy metals, and about 90,000 tons of plastic debris per year deposited in its waters by the Ozama. "These severely polluted waterways," Sletto and Díaz argued are at the best of times "decaying," "filthy, and "dangerous" (1680). The 2018 storm, however, suddenly transformed this yearly reality into what the *Smithsonian* magazine called "a nightmarish scene, with garbage-filled waves depositing literally tons of refuse onto the sand" as "a dense garbage carpet" (Katz). Cleanup required more than 500 public workers as well as the navy and army, and hundreds of volunteers (Pereyra).

Press coverage of this dramatic environmental event "twinning" the contamination of the beach to its symbiotic relationship with the Ozama River, as the geographic points that frame the port's ecotone. It reminded readers of how the river communities, lacking the most basic sanitary facilities, are intrinsically interconnected to the fate of what once was the city's most affluent beach. The river-beach binary echoed the patriarchy-sea binary of *Güibia* (c. 1943). As Andrea Drainy argued at the time:

It is not an issue of cleaning this area or banning plastic only. It is an issue of disorganized urbanization, lack of sanitation infrastructure and adequate dump sites, the cycle of poverty, corruption, lack of recycling, narco-based economies that generate more waste, lack of recycling projects, lack of enforcement of laws, lack of land use plans ... poverty settlements set up right next to the river, etc. To eliminate this, you have to tackle all this at its source and also would have to relocate thousands and thousands of people who live in dysfunctional and poverty-stricken areas along the rivers ... it is all they have. (D'Estries)

The work of Polanco and Morbán, when read ecocritically, speaks to the basic need for environmental justice in societies like that of the Dominican Republic, where the residents of the riverbank communities—politically, economically, and socially powerless—too often bear the disproportionate burden of pollution, contamination, and rising sea levels. Together, this work brings attention to the need for re-envisioning the narratives of the past to bring forth neglected versions that can shed light on the ways in which history has created the conditions that result in environmental injustice. Devastating environmental changes have

brought the port of Santo Domingo to an acute crisis now exacerbated by the worsening impacts of climate change, and we can find in the many narratives of a long history of ecological neglect of this ecotone, as told through literature and art, a spectrum of the many ways in which ecological revolutions linked to colonialism continue to haunt us. Polanco and Morbán—like José Alcántara Almánzar, Tony Capellán, Rosa Tavárez, and Domingo Liz, among others—can be a vital part of “a process in which civil society challenges the state in an environmental field” (Valdés Pizzini 46). Their engagement in art that awakens the viewer to community environmental action underscores their power to help the community articulate its needs and tap into its history and the narratives through which this history can be re-envisioned. It is in this task of articulation that we find a crucial role for scholarship, literature and the arts.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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