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Writing *dominicanidad*: An Interview with Marianela Medrano

Marianela Medrano is an accomplished writer and practicing psychologist. She was born and raised in the Dominican Republic and moved to United States in 1990.

Already an established poet in her native country, Medrano has continued her literary trajectory in her adopted country where she has made notable contributions to the growing corpus of Dominican literature in the United States. She has authored numerous books of poetry, including *Oficio de vivir* (1986), *Los alegres ojos de la tristeza* (1987), *Regando esencias/The Scent of Waiting* (1998), *Curada de Espantos* (2002), and *Diosas de la Yuca* (2011). *Prietica* (2013), illustrated by Clara Rodríguez and published by Alfaguara Infantil, is Medrano's first book for younger readers. Medrano's latest book, *Rooting/Desarraigar* (2017), is a bilingual edition of her selected poems published by Owlfeather Collective.

Medrano's literary production, which is primarily written in her native Spanish, delves into questions of cultural loss and identity, spirituality, memory, history, nature, and women's voices. In her poetry and prose, the author explores Dominican identity from an inclusive perspective, one which celebrates the African heritage that has so often been ignored in Dominican national discourses as well as the Taíno roots of the



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Dominican people. In the following interview, Medrano discusses her transition as a writer from the Dominican Republic to the United States, the value of fostering and developing community/ies, the struggles she has faced as a woman writer, and the importance of staying true to one's voice.

Sobeira Latorre (S.L.): You left your home country in 1990. Could you explain the reasons behind this decision and why you chose to come to the United States?

Marianela Medrano (M.M.): Actually, I left in the late 80's. To be exact I came here for the first time in 1988 as a tourist with no intention to stay. I arrived in New York and was totally astonished by the concrete jungle I encountered. At first sight, I didn't like New York. I felt suffocated by its grandeur. Luckily a friend, Genoveva Palmieri, invited me to visit her in New Haven (Connecticut) and I fell in love with it. I stayed for a little bit and then went back to Dominican Republic. After the elections in 1990 when Juan Bosch mysteriously lost, which meant that then president Joaquín Balaguer actually retained power, I just couldn't stand the situation anymore and left the country. To be honest, I was tired of how women were treated and, specifically, I was tired of the conditions for women writers in the country. I was tired of being



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invisible and also tired of struggling to make a living and having little time to write. In 1990 I made the decision to stay here.

S.L.: You mention how difficult it was to be a woman writer in the Dominican Republic of the 1980's. Could you elaborate on your experiences?

M.M.: My experience is that women have been writing for a long time in the Dominican Republic. We know that anthologies did not include women, that women were not acknowledged. When we look back, women who were able to say things that were prohibited eventually left, moved out of the island. I mean, Aida Cartagena went to Europe and then came back. Chiqui Vicioso left and went back. There are exceptions. Irma Contreras, I don't think ever left. By the time I came into the picture or Aurora Arias, Yrene Santos, or even Angela Hernández, there was a context for us to exist. Of course, we took it to another level because we started writing from the body and with the body and assuming ourselves as whole human beings, with political rights and with voices. I don't agree when people say that women need to find their voices. I think we have known all along what our voices were. We were suppressed, stopped from saying it out loud.



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S.L.: When you moved to New Haven, what type of community did you find both as a Dominican woman and as a poet?

M.M.: I think I was very fortunate because my friend Genoveva was well connected with the community so after a few months in New Haven she put me in touch with what was then La Casa Cultural Julia de Burgos at Yale University, which became my second home. What really convinced me to stay in New Haven was the community that a group of us co-created. We began holding literary events in Spanish. Many of the Yale students, both Latinos and from other ethnicities joined us. I felt that there was a chance for me. At the beginning, I had felt completely alienated until my friend connected me to this wonderful group of creative people. We began organizing *Noches bohemias* (Bohemian Nights). We also created a theater group, and we would put together shows and performed them there. The early 90's are years that I recall very fondly. I can say that back then I had a very strong community supporting me.

S.L.: You describe such a wonderfully supportive and creative community. Of course, the idea of community may evoke different things for different people. Some people might define community through a shared language or nationality. But for a writer, it must be so important to be part of a community of artists.



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M.M.: To me that's vital. Especially because I had that community in the Dominican Republic. I was part of a circle of women poets, six poets-Aurora Arias, Yrene Santos, Mayra Gutiérrez, Nelly Ciprian, and Ylonka Nacidit-Perdomo. Prior to that I had been part of the literary group La Peguera, a small group of writers resisting the imperialism of an international mining company, Falconbridge, which was then exploiting a mine in the Peguera hill in the outskirts of Bonao (Dominican Republic) where I lived as a teenager and young adult. We took on the name to fight back and say no to the exploitation of natural resources in the area. We used poetry and theater as a way to resist. I came from a tradition for which communal support was vital. Growing up I witnessed my dad organizing "juntas" at the farm. "Juntas" were communal gatherings to tend the crops of a particular farm. The way it worked was that people took turns tending each other's farms. In this way, the labor was free, basic needs were covered and everyone returned home with some staples to feed their families. I saw farmers exchanging goods to ensure everyone had what they needed to survive. Similarly, later on I found a community of women writers both in the Dominican Republic and here where we practiced a version of the "juntas" of a coming together to attend to and nurture each other's literary work. Finding that community here in the



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United States *was* particularly important for me as I made the transition into a new culture and language.

S.L.: Could you tell me more about the transition from your home country to the United States? What was it like for you? What changes did you experience?

M.M.: Of course, everything changed. Migration is a serious dislocation and has its ups and downs. To be uprooted from the familiar creates a disturbance but being transplanted in a different soil holds the promise of new growth. After I moved to United States my life changed drastically when I divorced my son's father in my late twenties. Becoming a single mom with a mind and heart full of dreams was not easy, but at the same time it propelled me toward clarifying important values and working toward living a life that was coherent with those values. For instance, I wanted to provide my son with a good life, so I went back to school and never stopped until I finished a terminal degree.

On the surface, my exile seems to have been a voluntary one, but I don't see it as such. I was impelled by the devastation of the island, by the poor treatment of women and the hostile political atmosphere we were experiencing then.



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Exile changed me in many ways. It had to. A move like that shakes things from the root up. As a Hispanophone writer I was confronted with the need to extend the reaches of my writing if I wanted to stay alive as a serious writer. The distance also impelled me to take a close look at the insular nature of my upbringing. Exile has been that open window into my inner experience as a migrant. Coming to United States opened me to a new reality. I began to question my identity, my attitudes and even my religious beliefs. I grew up Roman Catholic and even joined a convent when I was fifteen before I disengaged from the Catholic Church altogether. After I moved to this country I began to explore Zen Buddhism and other religions of the world and began to expand my horizon beyond Roman Catholicism. My search brought me to authors such as Thomas Merton, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, St. Teresa of Avila, and many others so I could take a second look at my religious upbringing and find good reasons to go back to Christian practices. I like what contemplative Christianity has to offer although I still struggle with the formal structures of the religion. Meditation and introspection have a lot to do with the depth of our being. My poetry began and continues to shift. Migration and exile implied a dismantling and reconstruction of who we are and that by force changes the lenses through which we look. I think my view of the world after migrating and



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after traveling to other countries in Europe, Asia and Latin American has permeated the lines of my poems. At least, I want to think so. My post-graduate education put me on the path of brilliant contemporary minds from this country and abroad and that has changed me for sure. The work of Thich Nhat Hanh, Jack Kornfield, Ram Das, Ken Wilber and many others I encountered as a student of transpersonal psychology truly made me look at things with new lenses.

S.L.: You have published with both Spanish (from Spain) and Dominican publishers. Have you noticed any differences?

M.M.: No. Unfortunately, in both cases it hasn't been the kind of publishing that comes with a lot of support. I have had to do my part in both supporting the publication and promoting the book. In that sense, in the sense of putting my name out there, distributing my work, the limitations have been similar. I would say though that my book, *Diosas de la yuca*, has had a wider reach. This might be because of what is happening with the cyber world and the globalization of the world, but I think that the limitations are pretty much the same. I mean, these are small presses. I haven't been picked up by a big press. With small presses you have to do the legwork if you want your work to be known. My recent book *Rooting*, a bilingual edition is also running the



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same course. It is up to me to put it out there. Unfortunately, I am not very good at selling myself.

S.L.: This raises interesting questions about marketing and readership. As you know, a number of Dominican diaspora writers who publish originally in English have found significant success in the US literary market. At a Dominican Studies conference that we both attended in Connecticut back in 2012, a Dominican fiction writer in the audience argued that critics working on Dominican Studies in the United States do not really engage with the writing of Dominican writers who write and publish in Spanish. What are your thoughts on this? Do you agree with what this writer expressed?

M.M.: I do agree with the writer who expressed that concern at the conference that you mention because generally there is a lack of support for writers who write in Spanish in this country. There are some slight positive changes. For the last few years I have attended a couple of conferences in different parts of the country where presentations were offered in Spanish. Most of those conferences have been sponsored by Spanish departments at different universities and I can see that things are turning and that more people are turning their attention to the writing that is written in



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Spanish, but there is a long way to go, a long way. Part of what happens is that what we are writing doesn't necessarily speak to the sensitivities of the people who are approaching this work and that when they read what we are writing, it doesn't mean as much as it would mean to someone in Puerto Rico or in Dominican Republic. There's something lost in translation, I think cultural meanings are lost in translation. It is frustrating for me when I know that this is my experience. In the Dominican Republic, I don't have to send my work anywhere. People call me and ask for my work. That's not my experience here. My experience here is that I send my work out and I receive rejections. Something is lost in the translation, in the cultural experience, the cultural understanding. I'm not writing about what has become marketable. Writing about the ghettos sells; writing, sensationalizing the immigrant experience sells. And that's not what I do.

S.L.: Given your experiences, would you consider writing directly in English or about more "marketable" topics? If not, how do you avoid the temptation to succumb to market demands?

M.M.: I have written some things in English not because I intended for it to happen but I think because the experience or the reading I did about the topic was in



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English. I am tempted to write about what is marketable, perhaps, when I am frustrated. For instance, I have a book that is over 16 years old and hasn't been picked up. It is a very singular book. It has a lot of prose poetry. It is a book that speaks about the polarity of human relations, male/female, masculine/feminine and at the same time it is a book that tries to describe the writing experience, the struggles of finding the words. I haven't been able to sell it to anyone. Sometimes I look at it and wish there was something I could do to make it more marketable without selling myself. I can't. I have been thinking lately that maybe I will publish it myself because I actually believe in the book. No... I am not tempted. I will continue faithfully working with what I know. I cannot write about what is in fashion.

S.L.: On that note, how do you think your work has been received within the US scholarly community?

M.M.: I think that when it gets there, when it finally gets there, the people who read it receive it well. I don't think it is enticing enough to get people to read it. I think we are getting back to the issue of content. Perhaps my writing is too central to a particular part of the world. Now, *Diosas de la yuca*, I think is breaking through, because despite being built on a local analysis, its core is very universal and speaks to people



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from different cultures because it deals with identity, loss, grief, cultural dislocation, and the misunderstanding between cultures and cultural encounters and what gets lost or killed in those encounters. I think that is a very general, universal theme. That book seems to speak more to a wider audience.

S.L.: Your poem “El ombligo negro de un bongó” or the “The Black Bellybutton of a Bongo” in its English translation is one of my favorites. It is probably also your most anthologized. What do you think it is about this poem that resonates with so many readers?

M.M.: You are right. It is the most anthologized. I think it is the theme. It is a celebration of my blackness. But I’m not just saying “great thing I’m black.” It is an introspective, reflective look at what it is to be the product of all this mixture that makes us. Also, it is about grieving what happened in that encounter of cultures. In the poem, there’s a white grandmother that doesn’t understand or that denies the blackness. And I think that gets to people...What gets to us is when things touch our emotional fabric. That feeling of confusion, alienation and very sure of who you are. The end of that poem celebrates blackness, but also celebrates the diversity of our culture.



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S.L.: As you mentioned earlier, your book of poems, *Diosas de la yuca*, has reached a wider audience. I know that this book was largely inspired by your scholarly research. Could you tell me more about the connection between your academic research and *Diosas de la yuca*?

M.M.: Most definitely. When I was doing my doctoral research, I thought I was going to be researching about Latinas growing up in the United States and what happens when people lose touch with the original culture and how that impacts self-esteem and social-esteem. I actually proposed this theme to the committee and when they heard me, a very wise professor said to me that it was a very good topic and would probably be successful in securing grants. However, he did not see my passion for the project and warned me that it is difficult to sustain the rigor of a research project if you are not passionate about it. Because I respected him and his opinion, I had to think more about that. I came back home and another one of my professors told me that a research topic finds you. Following this person's advice, I took the time to allow the topic to find me. One day, I was canoeing along the Housatonic River and I had an experience where I felt the need to sing Anacaona's name. Anacaona was a Taíno chief, a brave woman who played an important role in the pre-Colombian and Colombian times. I felt that



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something beyond me was happening. After about a month, it hit me that my topic had found me. And then I started remembering who I was and my experience with the Taínos and my curiosity for that culture. I then remembered my passion for understanding women...I decided to get closer to the archetypes that can support a feminine identity...I wanted to know more about the Taínos and the divine feminine. So, the poems in *Diosas de la yuca* were my way to digest the research I was doing. There are poems for each one of the goddesses I studied and to other deities of the Taíno world. Most of all, it is a book that looks at the centrality of races in the composition of who we are.

S.L.: In 2013 you published your first book for children and young adults, *Prietica*. What was your inspiration for this lovely book? How has it been received?

M.M.: *Prietica* came out of a need to protest the institutionalized racism and aversion to dark skin in the Dominican Republic. I grew up feeling a sense of deficit because of my dark skin. In the books I read growing up goodness and beauty were portrayed as qualities of the white. Ugliness and bad were qualities of the dark-skinned people. I wanted to create a character who could be a clear reflection for the average Dominican children to see themselves. We are primarily a dark-skinned nation where



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most want to think of themselves white, a legacy further vitiated especially by the Trujillo dictatorship where the entire nation was trained to look at Spain as the Mother Land, Africa as the Shame Land, and the indigenous people as the virtually invisible and despised substratum. *Prietica* is a swarthy girl who knows a lot about the racial mixture that makes us who we are. Needless to say, *Prietica* has not been a popular book. Despite its publication by Alfaguara, it has gone pretty much unnoticed.

S.L.: On that note, how is your work generally received in the Dominican Republic now that you have been living in the United States for such a long time?

M.M.: I think I had a larger readership when I lived there. There is a rupture, a rift that happens when we leave the Island and we all of a sudden become the other. I don't think my work is now as well received. I don't know. I was brought back to the International Feria del Libro, the book fair a couple of times. Then, because I was voicing my opinion on certain things the invitations surreptitiously stopped. No, I am not sure where I belong or if I want to belong to the literary world of the island, a world that is permeated by political favoritism. The other thing is that the moment one leaves the island one is labeled "diaspora." That doesn't sit well with me. It makes me feel fragmented.



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S.L.: Speaking of the diaspora, what is your relationship/connection to Dominican diaspora writers who publish in English? Do you read them? Do you know if they read your work? Is there any Latino/a/x writer that you find particularly inspiring at the moment?

M.M.: For years I have had a sporadic correspondence with Julia Alvarez who has been very supportive of my work. In fact, she endorsed my book *Diosas de la yuca*. I shared some readings in the late 90s with Junot Diaz but have not kept in touch with him since his career took off. I admire and read their work. I have kept up with the work of Nelly Rosario, Annecy Báez and Angie Cruz through the years. I am not sure who, among them reads me or not. Frankly I don't worry about it. Reading is a personal preference and I don't think they are obligated to read me just because we share a nationality. In terms of feeling inspired by a particular Latino writer, there are many of them, including the ones I just mentioned, but I am forever shaken by the work of the late Octavio Paz and Claribel Alegría. They both have the ability to touch the most sensitive fabric of my being when I read them. Perhaps because their work too has a lot to do with the way identity and geographic location affects and changes who we are



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and how we are in the world.

S.L.: Dominicans have a strong and growing presence in the United States. So many Dominican families nowadays have ties to this country. In your view, how are Dominicans changing or transforming US culture or the ways in which we think about Latino/a/xs in this country?

M.M.: There are over 1.5 million of us here in the USA. We make up one of the largest ethnic populations in this country so I would say we have a visible place in the country's cultural and social landscapes. It is unfortunate that most of my people are poor and face serious challenges to advance in this country. I trust that as more and more Dominicans pursue education and attain prominent positions, the perception of Dominicans in USA will change for the better.

I want to think that migration in due course of time becomes a two-way street. The idealist in me wants to think that it is a mutually enriching exchange. When I think of the many Dominicans in academic, medical and political positions, I know that we are enriching the tapestry of this country. At the same time, I know that the returning of professionals to the island is also enhancing our culture. Having a Pulitzer Prize winner in Junot Diaz, a woman college President in Daisy Cocco De Filippis, another literary



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ambassador of the caliber of Julia Alvarez and many other Dominicans gives me confidence that we are no longer typecast as a baseball-players-producing machine. I believe our image is on the rise and we will be significant players in this adopted culture.

S.L.: I know that you are deeply committed to the dissemination of poetry and art, particularly among young people. This is most evident in your work with *Confluencia*, a gathering of seasoned poets, emerging poets, faculty, staff, and community members, to read and celebrate poetry. Can you tell me more about this project and why you decided to initiate it? What challenges have you faced? What has been the most rewarding aspect of organizing this event?

M.M.: *Confluencia* is a project I have done in partnership with Daisy Cocco De Filippis. When she was first appointed President of Naugatuck Valley Community College in Waterbury, I presented her with the idea. I wanted us to unite efforts and create a platform where young writers could be exposed to other accomplished writers, their way of thinking and their craft. As the President of the college she had the means to make this initiative possible and I had the conviction and passion for gathering



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people together. The biggest challenge has been to keep it fresh and diverse. Because I have a fulltime private practice as a therapist and my commitment to writing, it is not always easy to do the necessary networking to ensure I have access to the best and the brightest. The most rewarding experience is to see the young students of various ethnic backgrounds in conversation among themselves and with the writers. Something of great importance has been happening lately. At any given *Confluencia* we experience the converging of at least three different languages as students have taken upon themselves to read in their native language. It is beautiful and you can notice the sense of pride and belonging that they embody as they read. The series has already produced one anthology and we are gearing up to the second publication so these experiences can be registered in the annals of the literary life of Connecticut.

S.L.: Thank you so much for your work, commitment, and for granting me this interview.

M.M.: Thank you for the opportunity to reflect on my past and my present.