



ISSUE 1 • April 2007

# Racialised Identities, Caribbean Realities: Analysing Black Female Identity in Hispanic Caribbean Poetry

*Nicole Roberts*

---

## Abstract

The genius of our black foremothers... was to create powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip black folk with cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness.<sup>1</sup>

Women do not figure prominently among the revolutionary leaders of the Hispanic Caribbean. In fact, the modern Caribbean society is still largely patriarchal. Indeed, much of Caribbean literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century depicted women as sexually passive and subordinate to males. The intersection between race and gender, however, continues to inform Hispanic Caribbean societies, and representations of women, whether clear-cut or stereotypical, still have an impact on them. The 1980s saw a surge in the publication of poetry by women that attempted to develop language, to articulate a new female Hispanic Caribbean identity; specifically, an identity that recognized blackness and sought to present new representations of female sexuality. It portrayed women in various social roles, but mainly centred on the mother/grandmother figure and on female sexuality. This article seeks to analyze representations of femininity in contemporary Hispanic Caribbean verse. In privileging the black female voice, it looks at women and representations of them in the poetry of three contemporary female poets. In a sense, it seeks to inform our understanding of their lived experiences. Further, it examines to what

---

<sup>1</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) 15.

extent the poets see themselves in the role of definers or shapers of Hispanic Caribbean identity. The angst and sense of suffering of women in the Caribbean and the fact that they are equipped with the tools for survival, as well as the emphasis on female creation, distinguishes these poets as valuable to any study of contemporary Hispanic Caribbean poetics.

---

## **Introduction**

### **Mothering blackness**

This study analyses a genre which, to date, has not received widespread critical attention, though it is increasingly being noted in contemporary literary studies. To describe it as simply feminist poetry is neither adequate nor apt. At the same time, the staunch feminist slant cannot be ignored because of the reality it reflects. Feminist epistemology has transformed the world for many Caribbean women, as it questions women's lived experiences and their role/s in identity formation. In the introduction to the essay "El éxito según San... Hacía una reivindicación de la poesía femenina en República Dominicana" [Success according to Saint... Reclaiming female-authored poetry in the Dominican Republic], poet Sherezade Chiqui Vicioso says:

Hace unos meses un escritor dominicano, notorio por su mordacidad, me preguntó por qué las mujeres, independientemente de las muy conocidas, no han jugado un papel más importante en la literatura universal.<sup>2</sup>

[A few months ago, a Dominican writer, well known for his mordacity, asked me why it was that women, aside from the more well-known ones, had not played a more important role in universal literature.]

In response to the query, Vicioso first highlights the role of hegemonic masculinity, but she also points to the need for the reordering of Caribbean societies which must take place if gender oppression is to cease. She says:

Para las mujeres la situación es diferente. No se trata tan solo de entender la comprensión masculina de su mundo. Es la doble tarea de primero hacerse entendida en un lenguaje aceptable a los standards masculinos para luego poder crear los propios, siempre con el riesgo de quedarse al margen.<sup>3</sup>

[For women the situation is different. It is not only about understanding the masculine construct of their world. It is also the double task of first making oneself understood in a language acceptable to masculine standards so as to then be able to create one's own standards, while always risking remaining marginalised.]

---

<sup>2</sup> Sherezade (Chiqui) Vicioso, "El éxito según San... Hacía una reivindicación de la poesía femenina en República dominicana," in *Algo que decir: Ensayos sobre literatura femenina (1981-1991)*, (Santo Domingo: Editora Búho, 1991), 25. All translations in the article are the author's.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

Female power, sexuality and desire are intrinsic themes in the study of contemporary Hispanic Caribbean poetry, in the main because of the role of women in the [pro]creation of society. They are decisive factors in the creation of female identity, specifically in light of an historical repression of Caribbean women and men. Feminist Critic Judith Grant suggests that:

Feminist ideas about self-determination must include both men and women, while being aware of race and capitalism as interactive with the gender structure.<sup>4</sup>

Black<sup>5</sup> women across the Caribbean, in their roles as grandmothers and mothers, have mostly preached a strong work ethic and promoted a strong social identity. Their awareness of race as well as their role/s in society tends to influence their attempts to provide a home for their children and an education. These works must be read not merely as a reflection of the social reality of black women but also as a configuration of the cultural identity of black Caribbean women. This article seeks to analyse representations of femininity in contemporary Hispanic Caribbean verse. In privileging the black female voice, it looks at representations of women in the poetry of three contemporary poets and seeks to inform our understanding of their lived experiences. Further, it examines to what extent the poets see themselves as definers or shapers of Hispanic Caribbean identity.

In the essay “Dominican writers at the crossroads: reflections on a conversation in process”, Daisy Cocco de Filippis argues that:

...as we approach the closing of the century and consider the changes in what constitutes ‘Dominicanness’, we understand that no longer will geography be the defining factor. The lives and stories of many members of the Dominican community have broken the spell of many years of official silence. Consequently, as Dominicans move from Quisqueya<sup>6</sup> to Washington Heights, and as Dominican geography is expanded, a number of positive changes have begun to take place:

- Racial discrimination against Dominicans has had the positive effect of making Dominicans begin to come to terms with our own racial identity.
- The leading role of women in the migration process has underscored our social inequalities and has resulted in more freedom for women, equal partners in survival.<sup>7</sup>

Long before this, the poet Aída Cartagena Portalatín (1918-1994) took up the challenge of writing women into Dominican history. Her poetry insistently emphasises that Caribbean women constantly struggle with life and their voiceless status as they play out traditional roles in society. Her poetry was a succinct attempt to present the lives of women and the problematic of racial origin in the Dominican Republic.

The symbolic creation of mankind begins with the mother and the theme of *la patria* [country] as represented by the mother pervades much of the poetry analysed in this

<sup>4</sup> Judith Grant, *Fundamental Feminism: Contesting the Core Concepts of Feminist Theory*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 187.

<sup>5</sup> The term black in the Caribbean incorporates a range of colours and mixed ethnicities rather than a fixed opposition between Black and White, Caucasian and African.

<sup>6</sup> Daisy Cocco de Filippis, “Dominican writers at the crossroads: reflection on a conversation in process,” in *The Cultures of the Hispanic Caribbean*, eds., Conrad James and John Perivolaris, (London and Oxford, Macmillan, 2000). In the article, the author notes that Quisqueya is the Indian name for Hispaniola.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 159.

article. The poets celebrate the mother figure as integral to the construction of their identities. This interrogation takes many forms. Central to this is the use of the motif of the mother to emphasise creation. The poets highlight the notion of a Hispanic Caribbean in which the mother is always revered, despite official patriarchal domination supported by a culture of *machismo*. Usually the mother is presented as a strong figure, someone intrinsically linked to the creation of a sense of purpose in the people of the Hispanic Caribbean. She is the recipient of constant praise and recognition for her hard work and enduring love of family. Praise of motherhood is in fact a prevalent theme in the black poetry of the Hispanic Caribbean as well as black literature across the Diaspora. Often the poets compare the mother-child attachment to that of the citizen to *la patria*: in the same way, a mother gives life to and nurtures her child, *la patria* nurtures culture, and is therefore owed a great debt, as all mothers are.

Portalatín focuses on women's innate strength, which she learns from her mother. She confronts the very real issue of black shame and describes how women can learn to overcome it. In 'Elegía segunda', Portalatín describes how her mother helped the people in her community: "Mi madre fue una de las grandes mama del mundo" [My mother was one of the great mothers of the world.] She is not simply a good mother, but a great woman, who shows by her deeds how to live. Portalatín has written many other such poems about her mother's strength, suggesting that she is a strong woman herself because of her mother's teachings. Motherhood is in fact the biggest test of a woman's strength. In the following poem, Portalatín suggests that her mother's life work was a universal quest to ease the unnecessary suffering of the poor. It has been argued that central to Portalatín's premise are the disparities of life in the Caribbean and the many differences between Caribbean blacks and their North American counterparts.

Mi madre fue una de las grandes mamas del mundo.  
 De su vientre nacieron siete hijos  
 que serían en Dallas, Memphis o Birmingham un problema racial  
 (ni blancos ni negros).  
 (p.93)

[My mother was one of the great mothers of the world.  
 From her womb seven children were born  
 who would be in Dallas, Memphis or Birmingham a racial problem  
 (neither white nor black).]

Portalatín subtly raises the issue of race and colour in Caribbean societies where one family can have children of startlingly varied tones. In talking about how her mother takes care in raising her children, who would be "un problema racial" [a racial problem] in North America, she skillfully oscillates between the notions that the mother did an exceptional job of caring for and educating her children despite what would be seen as a big problem elsewhere, and the unbiased nature with which she did it. The poet suggests that her family background is similar to that of numerous people in the Caribbean. This is not an attempt to justify her racial reality but a portrayal of life as it is lived in the Caribbean. She goes on to point out that from her mother, she has learnt a way of perceiving the world in which race is not a major issue, especially with so many other issues plaguing the people of the Caribbean. Certainly, for her mother who raised all of

her children in the same way, race was not her main concern, but rather, teaching them the right values.

The mother figure does not focus on blackness or black identity. She elevates all people and seeks to value humanity and promote a collective struggle. Her self-determination is evident in the work, which she carried out tirelessly. She acquired a mental privilege which was above that of race, not by sacrificing her blackness but rather embracing it as well as an understanding of her role in helping her children and others to accept themselves and their role/s in life.

Lala al servicio de la casa por más de treinta años  
no la olvida  
En cada frío que se hace en nuestro valle  
la recuerdan también los que recibieron en el pueblo  
sus frazadas baratas. (p.93)

[Lala who worked in the house for more than thirty years  
never forgets her  
Every cold season that comes to our valley  
They remember her also those in the village who received her  
cheap blankets.]

Portalatín's concern, like her mother's, is not only for blacks but for all victimised people in the world.

Mamá ignoraba las Teorías Políticas. (Encíclicas y a Marx).  
Sólo entendía que el pobre sufre, reclama pan y  
necesita abrigo.  
Un periodista dijo que ella era un programa privado  
de Asistencia Social.  
Mujeres de vida buena y de vida mala aún la lloran. (p. 93)

[Mama did not know political theories. (Manifestos and Marx).  
She only understood that the poor suffer, need food and  
need shelter.  
A journalist said that she was a private programme  
for Social Welfare.  
Good women and bad women still mourn her.]

One life lesson the poet has learnt from her mother is that the debt of love human beings owe to each other transcends religion and politics ("manifestos and Marx") which the poet lumps together. Food (bread) to sustain life is needed by everyone, rich or poor, black or white:

Sus cosas eran deber de amor.  
Mamá. Olimpia. Mamá. El público no debe por fundas de alimentos  
ni frazadas y techos  
levantar estatuas. Deber de amor son esas cosas.  
Deber del hombre por todos los HOMBRES (p. 93)

[Her duties were those of love.  
Mama. Olympia. Mama. The public should not because of food drives,  
nor blankets and roofs

erect statues. These things were a duty of love.  
The duty of mankind towards all MEN]

In this poem, Portalatín presents a vision of cultural homogeneity, which may seem idealised. However, as one of the first Dominican women to confront racial attitudes, she puts it in a universal context and shows the Dominican reader that race and colour are not important. Portalatín underscores the strength of will that permeates her identity and suggests that her life is sustained by her universal aspiration: her “deber del hombre por todos los hombres” [duty of mankind towards all men].

Although the mother figure is central in the configuration of cultural identity, several of the poets also focus on the importance of the grandmother. The grandmother represents the repression of women and the sheer strength of the black woman. In a sense, this group of poets seek to dialogue with the ancestors and presents the grandmother figure in the role/s of seer and teacher to younger generations. Cultural traditions, racial identity and norms are learned through interaction with her. The mother figure looms large in the poetry of Cuban poet, Excilia Saldaña (1946-1999). The anthology *La Noche* is presented as a long letter to her grandmother. As an introduction, Saldaña uses a dedication that she wrote to her grandmother, dated ‘3 de febrero de 1985’: “una viejita gorda, carapachito de jicotea, maga, dulcera, campanita de bronce, libro de todas las respuestas, mito, verdad, raiz... abuela.”(p.11) [“...an old, portly woman, the shell of a tortoise, magician, confectioner, bronze bell, book of all answers, myth, truth, root... grandmother”] Here and throughout the anthology, Saldaña presents her grandmother as a seer, who passed on a wealth of knowledge. The description is almost mythic, filled with warmth and love. Most importantly, it documents the legacy of strength that black grandmothers have passed on to generations of Cuban women.

‘Madrigal de abuela’ appears in “Nocturno 1” (the first part of the anthology). It is not a madrigal in terms of versification but the rhythm does suggest a song-like quality and it is faithful to the 16<sup>th</sup> century madrigal poems’ thematic concern of love and nature:

Mariposa,	Butterfly,
primorosa,	graceful,
cadenciosa,	rhythmic,
tan mimosa,	so delicate
ven a mí.	come to me.
Caricia,	Endearing,
vergonzosa,	modest,
sé dichosa:	be happy
vuela en mí.	live on in me.

(p. 25)

Saldaña’s imagery conjures up nature and its beauty. The poem is much more than an exposition on love, which centres on womanhood. Only 15 words are used to create the polemical image of fleeting yet enduring beauty. The use of the word “mariposa” [butterfly] immediately brings to mind the perfection of the grandmother, evoking an image of her grace, wisdom and loving-kindness. It is clear that her teachings live on in

the poet, who sees her as an ancestral source of wisdom and inspiration. The suggestion is that it is the same for all women who will in turn give birth and do the same.

Many of Saldaña's poems harp on this theme. For the poet, her strength and pride in her identity, in this case both her "Cubanidad" and her black identity, come from her grandmother. In terms of the physical description of the grandmother, Saldaña says in the poem entitled '*¿Que cómo era mi abuela?*'

—*¿Que cómo era mi abuela? Abuela estaba hecha de vuelo de ZunZún y miel de abeja. Era como una vieja guitarra guajira cantando en la noche cuando la faena termina. O como un tambor, que cuanto más tenso el parche, habla más alto y mejor.* (p.26)

What was my grandmother like? She was made of the flight of Zun Zún and honey. She was like an old rustic guitar strumming in the night towards the end of the shift. Or like a drum on which the tighter the cover the higher and the sweeter the beat.

The poem is testimony not only to her grandmother's beauty, but also to an affirmation of the poet's black heritage. The image of the 'tambor' [drum] harks back to the African connection of the grandmother and the image of the "guitarra guajira" [rustic guitar] emphasizes her wild spirit and strong will. Saldaña then goes on to reaffirm the wisdom and faith of her grandmother:

— *¿Que cómo era mi abuela? Abuela era tan sabia que no sabía palabras oscuras, pero podía conversar con los astros o con la humilde matica de ruda.* (p.27)

What was my grandmother like? Granny was so wise that she did not know dark words, but she could speak with the stars or with the humble rue plant

The poet's response to the initial question posed "What was my grandmother like?" links the grandmother's knowledge with divinity. She is able to converse with the stars, and this suggests that she is endowed with a gift of supreme knowledge, which unites worldly wisdom with strength of character and these with blackness.

*¿Que cómo era mi abuela?  
Abuela era una jícara de magia cotidiana.  
Elemental y simple como el milagro  
cotidiano del agua.* (p.28)

What was my grandmother like?  
Granny was a calabash of daily magic  
Basic and simple like the daily  
miracle of water

In a sense, one can argue that the grandmother figure is almost mystically presented. She is portrayed as flawless, with a timeless, almost magical quality. This notion of ancestral knowledge, that is, a sort of ethereal knowledge gained from divinity and passed on through generations, is a common theme in black Diaspora writing. Saldaña describes her grandmother as being elemental and simple, and we can read this to mean that the essence of the grandmother lies in her timeless belief system, both as miraculous as the everyday existence of water. The poem evokes a depth and a rootedness that the poet suggests is epitomised by her black grandmother.

Puerto Rican, Mayra Santos Febres (1966- ) speaks to the spirit of her ancestors. It is from them that she obtains her sense of self; in the first instance, she is able to recoup lost

memory about the history of blacks in her country. Additionally, she is transformed into a black woman who can stand up to those in society who discredit and look down on blackness. In much of her poetry, Santos Febres praises her grandmother as well as her mother; both were strong black women who recognize (d) her beauty and sought to teach her their way of life. In the following trilogy, the grandmother figure is central to thematic content. ‘Abuela’ takes the form of a conversation with her grandmother and opens with the words:

Abuela  
si tu fueras iyaloche todavía me dirías  
“hija de Yemayá”  
carne salina  
y yo te entendería (p. 20)

Granny  
if you were iyaloche you would still call me  
“Yemaya’s daughter”  
salted beef  
and I would understand you.

In the African tradition, Yemayá is the wife of Changó and is herself a god. The poet states that no matter what or who she becomes in life, for her grandmother, she will always be “hija de Yemayá” [Yemayá’s daughter], that is, a beautiful black girl with an innate spirituality and strength that is liberating. With this point Santos Febres immediately highlights the fact that race is problematic in Puerto Rico. She presents the dichotomy of the significance of race in her strong black self-image and the concurrent mental colonisation of the internalisation of racist ideology.

To her grandmother, Santos Febres is grateful for the substance of a spiritual existence, that her grandmother always showed a belief in herself and projected that self-love on to her granddaughter, so that the poet never denied her black identity, as many Puerto Ricans do. The poet points out that despite the “personas planchaditas” [whitewashed people] with whom she inevitably comes into contact, she is able to live the strength of her conviction in her love of self:

...a pesar de personas planchaditas  
que me dicen  
“enfermedad vernácula,  
anécdota de tierra  
mito hueco para algunos antropólogos.  
Zambúllete en el mainstream minoritario;  
lee a Safo” (p. 20)

...despite the whitewashed people  
who call me  
“native illness  
earthly anecdote  
hollow myth for certain anthropologists.  
Plunge into the minority mainstream;  
read Sappho.”

In the poem, Santos Febres’ criticism of the majority of the blacks in Puerto Rico is scathing and is aptly demonstrated by her use of the quite knotty metaphor of “personas planchaditas”. The double entendre in this phrase serves both as a comment on the ‘straightening’ of black hair and the blacks in Puerto Rican society who deny their blackness in an attempt to present themselves as whites.

Unlike Saldaña, Santos Febres mixes voices in her poetry. On the one hand there is a demotic Caribbean voice intermixed with a confrontational resistant voice, which manipulates language in a fascinating way. The poem uses anecdotes (which still inform black tradition) to expose some of the more salient examples of prejudiced beliefs regarding blacks, which are internalised by many people, including blacks themselves. The relaxing of their hair is one such example because blacks are said to have “bad hair”.

In addition, they are seen as a minority group who speak badly and are mostly uneducated. In the poem, the poet is advised to read Safo [Sappho], an allusion to the Greek female poet known for the intense subjectivity of her poems, versatile metrification, and her lesbianism. Indeed, homosexuality remains a taboo subject in Hispanic Caribbean culture and society. In a poem such as this, it allies with race and language to articulate and even legitimize identity. Thus, Santos Febres launches a defence initiative in favour of her personal form of nationhood drawn from her ancestral connections and personal conflicts, against those who feel that her form of expression as a black Puerto Rican is not in keeping with mainstream ideology.

In reopening the age-old argument on black identity versus the idealised collectivity of Puerto Rican identity, Santos Febres signals both the debt owed by all Puerto Ricans to their black ancestors as well as her own rejection of the docility required to live the myth of Puerto Rican racial communalities. The defining moment of the poem is contained in the last five lines:

<p>yo soy sal abuela      sal negra que entiende a Safo      desde el hermenéutico sabor      [del hueso propio      y no tengo intención de plancharme      ni una greña más. (p. 20)</p>	<p>I am salt Granny      black salt who understands Sappho      starting with the hermeneutic flavour      [of one's own bone      and I have no intention of straightening out      not one more bit of kinky hair.</p>
--	--

She describes herself as “sal negra” [black salt]. Salt is integral to the earth and to mankind/life, as a preservative and as a major component of the Caribbean Sea. Salt is therefore the lifeblood of the islands, in this case, Puerto Rico. Santos Febres’ comparison makes the allegory that “sal negra” is similarly essential to Puerto Rican society, while the poet’s role is that of preserver of the black history and presence in Puerto Rico. Her suggestion that she understands Sappho may well be an attempt to reveal her lesbian sexuality. She also underscores the fact that she sees herself as a strong black woman and she questions her position in the society because she does not fall into the stereotypical categories of blackness. Educated and proud of her black heritage, she is at once positive and singular in showing her pride. She stands for an emergence of blackness from behind the imposed barriers of prejudice and racism. From her grandmother, Santos Febres has the spirit to address problems of race and invisibility in Puerto Rican society. Her message is direct: the black woman must lead the race forward, first by a positive acceptance of blackness then by demonstrating strength of purpose in not being swayed by aspirations to being the white other. She must speak for herself and define herself in her own terms; this way of being and self-confidence, Santos Febres suggests, was learnt from her grandmother.

The second poem ‘Abuela hoy’ also portrays an almost idealistic lauding of the grandmother while simultaneously exploring the relationship with the mother as central to the formation of identity, through a description of their legacy. Santos Febres suggests that she has learnt from her grandmother to be prepared to work hard to fulfil her goals in life. The poem opens:

Abuela hoy

Granny today

me toco suavecito el ventanal de musgo;  
 rodando sale la primera voz dentada.  
 la historia propia  
 reaparece bailoteando  
 como un quipus ancestral  
 desde lo ínsolito.  
 me toco suavecito  
 el ventanal del musgo. (p.25)

I softly touch the window of moss;  
 the first serrated voice comes out gyrating.  
 History herself  
 reappears dancing around  
 like an ancestral quipus  
 from the extraordinary.  
 The window of moss  
 softly touches me.

This “coming of age” poem makes the point that the poet had to learn to accept her history and her black identity. The rest of the poem describes the hard work the mother does on a daily basis and recounts the poet’s own role in the household, in which the grandmother is no longer present. The memories reappear, as do the challenges of daily living:

mami corre de las duchas  
 al suministro de cucharas agrias,  
 la emoción a porción chica,  
 y me baja hasta el sillón a que la ayude  
 a corregir descripciones  
 de un pájaro escapándose. (p.25)

mama runs out of the showers  
 straight into the supply of bitter spoonsfuls,  
 small portions of emotion,  
 and she lifts me down to the armchair to help her  
 to correct descriptions  
 of a bird escaping.

The poem ends with the words:

mami sale de las duchas,  
 habla sola  
 sobre el error de estar casada  
 parir y correr tras la hija  
 que se trepa a un árbol de grosellas.  
 me dice--tú no permitas demasiado  
 pero a mí el vecino, la familia...  
 yo le toco la carne dura de ser hembra,  
 la insondable negrura de su espalda.  
 (p.25)

mama comes out of the showers  
 talking to herself  
 about the mistake of being married  
 giving birth and running after the child  
 who climbs up a fruit tree.  
 she tells me “you don’t allow too much  
 but me, the neighbour, the family...  
 I touch the harshness of being a woman,  
 the inscrutable blackness of her shoulders.

A comment on the difficulties of being a black woman in Puerto Rico, the poem also underscores the harsh reality of life for all women. It demands respect for them, specifically black women, who must always be strong.

Santos Febres lengthy, five-part poem ‘Sale a darle clemencia al universo’ is moving and provocative as it treats with the subject of passing on black culture and traditions. The grandmother, who has a special place in the universe, is the keeper of knowledge, a fountain of information on motherhood and aging:

Sale a darle clemencia al universo.  
 a su lado  
 se coagula toda bruma  
 en paralela negritud:  
 mi abuela  
 reordena el caos nómada  
 de todas las mañanas  
 cuando todavía no bullen

She goes out to give mercy to the universe.  
 at her side  
 the mist is all around  
 in parallel negritud:  
 my grandmother  
 reorders the nomadic chaos  
 of every morning  
 when her purposeful ample breasts

sus deliberadas tetas opíparas  
de querer atrapar el escándalo  
y volverlo hojas secas para barrer. (p.11)

still do not seethe  
from wanting to trap the scandal  
and turn it like dried leaves for sweeping up.

The chaos refers to both the mysteries and the vagaries of life. Yet the grandmother's wisdom is infinite:

Mi abuela es como la tierra, tú sabes:  
mujer helicoidal que extiende su ceiba seca  
a contrapunto, a contraluz,  
para trenzar la ruta que el viento ha de  
seguir al día  
y obligarlo a entregar  
los huevos y obeliscos que arrancara  
de las vitrinas anteayer.  
ella es así mi abuela, (p11)

My granny is like the earth, you know:  
a helicoidal woman who extends her dry branches  
counterpoint, against the light  
to line the route that the wind has to follow  
by day  
and force it to turn over  
the eggs and the obelisks that she takes up  
the day before yesterday from the windows.  
That's just how she is, my grandmother,

In her grandmother, all of nature is united and she is seen as a perfect creation. Repeatedly the poet compares her grandmother to the earth. She not only accepts her role in life, but also she constantly seeks to challenge herself and to better inform herself, then she passes on the wisdom of the ancestors to her granddaughter.

me recomunica toda la sabiduría  
adquirida en mi niñez  
entre tabla y tabla de multiplicar  
( $2 \times 1 = 2$  el té de jengibre  
alivia el aire en la barriga  
 $2 \times 2 = 4$  que sólo son espíritus encajados  
 $2 \times 3 = 6$  el mal de amor se cura  
con semillas de caoba  
 $2 \times 4 = 8$  guardadas donde más  
le duele a una el amor)  
por eso es que la pubis de mi abuela  
es raíces de caobo  
por eso es que los mozambiqueños del  
barrio  
anidan en sus greñas de carbón  
y tanto se restringan en ellas  
que se han transubstanciado  
en proteínas. (p.12)

she connects me to all of the knowledge  
acquired in my childhood  
between tables and tables of multiplication  
( $2 \times 1 = 2$  ginger tea  
alleviates wind in the stomach  
 $2 \times 2 = 4$  that they are only spirits who fit  
 $2 \times 3 = 6$  lovesickness is cured  
with seeds from the rubber plant  
 $2 \times 4 = 8$  kept where  
love hurts one the most  
that is why my grandmother's pubis  
is made of rubber plant roots  
that is why the mozambiqueños of the  
neighbourhood  
nest in their kinky coal hair  
and so much do they burrow in them  
that they have transubstantiated  
in protein.

The experiences and thinking of the ancestors guide us today. The examples that the poet gives (such as ginger tea relieves menstrual cramps) are about mythical knowledge, based on common sense and the recognition that the cure for all of life's ailments and mysteries lies in nature. This poem is about belief systems as much as it is about faith in God and in the universe. The poet describes her quest for knowledge and enlightenment in the following words:

y al pecado de conocer  
porqué roto se sale el tiempo  
por qué filo se escapa lo cercano  
cómo hace una para encontrarse

and the sin of knowing  
why time ends up broken  
why hunger closely escapes  
what one does to meet

la gravedad.

with gravity.

Life is an endless search for enlightenment. By the end of the poem, the poet communicates with her grandmother, now deceased, and she suggests that answers or greater truths lie with the ancestors, such as her grandmother:

Y después de todo  
mi abuela retorna  
lenta de saber direcciones,  
envuelve un pedazo de clemencia  
en papel de estraza  
me lo coloca bajo las axilas  
me peina la frente de un beso aforístico  
y desde el escalón  
alza su brazo de yagua seca  
y enreda el viento en su mano  
como si borrara una pizarra. (p.14)

And after everything  
my grandmother comes back  
slow to know directions  
wraps a piece of mercy  
in parchment paper  
puts it under my arms  
combs my forehead with an aphoristic kiss  
and from the staircase  
she raises her arm like dry palm  
and wraps the wind in her hand  
as if she were cleaning a blackboard.

In acknowledging her grandmother's mortality, Santos Febres suggests that infinite knowledge lies in love; the love of the grandmother for the granddaughter and vice versa. Her grandmother is the essence of truth, light and being.

Self-identity is important in constructing a nation's identity. The women poets of this study individually use their works to focus on the role of women and how they find strength in the face of adversity. None single out blackness as hindering self-understanding. Perhaps more importantly, they present the notion that it is their womanhood that gives them strength and a positive identity. They suggest that although they face daily challenges in overcoming many stereotypes regarding blacks in the Caribbean, it is their strength as women that often guides them to a place of self-understanding and ultimately helps them to transcend negativity.

Mayra Santos Febres argues that contemporary Caribbean societies need a redefinition of marginality as well as a re-examination of the self-deprecating nature of blacks. She points out that even though Hispanic Caribbean blacks are educated, among themselves, they continue to perceive blackness negatively and thus marginalise themselves. Blacks must take control of their lives if they are to begin the process of reconstructing identity; and it is among black women that this process of reconstruction, which has already begun, will flourish and be sustained. She begins the poem 'Las yerbas y los ríos son para mí' with the lines:

Las yerbas y los ríos son para mí  
para esta negra que nació en Carolina  
que ha vivido en urbanizaciones  
en satélites hermenéuticos  
una avenida hacia la boca propia  
hacia el líquido poema que se sueña  
cada noche en mi cabeza. (p. 39)

The shrubs and rivers are for me  
for this black girl who was born in Carolina  
who has lived in housing developments  
in hermeneutic satellites  
an avenue towards the mouth  
towards the liquid poem that is dreamt  
every night in my head.

Blackness and black identity are integral to Santos Febres' sense of self. Her race is a central thematic concern. Her poetry, the filter through which she shows her world, is used to present that social vision:

no recuerdo nada más y para esta hembra urbanizada universitada blanqueada y reblanqueada sin éxito (p. 39)	I don't remember anything else and for this urbanised woman university educated whitened and rewhitened without success
---	--

She presents the idea that adaptation to whiteness is not an option for her because it requires denial of the self and a consequent crisis of the black self. Rather, she is searching for “el pecho común” (p.39) [the common breast], the basis upon which all Puerto Ricans and the people of the Caribbean can come together, neither in imitation nor denial. By turning an ironic lens on Puerto Rican society, she shows women that they must be prepared to recognise the loss of identity and take steps to reclaim a voice:

la sal iodizada en la cabeza no es progreso abuela, madres, no es progreso. (p. 39)	iodized salt in the head is not progress grandmother, women, this is not progress.
--	--

The image of iodized salt ties into socio-cultural beliefs in Puerto Rico; the notion that everything created outside of the Caribbean is better than that made within. In a way, this image can be interpreted as the desire to obtain whiteness. Caribbean women pass on these beliefs to their children, which heightens their sense of inferiority and maintains a denial of the racially black segment of the population. Santos Febres uses irony to distance herself from black women who do not love themselves. She suggests that with self-confidence and strength, they can attain a cultural ascendancy, as was perhaps envisaged by Mexican writer José Vasconcelos (1881-1959) in his vision of a cosmic race. The repetition of “no es progreso” [this is not progress] focuses the reader on what would be considered progress in Puerto Rico. Here Santos Febres’ condemnation is clear. Progress is not the whitening of the country but rather, it lies in the hands of strong women who accept themselves: their sexuality, gender and race.

### **Women's strength**

In contemporary Dominican poetry, it was Aída Cartagena Portalatín who first began a tradition of writing that attempted to define the psychic identity of the Dominican woman. Before Portalatín, the status of women in Dominican poetry, often written by men, was one of lofty idealised images or base, sexual imagery. However, in Portalatín’s poetry, she puts her self-image up for inspection. The identity is usually that of a strong woman, certain of her role in society but unsure of her place in a male world, which expects a woman to know her place and to remain there. The idea of self-preservation through inner strength is often repeated in Portalatin’s attempt to give voice to the women who populate her poems. The voice in her poetry is always female, struggling to resist the norms of patriarchal Dominican society. In ‘2000 años después’ Portalatín admits: “No he sabido hacer el juego” (p. 83) [I didn’t know how to play the game.] As a woman, she

is isolated, in a world where men have made the rules. This is about to change, now that the poet has a language which she can use to speak out:

Cuando la mujer no tenía la palabra  
yo era una estrella colgada del cielo,  
de un cielo de palomas y de lluvia  
donde la mujer es una feliz hormiga inútil  
anegada de Dios.  
(p.83)

When the woman did not have the word  
I was a star hanging in the sky,  
from a sky of pigeons and rain  
where the woman is a happy, useless ant  
overwhelmed by God.

The collective voice is now prepared to speak up. This is a strong rejection of the passivity of many Dominican women who readily accept brutal treatment from men then turn passively, often to religion, for salvation and healing. Portalatín's use of the analogy of the ant, described as happy but useless, suggests that women are powerless creatures in Dominican society. It is a strong criticism of the way in which they have allowed themselves to be treated. Repeatedly, she says they have no voice:

Ahora soy como cualquier mujer  
y se puede llamarla con cualquier  
otro nombre  
porque todos somos iguales  
en el mundo  
y estamos como muertos  
cayendo por el mismo agujero  
de la tierra.  
(p. 83)

Now I am like any woman  
and I can be called by  
any other name  
because we are all equal  
in the world  
and we are like the dead  
falling through the same hole  
in the earth.

Now Portalatín suggests that there is nothing to impede her progress, or other Dominican women. We can interpret the poem's title to suggest that 2000 years after the birth of the supposed saviour of the world, Portalatín believes it is time for women to assert themselves by speaking out and interrogating their status in society. They must constantly strive to regain the word and to reclaim their world. They should not accept their victimization or the traditional role ascribed to women. Portalatín condemns the limited strides they have made and their inadequate attempts at assuming leadership. The poem ends with a call to arms:

Después de todo, ¿por qué debo llorar?  
Yo no abrí este sendero,  
yo no enseñé la pena,  
¡ni yo inventé estos 2000 años  
jugando al escondite de la redención! (p. 84)

After everything, why should I cry?  
I did not open that path,  
I did not teach the pain,  
nor did I invent these 2000 years  
playing hide and seek with redemption!

Women, according to Portalatín, are not the creators of a society of inequality. Yet it is in reading between the lines that women can realise they will only reach an understanding of themselves if they understand how society has wronged them and take a stand against this oppression.

Often, the world Portalatín presents is one of desolation, where she has no place as a woman. The poet's dream is to change her world and that of all women. Interestingly,

there are a number of recurring images and motifs in Portalatín's works, such as the calming effect of nature. In 'Tarde en el parque', the poet sits in one corner of the park, watching life pass by. The park is symbolically a refuge, which she calls a "refugio de recuerdos" (p.27) [a shelter of memories]. On this particular afternoon, she is alone: "El parque, quejido de ramas vacías" [The park, a complaint of empty branches]. The dying park is filled with emptiness. The children are gone: "La risa de los niños es sueño" [The laughter of children is now a dream] and even the raindrops die as they descend unhappily to the earth - "en la hiedra tiembla la gota su vuelta/al firmamento" [in the ivy, the trembling raindrop is afraid of her return/to the earth]. She feels she has no control over nature, or her thoughts. She feels a void and expresses a sense of not belonging while wanting to return to her place. Here in the park: "relámpago, claro con guiones de sombra" [lightning, with shadows] as with her life, there are many dark shadows and she despairs.

In Portalatín's poetry, nature exists to echo our presence on earth. Women are essentially lost in a world that is wild, created by men, and one in which they find themselves alone and lonely. With images of the dying "naturaleza" [nature] she emphasizes the significance of nurturing to the survival of a strong female identity. In 'Víspera del sueño', Portalatín marks the emergence of women in the Hispanic Caribbean, indicating her freedom to speak out as a strong Dominican woman. "Vispera" means twilight. While it can be read as a period of restlessness, signifying a lack of direction in the lives of Dominican women, it is also the time when dreams are made, when we see less clearly. But instead of feeling a fear of the shadows, in this poem, all becomes possible:

Tierra se hará silencio  
 risa no harán los hombres para que me haga eterna  
 llanto no harán las piedras para que me haga eterna (p.23)

[The earth will be silenced  
 Men will not laugh so as to make me eternal  
 The stones will not mourn so as to make me eternal]

This stanza cuts to the heart of the voiceless nature of women in Dominican society and the collusion that exists to keep them in their place. But Portalatín is no longer willing to be complicit in this shadowy dance - she will not remain silent: "Mi sangre se ha herido y se parece al fuego" (p. 23) [My blood has been wounded and seems like fire.] She burns with the desire to speak out, yet this very act is infused with shadows and doubt. In the article "Between the masques", Diane DuBose Brunner explains:

Dealing with the tensions produced by my own position in a society that justifies domination and, therefore, subordination, my writing, performing, invoking art becomes a forbidden pleasure. As the squirming, signifying body (re)positions itself over and over under the masque, writing becomes a sorting activity.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Diane DuBose Brunner, "Between the masques" in *As we are now: Mixblood essays on race and identity*, (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997), 170.

'Víspera de sueño' is Portalatín's attempt to sort out her world, while at the same time she rages against the scarring of women in the Caribbean. It is also a call to the woman reader who is no longer willing to accept the outmoded male definitions of her world. Portalatín urges her to listen and to join in this act of confrontation. The image is that of a fire sweeping out of control, much like Portalatín's desire to speak out. The process of self-discovery has begun for the poet, and she suggests that there can be no stopping this heady movement or journey towards self-discovery and self-identification.

Nieve se irá al cielo y vestirá la luna.  
 Se talarán los bosques para que la desnuden.  
 Sabrá a dulzura la raíz de la hierba.  
 Amor:  
 los ojos de la luz quemarán sus pestañas;  
 te soñaré a mi lado,  
 es víspera del sueño. (p.23)

[Snow will go to the sky and dress the moon.  
 She will fell the forests to lay them bare  
 The roots of grass will know sweetness.  
 Love:  
 The eyes of light will burn her eyebrows;  
 I shall dream of you at my side,  
 It is the dawn of the dream].

Love is truth, according to Portalatín; so she calls on women to love themselves. Only through self-love will they escape all that is false in life. She calls for a resistance to all masking and demands that women look closely at themselves and their situation, to see the truth. Although Portalatín is at times whimsical, she is quite a confrontational poet. Themes of racism and the experience of the pain of womanhood are trademarks of her work and this poem is a response in dream for a new world. She dreams a world for women where they are seen as equals:

Mundos de pies cansados descansarán. La sed de los recuerdos tendrá lluvia de olvido. (p.24)	Worlds of tired feet will rest. The thirst of memories will have a rainfall of loss.
--	--

The poem ends with the following stanza:

El tiempo desde el cuerpo del Sol con temblor de ceniza ha reido a los hombres. Cielos, mares, tierras. Nacer, vivir, morir. Los astros tienen sueño, soñaré con los astros: es víspera del sueño. (p.24)	Time since the body of the sun with the tremble of ashes has laughed at mankind. Skies, seas, earth. Birth, life, death. The Stars have dreams, I shall dream with the stars it is the dawn of the dream.
---	---

Here Portalatín suggests that life is an infinite sea of possibility. Her response is to make her own way and to map her own identity. Yet again, the identity articulated is that of a strong woman, who is at peace with herself. This need to awaken self-awareness in

women is the antithesis of the image of passivity normally associated with women in the Dominican Republic and by extension, the Hispanic Caribbean. Portalatín's "brave new world" is one of women who are strong and wish to better themselves.

## Conclusion

This article is not concerned with exploring stereotypical representations of black female sexuality, which has dominated Hispanic Caribbean poetry and narrative fiction for decades. Images of the mulatto woman, who was perceived as exotic and desirable have been much examined. Whether female Hispanic Caribbean identity must be informed by blackness is a dialogue that continues to be debated by those of us interested in the ways in which race and gender contribute to shaping black women's lives in the Hispanic Caribbean. The poetry written by women in the Hispanic Caribbean today demands that women stand up and affirm their place in the society, while, at the same time, repudiating stereotypical portrayals of women as sexual products or objects.

For many of the poets, the black woman's most desirable quality is her strength because it is this ancestral legacy that has ensured the survival of the black race. These progenitors of entire populations are also authors who document life experiences. Yet, racial inequality continues to divide women and prevent their solidarity. All of the poets have highlighted the subject of black identity and the central role black women play in female empowerment. Moreover, we have seen that the tension inherent in black identity provides for constant interrogation and is evident across the entire Hispanic Caribbean. Exilia Saldaña's poetry re-defines the Caribbean self through a re-examination of the role of women as well as the traditional symbols of beauty in Caribbean society. Puerto Rican Mayra Santos Febres highlights the social experiences of being restricted because of her colour and the psychic dilemma which *blanqueamiento* (the desire to lighten oneself) causes. For Aída Cartagena Portalatín, the search for psychic wholeness begins with revisiting notions of identity and the entire process of cultural conditioning to change the way in which black women see themselves and in which traditionally they have been seen. These three poets in some measure succeed in deconstructing myths surrounding black female identity. Most importantly, they provide us with a broad platform for discussion of the racially problematic reality of black women in the contemporary Hispanic Caribbean.

## Bibliography

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, (eds.) *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Cabrera, Rosa M. "La búsqueda de la identidad en la poesía afroantillana" in Cartagena Portalatín, Aída. 1944. *Vísperas del sueño*. Santo Domingo: La Poesía Sorprendida, Colección El Desvelado Solitario, 1978.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *Una mujer está sola*. Santo Domingo: Colección La Isla Necesaria, 1955.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Del desconsuelo al Compromiso: A Bilingual Anthology of the Poetry of Aída Cartagena Portalatín*. Daisy Cocco de Filippis (ed.). Santo Domingo: Colección Montesinos (Nº10), 1988.
- Castro-Klarén, Sara, Sylvia Molloy, Beatriz Sarlo, (eds.). *Women's Writing in Latin America: An Anthology*. Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1991.
- Cocco de Filippis, Daisy. *Sin otro profeta que su canto: Antología de poesía escrita por dominicanas*. Santo Domingo: Taller, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “Dominican writers at the crossroads: reflection on a conversation in process” in James Conrad, John Perivolaris (eds.) *The Cultures of the Hispanic Caribbean*. London and Oxford: Macmillan, 2000.
- Davies, Catherine. *A Place in the Sun? Women Writers in Twentieth-Century Cuba*. London and New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd., 1997.
- De Costa-Willis, Miriam (ed.) *Daughters of the Diaspora: Afra-Hispanic Writers*. Kingston and Miami: Ian Randle, 2003.
- DuBose Brunner, Diane. “Between the masques” in *As We Are Now: Mixblood Essays on Race and Identity*. Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997.
- Grant, Judith. *Fundamental Feminism: Contesting the Core Concepts of Feminist Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Jackson, Richard L. *Black Writers and the Hispanic Canon*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997.
- James, Conrad and Perivolaris, John (eds.) *The Cultures of the Hispanic Caribbean*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000.
- Mohammed, Patricia. “Unmasking Masculinity and Deconstructing Patriarchy: Problems and Possibilities within Feminist Epistemology” in Rhoda Reddock (ed.) *Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities: Theoretical and Empirical Analyses*. Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago: University of the West Indies Press, 2004.
- Montefiore, Jan. *Feminism and Poetry Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing*. London and New York: Pandora Press, 1987.
- Roberts, Nicole. “Discovering resemblances: Language and Identity in Hispanic Caribbean Poetry” in *Derlas: Delaware Review of Latin American Studies*, 2004.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1993.
- Saldaña, Exilia. *La Noche*. La Habana: Editorial Gente Nueva, 1989.
- Santos Febres, Mayra. *Anamú y Manigua*. Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Editorial La Iguana Dorada, 1991.
- Vicioso, Sherezade (Chiqui). “El éxito según San... Hacía una reivindicación de la poesía femenina en República dominicana” in *Algo Que Decir: Ensayos Sobre Literatura Femenina (1981-1991)*. Santo Domingo: Editora Búho, 1991.
- West, Cornel. *Race Matters*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.
- Williams, Claudette M. *Charcoal and Cinnamon: The Politics of Color in Spanish Caribbean Literature*. Gainesville: The University Press of Florida, 2000.