

Review / Reseña

Moreno, Marisel. *Crossing Waters: Undocumented Migration in Hispanophone Caribbean and Latinx Literature and Art*. Latinx. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2022. 308 pp.

Zorimar Rivera Montes

Washington University

Gloria Anzaldúa's poetic ruminations on borders in the opening lines of *Borderlands/La frontera* hold an unexpected and often overlooked call to the sea: "But the skin of the earth is seamless. / The sea cannot be fenced, / *el mar* does not stop at borders" (3). Anzaldúa centers the sea in the opening pages of her text, but this is perhaps its only mention in this seminal book that helped build the theoretical foundation for our contemporary thinking about borders. Marisel Moreno's *Crossing Waters: Undocumented Migration in Hispanophone Caribbean and Latinx Literature and Art* offers a powerful corrective, calling our attention to the sea as a fundamental border and borderland, and revealing its decolonial possibilities. The result is a momentous contribution that expands the field of Latinx Studies into Caribbean water and land. It opens many crucial and fruitful avenues of consideration for the overlooked study of the travails of Caribbean undocumented migration.

Moreno expands the very borders of the field by centering smaller and lesser considered liquid borders: the Caribbean Sea, as well as the land border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. For Latinx studies, this reframing is crucial: the U.S.-Mexico border is the central site for the study of borders and migrations. Moreno's

work posits itself in conversation with the U.S.-Mexico border at the same time it decenters its preeminent position, reminding us that Caribbean migration accounts for seventeen percent of the current US Latinx population (2). The book focuses on Hispanophone literatures, which is another way the book expands our understanding of what counts as Latinx artistic productions. Latinx scholarship—understandably—tends to focus on US-based and thus Anglophone cultural productions, so looking to the Caribbean islands suggests a transnational, relational, and multilingual approach to our understanding of Latinx. In doing this, Moreno follows the recent work of Yomaira Figueroa Vásquez in *Decolonizing Diasporas* (Northwestern University Press, 2020) in widening the contours of Latinx experience by considering the diasporic routes of most Latinx popular production and looking into the insight that insular perspectives provide regarding the migrant experience. The book also follows Lorgia García Peña's *The Borders of Dominicanidad* (Duke University Press, 2016), which starts the work of looking at the Haiti-Dominican Republic border as a fundamental site for Latinx studies. This push towards considering Hispanophone and island-based cultural production not only expands the contours of Latinx studies, but also blackens them. Latinidad is historically rooted on the ideology of mestizaje—the farce of harmonious racial mixture in the Caribbean and Latin America, and examples of its aspiration of whiteness and erasure of Blackness and indigeneity unfortunately continue to abound today. But rather than dismiss Latinidad, Moreno centers Black Latinidad by focusing on literature either produced by Black Latinx writers or that speaks to the theme of race and Blackness. The poetry of Mayra Santos Febres and Elizabeth Acevedo, Ana Maurine Lara's novels, as well as other Black writers and artists are placed in dialogue with theories by Caribbean greats such as Edward Kamau Brathwaite, but also important currents on the study of Mexican migration like Jason de León's important *The Land of Open Graves* (University of California Press, 2015), producing a wide view of the field. This relational engagement with scholarship on the U.S.-Mexico border reveals the way the natural environment is used as deadly policy against migrants attempting crossing—in De León's case referring to the desert. Moreno productively applies this argument to the sea as a powerful natural deterrent, offering a comparative reading of the perils of desert and sea.

The book's title evokes the combination of theories that set it apart: migration and sea, which in the book manifests as a bringing together of border studies with theories of island and archipelago to expand on the idea of borders as land-based put forth by Anzaldúa and most U.S.-Mexico border scholarship. Marking the distinction

between borders and borderlands and replacing the lands in borderlands with the open water, offers a fresh perspective on what Moreno terms *liquid borders* (Moreno 3). She states: “one of my main goals is to place archipelago and border studies in interdisciplinary dialogue to reveal how the borders of the archipelago are reinforced, challenged, and dismantled in the cultural production of the Hispanophone Caribbean and its diaspora” (3-4). Moreno’s research rests on other important considerations of the sea that range back to the study of the Middle Passage, situating contemporary Caribbean migrations as part of a longer history that begins with the Atlantic slave trade. They are contemporary manifestations of a five-hundred-year-old (and counting) story of colonialism and antiblackness.

Centering the Caribbean means turning our gaze away from the more obvious patterns of migration from the Caribbean towards the US—which Moreno terms South-North—to consider the dynamics of intra-Caribbean movements between islands. This analysis of intra-Caribbean power relations, which Moreno terms “horizontal hierarchies,” (following Frances Aparicio) disrupts the easy binary of North-South with which we tend to discuss migration and power relations. This means, for instance, wrestling with the uncomfortable place held by Puerto Rico in these movements: its colonial status, which makes it a US territory, renders it desirable for migrants from the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Haiti, either as a portal to crossing into the US, or as permanent settlers. The book opens with a reflection on anti-immigrant xenophobia in Puerto Rico, part of daily life and expressed through jokes, and noting the absence of texts that reflect on Caribbean migration in Puerto Rico. This gives us an important new perspective of thinking about Puerto Rico’s privilege in relation to the undocumented migration of its Caribbean neighbors, while balancing the tension of that privilege coming from the colonial subjection the U.S. holds Puerto Rico under. Such confrontations happen for the three islands studied in the book: in the Dominican Republic, the conversation between out-migration to Puerto Rico and the U.S. is contrasted with its internal land border with Haiti, and in Cuba, the focus on the *balseiro* crisis pushes against the grain of the exceptionalism of Cuban migrants.

Chapter One, “Rethinking the Borders of the Caribbean Archipelago,” cites in its epigraph the lines from Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands /La frontera* that I used to open this review. This chapter contains the theoretical framework and operating concepts of the book: borders and borderlands, water, island and archipelago, neoliberalism and disposability, and the temporal intersections between the Middle Passage and contemporary migrations. It is critical reading for those looking to engage with the

innovative coming together of archipelagic and border studies across disciplines. Moreno explains the difference between borders, understood as the line that divides two places, and borderlands, a broader concept referring to the liminal space created by the border itself. The attention towards water unsettles the rigid line that marks the space between divided territories in the case of the Caribbean. For this, Moreno's engagement with archipelago, understood as collections of islands that challenge isolation when considered together, upends easy binaries in the concept of borderlands as commonly deployed. Considering islands in relation goes against the grain of isolation and insularity that is most commonly used to represent the condition of being an island. It is also a long-held tradition of Caribbean thought, from Édouard Glissant to Yolanda Martínez San Miguel's *Caribe Two Ways* (Callejón, 2003), a clear referent for this book, to Edward Kamau Brathwaite's concept of "tidalectics." The book's engagement with water also reveals an instability to the concept of border that is more pronounced than in land-based borders. Water's natural fluidity serves in this book as material and metaphorical condition of in-betweenness produced by inter-Caribbean forms of migration. Each of the remaining chapters offers detailed close readings of literary and visual engagements with maritime migrations, organized by islands: Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. The close reading follows detailed sociological explications of the specific circumstances that lead to migration for each of these populations, again showing the author's material investment in painting a full picture that uses literary analysis to give affective depth where empirical data is not enough to humanize these subjects and produce empathy as a means to achieving justice. Though Moreno's object of study is literature and visual art, the research of the historical, political, and sociological condition of intra-Caribbean migration is exhaustive, detailed, and robust. It is clear that Moreno's main interest is the human impact of these migrations, not merely the way it gets metaphorized in literary discourse. As such, the work is a rigorously interdisciplinary contribution of interest to literary and ethnic studies scholars, as well as scholars of migration from across fields ranging from anthropology to geography. The book's close readings on representations of migrants' journeys on makeshift vessels through the Caribbean Sea is harrowing. Written with deep empathy and respect, Moreno confronts head-on the boundless tragedy of uncounted deaths of migrants who do not make their destinations, turning our attention to an issue that is not often discussed.

In the chapter on Puerto Rico, titled "Border and Bridge to the United States," Moreno explores the complicated positioning of Puerto Rico as a site of both promise

and exclusion for Caribbean migrants as either destination or site of passage on the way to the United States. Puerto Rico's colonial condition and the produced ambiguity of its legal status as belonging to but not part of the United States puts it in a position of power relative the rest of the Caribbean islands. Its (colonial) proximity to the US offers migrants a mirage of prosperity, but also the ease of a shared or similar language and culture. As such, Moreno proposes that Puerto Rico serves as "a disruptor of U.S. empire. It interferes with the latter's hegemonic control of the archipelago, revealing the cracks in US empire by stimulating the unauthorized migrant's agency of movement" (72). Despite this, Moreno's analysis of the few Puerto Rican texts that broach the topic of unauthorized migration also illustrate Puerto Rico's internal bordering: despite an important migrant population of Cubans and Dominicans (now waning due to economic crises), there is little literary or public engagement with the issue. An important contribution to island and archipelago studies is Moreno's engagement with Mona Island and the Mona Passage, a dangerous stretch of the journey from the Dominican Republic, and the site of many uncounted migrant deaths. Moreno engages with works by Ana Lydia Vega's short story "Encancaranublado," Mayra Santos Febres' "Boat People", and Mayra Montero's "Isla de Mona." The reading of poems on "Boat People" is one of the most powerful moments of the book, which leads Moreno to argue that in the poems, "the sea becomes a contact zone where the drowned coexist" (93). Moreno's theorizations on the nature and possibilities of the sea, of its function as border and bridge, are best exemplified in her reading of the poems in "Boat People". The connections made between the Middle Passage and contemporary migrations draw powerful images of submarine bridges of bodies that defy linear time and lay in communion across time. The sea becomes a space for unity that is imperially segregated on land, argues Moreno following Brathwaite's dictum that there is submarine unity in the Caribbean, which makes the sea a space of decolonial possibility:

the submarine unity they symbolize between and among islands defies the trope of isolation that the Global North (and US empire) has deployed to balkanize—and thus colonize—the Caribbean. Submarine unity reveals the archipelago—the invisible or erased links between the islands—producing a decolonizing remapping of the region. (96)

Chapter Three, "Dominican Crossings: Displacements Across Sea and Land," considers two borders: the maritime border of the Caribbean Sea and the land border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. The inclusion of Haiti once again expands

our conception of Latinx and Hispanophone cultural production, and the dialogue between these both forms of migration is illuminating. The chapter also combines literary readings with analysis of visual art. This chapter is divided in two parts that mirror the two borders described above. The first part looks at representations of “yola” crossings, a vernacular term for the makeshift boats migrants cross in, in a story by Miriam Mejía, who writes a harrowing account of the perils of the journey, going against the grain of more commonly sanitized representations of the trip (110). Moreno’s reading of the in-between moments of the journey exemplifies her unique approach to this literary corpus, showing the power of the theories about water and in-betweenness she engages with, and calling attention to the cruel conditions faced by migrants, especially women. This is followed by an in-depth discussion of the visual art of Scherezade Garcia, which includes video art (*Sabana de la Mar: Salvation Action*), an installation (*Theories of Freedom*), and the painting *Super Tropics: The Liquid Highway I*, including the one that graces the book’s cover. García’s work proposes multi-media feminist considerations of water crossings between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico which call also call attention to the conditions migrants endure and challenge the idea of the Caribbean as paradisiacal. The second half of the chapter, which centers narratives of the Haiti-Dominican Republic border, examines poems by Elizabeth Acevedo, the novel *Erzulie’s Skirt* by Ana Maurine Lara, and short narratives by Junot Diaz and Pedro Cabiya. This brings together insular and diasporic writing that speaks out about a crucial issue that is often ignored: anti-Haitian sentiment in the Dominican Republic. In placing Dominican and Haitian migration in dialogue, Moreno once again attends to the “horizontal hierarchies” between intra-Caribbean communities and unsettles easy dichotomies of North-South. From “bateyes”—the precarious living quarters for Haitian migrants laboring in the Dominican sugar industry with conditions reminiscent of slavery—all the way to post-Haitian 2010 earthquake reflection and the 2013 xenophobic law commonly referred to as *La Sentencia*—this chapter is a *tour de force* on both ends of migration in the Dominican Republic.

The final chapter, “Cubans at Sea: The Balsero Crisis in Literature and Art” tackles what has always been considered as the exceptional migration of Cubans into the U.S. and Puerto Rico. By focusing on the 1994 *balsero* crisis, a watershed moment with lasting changes to the migratory policy of Cubans in the U.S., Moreno demonstrates how despite the perception of Cuban exceptionalism stemmed from their political relationship to the U.S., representations of Cuban migrations share much with those of the rest of the Caribbean and exist in a continuum that explores similar

questions. While the local specificities of Cubans in the U.S. inhabit the works, Moreno's analysis reveals larger trends that produce a generative conversation with the pieces and narratives from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Discussions of poetry by Richard Blanco and Adrián Castro, short stories by Achy Obejas and Ana Menéndez, a play by Nilo Cruz, and visual pieces by Sandra Ramos, Abel Barroso and Kcho all come together to show the range of Cuban discourse in Cuba and the US regarding undocumented migration in the form of the "wet foot/dry foot" policy, for example. Our dominant understanding of Cuban migration, and the conversation that regards it as exceptional, typically dates back to earlier periods during the Cold War. Focusing on the *balseiro* crisis of 1994 gleans a more nuanced portrayal of Cuban migrants, which puts them in relation to their Dominican and Haitian, counterparts. Moreno's analysis cleverly puts Cubans in relation to broader currents in Latinx migration: particularly revealing is her likening of the ocean and desert as migrant transit zones via her reading of Nilo Cruz's *A Bicycle Country*, citing "trains of water sailing everywhere" (193) that evoke *la bestia*, the infamous vehicle of Central American migration via Mexico. The analysis of paintings by Sandra Ramos also touches on the theme of water as both border and bridge, unsettling the binary between isolation and connection.