

## The Shared History of the United States and the Dominican Republic in Angie Cruz's *Let It Rain Coffee*

By Rasha Al Shalabi

*Let It Rain Coffee* (2005), Cruz's second novel, narrates the story of the Colóns, a Dominican-American family who live in Washington Heights. The novel starts in the Dominican Republic (DR) with the death of Doña Caridad, Don Chan Colón's wife, after they had been married for seventy years. After her death, Don Chan, a Dominican of Chinese origin, migrates to New York to join the family of his son Santo, comprised of Santo, his wife Esperanza, and his thirteen year old son Bobby and ten year old daughter Dallas. The migration of Don Chan to the United States occurs in 1991, a decade after Santo and Esperanza's arrival in the there. This earlier migration was instigated by Esperanza who, influenced by the American television soap opera *Dallas* (1978–1991), wished to leave the DR for Puerto Rico, with the intention to cross to the United States, leaving behind her three year old son with Doña Caridad. Santo decides to fulfil his pregnant wife's will – she gives birth to her daughter Dallas in Puerto Rico – and travels to New York where he finds a job as a taxi driver and eventually reunites the rest of his nuclear family in Washington Heights. Santo is depicted as a responsible man who takes care of his family; however, Esperanza becomes a single mother when Santo is murdered by a passenger of his cab. After his death, Esperanza works as a full-time care-worker while having problems with a daughter who skips school, and a son who is admitted to Spofford Juvenile Detention for three years.

Cruz employs an unidentified third-person narrative voice to convey the experience of the family as immigrants in the United States and to create a feeling of estrangement in the way we perceive the characters' unspoken feelings towards Washington Heights. The novel comprises eight chapters which are separated by asterisks to indicate the author's shifting focus upon the different characters across different time periods. The narration covers the period between 1991 and 1999 – from Don Chan's departure from Los Llanos in the DR to his eventual return. In addition, the novel further employs flashbacks to present four other moments from the past. One of these moments is the period between 1916 and 1922 which tell the story of Don Chan as a child in the small seaside village of Juan Dolio around the time of the 1916-1924 US occupation of the DR. Two other flashbacks treat the years between 1961 and 1966, which describe the lives of Don Chan, Santo and Miraluz – Santo's girlfriend at the time – in the rural community of Los Llanos, their role as political activists during the troubled aftermath of the president Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina's assassination, the civil war and the US second occupation of 1965-1966. Finally, the novel also covers the time immediately before Esperanza and Santo's arrival in the US in 1981 – ten years before Don Chan's immigration - and describes Esperanza's frustration with her life in Los Llanos, her migration to Puerto Rico, and Santo's decision to go to the US and secure a valid visa for his family in order to fulfil his wife's dream to relocate there.

The narration shuffles between these five time periods and Juanita Heredia points out that “the dispersal of memory in the narrative has as much an effect on the displacement of the reader as it does on the actual characters” (Heredia 91). This ‘dispersal of memory’ also finds a counterpart in Don Chan's scattered memory, which deteriorates with the onset of Alzheimer's disease, and makes him confuse his experience as an immigrant in the United States with his experience of the 1965-1966 US occupation of the DR. For instance, at one point he mistakes a white-American police officer in Washington Heights for one of the

marines who were stationed in the DR in 1965. This episode also allows Cruz to explore the different set of references and the different environment in which Don Chan and his grandson live and operate:

He saw the police officer walking his beat on Quepasó Street and sucked his teeth. What right did they have to invade his country?

–Those Yanquis never get enough.

–So you saw how the Mets beat the hell out of those Yankees last game, Abuelo? (Cruz 120)

For Don Chan, for whom the past is at times more present than the present, the word 'Yankees/Yanquis' signifies a US marine, while Bobby identifies the term as the name of the Yankees baseball team.

The US occupation of the DR referenced above was the indirect result of the fall of the Trujillo dictatorship in 1961. After Trujillo's assassination, the country entered a period of political chaos caused by the conflicts between pro-Trujillo forces and the opposition. In February 1963, Juan Bosch, who returned to the country after twenty-three years in exile, was elected as a president, only to be overthrown by a military coup seven months later. On 24 April 1965, pro-Bosch militants staged a coup to restore Bosch's presidency as an elected authority. Calling the coup a "communist plot," pro-Trujillo forces turned to the US embassy for an American military intervention, appealing to the US government's fear of communism spreading from Cuba to the DR (Atkins and Larman 134). Despite not having enough evidence of communist participation, the United States announced the military intervention and released a list of "alleged communists" within the pro-Bosch military supporters. Forty-two thousand US soldiers landed in Santo Domingo in April, 1965, "under the pretext of saving lives and protecting U.S. interests in the country" (Moya Pons 338).

In her novel, Cruz criticises the politics behind the second US occupation, explicitly rejecting the US government's claim to have imposed democracy and protect civilians. She has Don Chan comment sarcastically on this attempt to legitimise their occupation:

The marines had landed to ensure democracy, but immediately sided with the armed forces that were subscribers to Trujillo's politics.

–Why don't the Yanquis let us figure it out for ourselves? It's hardly democratic for the U.S. to impose democracy on another country! (Cruz 73)

Don Chan echoes the voices of many Dominicans who wanted to re-establish the democratic process without US interference. The intervention of the US marines, however, strengthened the position of pro-Trujillo troops in the army and resulted in a bigger division within the Dominican army and, subsequently, a civil war. When some pro-Bosch militants planned a military coup, they were almost successful, however, the US intervention shifted the power to pro-Trujillo military troops. Frank Moya Pons establishes the connection between the US intervention and the erupting of the civil war: "The first U.S. marines landed on April 28, 1965 and sided with the Trujilloist army. Santo Domingo was rapidly divided into two zones occupied by the opposing armies" (Moya Pons 388). "Hence," Moya Pons comments, "what began as a coup d'état [by Bosch's supporters in the army] ended as a civil war" (Moya Pons 388). Through Don Chan's scattered memory, we are told about the violence committed by the US forces against Dominican civilians during the occupation in 1965, as described in a past-edition of a journal headline: "**THE YANQUIS CAME TO "SAVE LIVES"** Civilians

Assassinated by the Gringo gun on June 15 and 16 in the Tragic Massacre of Santo Domingo” (Cruz 175). After many days of battles with Bosch supporters, the American forces “bombardeed” the centre of Santo Domingo “with heavy guns” on the 15 of June for 36 hours (Glejeses 40).

The US intervention resulted in the dispersion of Bosch’s supporters and the announcement of new elections. In July, 1966, Joaquín Antonio Balaguer Ricardo, a previous member of Trujillo’s regime endorsed by the US government, was elected as president. Balaguer counted on loans from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to reconstruct the country. Most of these loans were from the US government. The 1970s witnessed an increase in national income, an establishment of some industries such as garment factories and agricultural products and the flourishing of the tourism sector. Since the country was built on high debts with high interest rates, “by 1981-1982 the Dominican Republic was in the midst of a severe economic crisis” (Kryzanek and Wiarda 139). As such, the number of Dominican immigrants reaching the US in the 1980s was almost double the total number of the previous decade (Duany 56-7).

The US in the novel is perceived as pernicious in both occupations of the DR. It was during the first US occupation of the DR that the dictator Trujillo got his training in the US Marines. Trujillo joined the National Guard after the first US occupation ended and the Americans left the DR. According to James Ferguson, the National Guard was created by the US military in 1924 and “Trujillo used the US-designed security forces to construct a dictatorship, removing opposition and consolidating his personal power” (Ferguson 23). The US government consolidated North-America’s control over the resources and politics of the DR during the dictatorship. Through Don Chan’s flashbacks, the novel creates a connection between the fact that so many Dominicans migrated to the US after Balaguer became President and the US military and political ‘interventions’ in the Dominican Republic. Cruz’s novel *Let It Rain Coffee* presents the Dominican diasporic community of Washington Heights within the broader context of the political and economic relations between the US and DR.

Esperanza’s dream of going to the United States, accumulating a fortune and living at the same standard as the characters of *Dallas* is conceived at the beginning of the 1980s when Dominicans were migrating to the US in ever increasing numbers due to the severe economic crisis caused by Balaguer’s government. At that point, Esperanza, who was born in Santo Domingo, was also regretting having moved to the rural Los Llanos following her marriage to Santo. The fact that her marriage with Santos was not approved by her father, prevented her from returning to the capital and, plagued by water shortages and electricity blackouts whilst in Los Llanos, Esperanza compares her life to the life of the Ewings in the American soap opera *Dallas* which she assumes is the life of every American. Since Esperanza believes she can improve her life simply by being in the US, she decides to emigrate, and, since her husband is against the idea, she prepares to go secretly and on her own. Gradually saving money, Esperanza finds, at the age of thirty, that she can afford to travel to Puerto Rico a recognised transitional staging-post for immigrants heading to the US. Santo, finding out about his wife’s escape, applies for a visa to enter the US. Meanwhile, after delivering her baby girl alone, Esperanza runs out of money and works as a housekeeper for a Puerto Rican family until Santo gets his visa and reunites his family in New York.

Once she arrives in the US, Esperanza finds that her life is not as she expected. Esperanza is ashamed of the way in which Dominicans live in Washington Heights and, the narrator tells

us, she desires to live in the Jewish section of Washington Heights because their buildings are in better conditions than those of the Dominicans:

For years, she had wanted to move farther north of Quepasó Street, where the Jewish families lived. Around los Judíos is very decente, Esperanza thought. Unlike us Dominicans who aren't decentes, we're so loud, we can't get off the streets. We want to make people deaf with all that merengue. Jewish people work hard and go school. That's why they don't like when we move into their buildings. (Cruz 108)

While Esperanza uses the pronoun 'we,' she differentiates herself from the rest of the Dominicans; her reflections and aspirations suggest an assumption of superiority on her part. Cruz highlights the fact that the Dominicans of Washington Heights are not a homogenous group, that different people react to their condition in different ways and that denial is one of them. After having invested so much in her dream of a new life, Esperanza appears unable to accept the reality of her life in the US which is, in fact, a life in a Dominican neighbourhood. She needs to feel that she is different from other Dominicans because she still needs to dream that one day she will leave the Dominican community behind and make a success of her life in the city beyond Washington Heights.

Cruz repeatedly illustrates the extent to which Esperanza escapes the reality of Washington Heights to create the illusion of a successful life in the US even if she is well aware of her predicament. For example, as Don Chan arrives for the first time in the building where his son's family lives, Esperanza unsuccessfully tries to hide the reality of their poor living conditions: "Esperanza distracted Don Chan's attention away from the cigarette butts pushed up against the walls and the graffiti in the lobby. She hurried Don Chan along to escape the smell of pot and piss in the elevator" (Cruz 11). When Don Chan complains about the dirt – "Doesn't anyone clean here?" – Esperanza privately dismisses his criticism: "–He went from pissing in the dirt, with a house with no roof and he's complaining" (Cruz 11). However, in contrast, Don Chan's house in the DR is characterised as being "in complete order: the cement floors freshly mopped, the wood for the kitchen stove piled up neatly into a small pyramid" (Cruz 2). While Don Chan finds pride in the home he inherited from his family, Esperanza feels ashamed of her flat and wants to move to the Jewish neighbourhood. When confronted by Don Chan's criticism she becomes defensive and lies to herself. Overall, Esperanza and Don Chan have very different attitudes towards the US and their condition as immigrants. Don Chan left the DR reluctantly and only because, after his wife's death, it was no longer safe for the old man to live on his own; however, he never ceases to dream of returning 'home' and, most importantly, never ceases to believe in the DR and in the possibilities which the DR could still offer. On the other hand, Esperanza was the one who initiated the family's migration, but, despite the disappointing reality she has to face every day, she is desperate to convince herself that 'being' in the US is, in itself, an achievement. By dismissing Don Chan's criticism and by demeaning life in the DR, Esperanza confirms her belief in 'the superiority' of her life in the US.

Esperanza's belief in the superiority of US culture is influenced by the media – primarily TV – which she watches avidly prior to emigration. As such, her privileging of the US relates to what Atkins and Larman call "Northamericanization;" a term which is used to describe the cultural influence of the US on the DR, mainly during Balaguer's three presidential periods (1966 and 1978) (Atkins and Larman 150). They identify it as "the impact of not only U.S. goods but also cultural values by way of radio, television, and motion pictures" (Atkins and Larman 157). The term "Northamericanization," then, exhibits the influence of US media

on the patterns of consumption adopted in the DR. The North American influence started after the first US occupation. Moya Pons notes that during these years “U.S. games and toys became popular, and baseball eventually replaced cockfighting as the national sport” (Moya Pons 338). He adds that after the US forces left the DR “more than half of the country’s imports continued to come from the United States” (Moya Pons 388). During the years of Trujillo’s role, the influence of the US was extending among upper classes. After the second US occupation of the DR, ‘Northamericanization’ increased dramatically, especially because of the growing number of immigrants who adapted to the life in the US and who would reproduce some elements of the US culture in the DR via language, clothes and gifts to their relatives (Atkins and Larman 157). Post-1966, US technical control over Dominican media outlets increased the visibility on North-American products and lifestyles. According to Atkins and Larman “television relied on U.S. commercials promoting U.S. products, and it and the movies ... portrayed the lifestyles, values, and material goods of the highly developed, prosperous, and secularized U.S. society” (Atkins and Larman 160).

*Let It Rain Coffee*, stresses the role the US plays in encouraging outward emigration from the Dominican Republic by way of such Northamericanization, as is demonstrated by its role in the migration of the Colóns. As Patricia R. Pessar argues, “despite economic downturns in New York, the visual images of life in the United States that Dominicans on the island receive[d] via cable and advertising remain[ed] a strong inducements to migrate” (Pessar 40). As stated, Esperanza’s decision was influenced by her exposure to the soap opera *Dallas*, which is focused on the daily lives of the Ewings, a wealthy upper-class family who have an independent oil company. The influence of the TV series is mostly obvious when Esperanza names her daughter after the show and calls her older son Bobby, after one the protagonists of *Dallas*. Once in the US, Esperanza continues to be an easy prey for the US media which encourage belief in upward social mobility within the North-American society.

Because of her media-influenced aspirations, Esperanza also suppresses the reality of the position of the Dominican immigrant in the US society: initially she is just happy to be in the US, regardless of her immediate surroundings: “Back then, she didn’t see the buildings as gray, or the city as grimy; or mind the crowds of people sitting on the front stoops catching a cold on a sunny day” (Cruz 9). Esperanza also decides to ignore signs of lack of social mobility for those in her predicament and continues to believe that her experience will be different from that of the many other Dominican-Americans in Washington Heights who have not attained success. We are told by the narrator that Esperanza “didn’t think twice about ... the fact that the streets had the smell of an impossible dream” (Cruz 9). After all, for her “New York City had always been Nueva York—an oasis of opportunity” (Cruz 9). Cruz’s novel, therefore, highlights how migration is not only ignited, but also sustained, by the immigrants’ beliefs of their ability to achieve success. Esperanza tries to create the illusion of richness by buying commodities which she sees through TV advertisements by using her credit card. Unable to pay back what quickly becomes a huge debt, Esperanza finds herself compelled to work for long hours to pay monthly instalments for what is estimated to be a period of twenty years.

In the novel, Cruz also elaborates on the negative side of the work environment in the US and how it causes frictions within Dominican-American families. Through the eyes of Don Chan, the reader can perceive the exploitation of the Dominican working force in the US and how it is affecting his own family. The US does not provide the chance for the Colóns to progress financially, and their jobs, while fulfilling their basic financial needs, in fact damage their familial relationships. At the beginning of the novel, Santo works night shifts while Esperanza works days. Santo and Esperanza’s work patterns widen the gulf between them: “It

was easy for them to stay angry at each other, when Santo worked nights and Esperanza worked days. If they stayed on schedule, they could spend weeks without having to talk much at all” (Cruz 47). The hard work, however, does not promise the family wealth. Even though the Cólons have been living for ten years in New York prior to Don Chan’s arrival, they only own the taxi that Santo uses for work and live in a small rented flat.

The workload in the US is criticised in the novel by Don Chan who can see how his son and daughter-in-law are working full-time jobs to sustain their children in New York: “You want to live to work or work to live? From what I can see, both of you live to work. What’s the point to live at all” (Cruz 48)? Esperanza again dismisses Don Chan’s criticism about the life in the US, this time by stressing their need to work to support those who are back home: “How else would you have survived in that campo without us sending checks back home every month?” (Cruz 48) Santo who tries to consider both Don Chan and Esperanza’s points of view about both countries, feels nostalgic because of Don Chan’s stories about the DR. And Santo finally plans to visit the DR, but his wish is never fulfilled. While coming back to his home, Santo gets robbed and murdered in his car because of a watch, the only expensive possession he owned and which was a gift from his father.

The anonymous narrator tells us, that before his killing, that Santo feels desperate because he spends all his time working for the future and is unable to live in the present and enjoy his life with his family. On his last day, Santo thinks that “Everything about Nueva York was about tomorrow. He wanted it to be about today” (Cruz 72). Santo thus realises that the dream of wealth might not be attainable. Just before his death, Santo makes the decision to return to the DR with his family for a short while. The novel here explores the immigrant’s dream of returning back home, which in the case of Santo, is not achieved.

The death of Santo worsens the living conditions of his family since Esperanza becomes the sole breadwinner for the two children and her father-in-law. Don Chan, who feels that he is a burden on the family, is unable to work because the only job he knows is farming, which is of no use in New York City. After Santo’s death, Esperanza and Don Chan’s relationship becomes one of co-dependency. Esperanza, being a working mother, needs Don Chan to take care of her children when she has night shifts and Don Chan needs Esperanza to take care of him in his old age. This dependence on each other allows them to co-exist and have some peace in the flat.

Barriers to social mobility are clearly signposted in the novel which highlights the conditions of African-Americans who had been living in the neighbourhood prior to the Dominicans. Esperanza’s determination to be oblivious to the difficulty of social mobility is demonstrated by her choosing to ignore the plight of the minorities who have been in the neighborhood far longer than she has: “the faces of the old black couple, looking out their window, [they] had survived the sixties only to find that their children still couldn’t get a decent education, and that cops sat in their cars, perched like hawks seeking out prey” (Cruz 9). The novel also examines other diasporic communities of Latin-American origin that had relocated to Washington Heights prior to the Dominicans. These other groups look down on Dominicans. Cruz highlights the hostility some Dominicans felt upon their arrival in the US, and also the inner tensions that existed in the neighbourhood in the 1980s. For example, Esperanza hears a Cuban lady who has a children’s clothing store repeatedly complain about the newly-arrived Dominicans: “These Dominicans,” she kept saying “are making a mess around here” (Cruz 9).

Cruz also illustrates how these tensions were also magnified by the fact that initially immigrant Dominicans found themselves working for other Latin groups in New York who

had a longer history in the US, were more acquainted with the North-American system, and used their knowledge to their advantage. For example, in 1994, Esperanza gets a job in the Bronx as a care-worker for Mr. Hernández, an old Cuban man. She soon realises that Mrs. Hernández has manipulated the system to acquire social support for her husband. In order for him to receive free healthcare, his records have been falsified to indicate that he is divorced. The presence of Mrs Hernández alters the situation for Esperanza who was expecting to be a care-worker for an incapacitated old man, rather than a home-help for his wife. Initially she is unhappy at the prospect of being a *trabajadora* [a kind of servant] for the family, a job that she finds demeaning: “If [she] had wanted to be a *trabajadora* she would’ve stayed in Dominican Republic” (Cruz 109). However, since she needs a job to support her family and pay back her huge debt, she decides to stay and work for the Hernández. In her first conversation with Mrs. Hernández, Esperanza tries to present herself as a success story, praising herself for having achieved her dream to live in the US. When Mrs. Hernández replies sceptically, “– But Dallas is a long ways from here,” Esperanza answers “So was Nueva York and look at me now” (Cruz 110). She then proceeds to quote the words of *Dallas*’s lead character: “Jock Ewing said that any man can win when things go his way, *it’s the man who overcomes adversity who is the true champion*” (Cruz 110). At the end of the conversation, Esperanza is reminded of her subaltern position when her new employer asks her to make a cup of coffee: “Esperanza was taken back. She wondered if she would even be allowed to have some. Back home, *las trabajadoras* weren’t allowed to drink from the same cups as their employers. What if she didn’t make the coffee, would she lose her job” (Cruz 111-2)?

Mrs. Hernández has to work all the time herself at the twenty-four-hour Laundromat down the block. In fact, the Hernández do not live in much better conditions than Esperanza, yet the lady of the house demeans Esperanza by ordering her to do tasks which are not related to her job description. A hierarchical order is established between new arrivals and more established groups which seem to copy their employers’ methods once they become employers themselves. In the novel, the demeaning of workers is widespread— those at the top transgressing most, those lower down, less so. The working classes, as depicted by Cruz, appear to be stratified within their own social system.

Cruz also explores the discrimination based on skin-colour that the Dominican-Americans feel. For example, when the sixteen year old Dallas is looking for a job, she approaches a white Puerto Rican young man called Peter who works in a CD shop: “He looked like a white boy. Maybe he could hook me up with a job, she thought” (Cruz 198). Dallas, falsely promised a job by Peter, accepts his invitation to his flat. There, Peter expresses his fascination with Dallas’s skin colour: “I love the color of your skin, and passed his pale hand on her belly” (Cruz 209). He treats her as ‘exotic’ because of her looks, and this makes her feel uncomfortable. When Dallas refuses to sleep with him, he retaliates by asking her to leave his house and telling her he will not find her a job as he had previously promised. Here, Cruz uncovers some of the racial prejudices that exist within the mainstream community in the US, and in Washington Heights in particular.

Esperanza’s full-time job influences her relationship with her daughter. By spending so much time working at the Hernández, Esperanza loses her authority over Dallas. Dallas and Esperanza’s talks are only related to household chores: “She wanted to be closer to her mother. But it was never the right time to talk with her. Her mother was always telling her what to do, giving her chores” (Cruz 190). In *Let it Rain Coffee*, the long hours of work required by Dominican immigrants to survive in New York result in more responsibilities being delegated

to their children. As a result, Dallas feels that she and her brother can take care of themselves and is ready to challenge her mother's authority.

Esperanza's relationship with Dallas is to some degree influenced by what is traditionally expected of a Dominican female. Before Santo passes away, Esperanza and Santo allocate their children different roles in accordance with their gender. For instance, when the thirteen-year-old Bobby is attacked by a school-gang who steals his jacket and shoes, Santo reacts to the robbery as if it is his son's fault for not being able to defend himself. Santo lectures his son about manhood and teaches him how to fight. Interestingly, Santo himself, during the revolution, used to guard a medical centre in Santo Domingo but was not involved in any fighting. Bobby refuses to learn. Heredia suggests that, "Cruz complicates the meaning of masculinity that is evident in the tension in the father-son relationship" (Heredia 100). On the other hand, Santo teaches Dallas how to dance and how to resist seduction if a man asks her out in the future. Esperanza, who does not approve of teaching her son violence, still applies gender roles to her two children. Though she works outside of their home just like her husband and feels she has the power to make familial decisions, Esperanza asks Dallas to help her with the kitchen chores and encourages Bobby to study. Dallas and Bobby resent each other because they are treated differently. Each of them looks at the advantages the other has based on gender. Dallas feels upset because her brother does not do work inside the house and she wants the freedom he has outside. On the other hand, Bobby feels upset when his mother expects him to find a job and become the man of the house after his father's death.

In addition, differences between the first and second generation of immigrants play an important role in the mother-daughter relationship between Esperanza and Dallas. Finding out that her daughter is skipping school, Esperanza has a heated argument with Dallas. Esperanza calls her daughter "Malcriada" when Dallas looks her directly in the eye. "Malcriada", the novel explains, is "the word for girls who disrespected their mothers by speaking their minds" (Cruz 211-2). Dallas is mostly scared of antagonising her mother because, like Soledad, she could be sent to the DR as a punishment – a common theme in the Dominican-American narratives. Her fear is based on what she has heard from her mother about life in the DR as she has never been there before. Esperanza has explained that life in the DR means to have 'to live without a TV, a CD player or new clothes" (Cruz 212). The younger Dominican-Americans' expectations of living standards are mostly rooted in the capitalistic US culture, where material possessions are a necessity. Dallas feels her mother is trying to stop her from expressing herself freely. In the novel, the mother's authority is more evident due to the fact that the grandfather figure – Don Chan – has lost his traditional role due to his migration to the US, which has robbed him of financial authority and consequently, his control as the oldest male in the family.

Esperanza uses ruthless threats to try and intimidate Dallas: "I made you and I can destroy you if I feel like it, even if it means I have to go to prison my entire life. You won't disrespect me again" (Cruz 215). Esperanza justifies her threats as a way of protecting her daughter: "If she allowed Dallas to do what she pleased, Esperanza would lose her. Like all the other girls she saw getting pregnant, messing up their lives" (Cruz 214).

The novel illustrates how members of the second generation of Dominican immigrants are able to challenge the authority of their parents, because they have the advantage of being born and raised in the US. For instance, Dallas is empowered by her ability to speak better English than her mother. In contrast, Esperanza uses Spanish to discipline her daughter. Dallas notices that "The pitch of her [Esperanza] voice went up high when she went off in Spanish. At least in English, she stumbled over words and couldn't

keep up with her thoughts. In Spanish, Esperanza's voice was a drill" (Cruz 212). Dallas responds in English, taking advantage of her mother's inability to comprehend the language perfectly, and thereby challenging her mother's authority:

You want me to end up like you, working for some stupid jerk who makes you stay up all night cleaning his ass? For what? Dallas said under her breath, quick enough in English so that her mother couldn't decipher what she was saying. (Cruz 212)

This aside reveals Dallas's anger towards her mother, and the extent to which Esperanza's dream of a new life in the US has been reduced to working as a servant. For most of the narrative, Esperanza has a straightforward admiration for US culture; however, it is in emotional moments that Esperanza's dream of integration falls apart. Earlier in the novel, when Esperanza is informed of Santo's death, "Esperanza only screamed in Spanish, because that night, she didn't have the energy to translate herself. No one understood her pain" (Cruz 80). This incident shows that while she has adopted, superficially, the language and manners of her host country, in a moment of despair, when she speaks from the heart, the language she uses is her native Spanish. This illustrates the extent to which she is at a social disadvantage compared to Dallas, and how overall, while celebrating her life in the US, Esperanza feels estranged from her US environment at a deeper level because she is not capable of fully connecting with North-American society. Earlier in the novel, she wishes that she had been born in the US, believing that it would have given her a better chance to thrive in her new home, rather than being limited by her place of birth: "If she had been born in the States, would she have been an actress like Rita Hayworth or Raquel Welch? But she would've changed her name, maybe into Hope Saint or Saint Hope. Something American sounding" (Cruz 182). Esperanza's wish expresses her feeling of frustration with her inability to improve her life in New York.

As for society at large, Cruz illustrates how being a Dominican from Washington Heights can affect the way in which one is treated by the US system when the fifteen-year-old Bobby is caught in a shooting incident. A white boy called Arnold brings the gun of his father, a retired cop, into the neighbourhood and allows Bobby to play with it. When his sister is attacked by a mugger and Bobby hears her shouting for help, he runs to her rescue carrying the gun he had in his hands. When the mugger sees that Bobby has a weapon he points his own gun at him: at that point Mrs. Schoberth, an old German lady who also stumbles onto the scene, begins screaming for the police and Bobby, in a panic, waves the gun at her because her screams prevent him of thinking of a way out for his sister.

In his confusion and panic, Bobby fires at the burglar threatening his sister, and injures him in the leg. The police, arriving at the scene, take Bobby away to Spofford Juvenile Detention. In the detention centre, Bobby is not guaranteed a hearing and is accused of threatening Mrs. Schoberth and stealing the gun from Arnold's house. Arnold, who lies not to get in trouble with his father, is believed because he is the son of a white police officer, and the version given by the fair-skinned Mrs. Schoberth who accuses Bobby of having threatened her with a gun is considered more plausible than Bobby's. As a result of these accusations and despite the fact that Dallas supports his version of the incident and Esperanza testifies that her son was at home when the alleged theft of the gun should have taken place, Bobby is incarcerated in the Detention centre for three years.

Detention is a mixed experience for Bobby. On one hand, he learns how to use computers, laying the foundation for future job opportunities. On the other hand, he cannot

escape discrimination even in the detention centre for he is harassed by other detainees who curse him because he is Dominican: “*Off-the-boat, Plátano-sucking motherfucker, what is your problem*” (Cruz 137)? In the detention centre where all of the youngsters are condemned by society, Bobby is condemned by other detainees because of his Dominican origins.

The shifting conditions of Washington Heights are examined via the eyes of Bobby who spends three-years in detention. Feeling unwelcome and unable to re-enter “the world he took for granted before” (Cruz 184), it is through Bobby’s perception of the neighbourhood upon his return that the novel reflects some of the stereotypes that developed in the 1990s about Washington Heights. It was during this era that the neighbourhood gained the reputation of being full of Dominican drug dealers, a reputation which was based on few members in the neighbourhood (Pessar 26). Dominican-American youngsters were persecuted in Washington Heights despite a lack of evidence. For example, Pessar recalls an incident which happened in the mid-1990s in which “... a Dominican man was choked and suffocated to death by a policeman. The victim had been playing basketball with his family, when he was charged with disturbing the peace and resisting arrest” (Pessar 80). Cruz sets the return of Bobby to the neighbourhood within this hostile environment of Washington Heights in the mid-1990s. Hush, Dallas’s school friend, also explains to Bobby how the cops show strong prejudice against Dominicans than before he left the neighbourhood:

- I’m just avoiding people. Can’t be outside without folk bothering me. I don’t want to get myself in trouble, that’s all.
- It’s gotten pretty bad since you were last here. It’s called Operation Clean-up. The cops are everywhere, undercover.
- Worse? Been having cops feeling me up since I was eleven years old, waiting for me to fuck up (Cruz 204).

During the 1990s, the increase in the number of illegal immigrants in the neighbourhood also increased the number of immigration police in the neighbourhood. Pessar reports that many Dominicans who were afraid of deportation tried to avoid the streets in the 1990s (Pessar 80). She adds, “There [was] the potential for harassment by and run-ins with the police and agents of the feared Immigration and Naturalization Service” (Pessar 81). Because Dominicans were targeted by the police in the neighbourhood, many avoided a number of streets in Washington Heights or stayed in their houses in the evenings.

The neighbourhood also became crowded because of the high number of family members living in small spaces. Many nuclear families were bringing their relatives from the DR because there was no one to take care of them. In *Let It Rain Coffee*, Don Chan is invited by his son. Before his arrival, Don Chan’s vision of New York’s socio-political hierarchy is exemplified by his mocking of that vertical city’s famous buildings: “He knew the world was built in such a way that some got to piss in toilets high above everyone else while the less privileged sat at home thinking the piss was rain” (Cruz 5). Cruz’s depiction of Don Chan’s attitude towards the US, while humorous, also prompts the reader to sympathise with the bitterness of the circumstances which forced, and still force, elderly Dominicans to leave their homes in the DR, where they have spent most of their lives, in order to relocate in the US due to their loss of independence. Don Chan is left alone after the death of his wife and the migration of his son. In Los Llanos, there is no one to take care of Don Chan and medical assistance is hard to reach. Don Chan’s migration, then, is out of necessity.

Don Chan's feelings of estrangement start when he reaches the airport: "He pretended the cold didn't bother him and that he had been in an airport many times, that the snow piled by the curb was not a novelty" (Cruz 7). Nevertheless, Don Chan's attempt to hide his insecurity about the new country does not help him in the airport, where his facial features betray him. Because of Don Chan's Chinese looks, the airport police officer feels "confused" (Cruz 6). The novel also challenges, to an extent, the expectations and tendencies of mainstream Americans to stereotype minorities and to categorise them on the basis of specific characteristics.

*Let it Rain Coffee* counters the way Dominicans in the US are perceived as one homogeneous population. The novel explores the racial diversity within the DR by focussing on the character of Don Chan, a Dominican who has Chinese origins. Don Chan is found on the beaches of Juan Dolio in the DR in 1916 when he is estimated to be just six years old. Don José, Caridad's father, decides to adopt him after giving up an attempt to trace his parents. Many people in Juan Dolio, speculated that this Chinese-looking boy with no memory of his origins belonged to a family who had worked in Panama, Cuba or Jamaica: "Travelling workers explained to Don José that Little Chan looked like the Chinos from Panamá. – Cuba, hombre. – You're a Chino from Cuba, said another. – There're a whole bunch of Chinos in Jamaica. That's where you're from. They had shiploads heading to Jamaica to work the cane" (Cruz 96). The years of the US occupation of 1916-1924 also gave rise to the number of Chinese immigrants in the DR (Chen 23-4). The US facilitated the entrance of Chinese immigrants to serve the sugar cane industry and to work in US-controlled plantations. Likewise, during the same years, many Haitians were imported from the neighbouring country by US forces who occupied Haiti (1915-1934). According to David Howard: "Haitian migrant labor has a history of employment in the neighboring Dominican Republic, but the number of workers substantially increased during the United States' occupation of the Dominican Republic and Haiti" (Howard 25). The sugar industry, which was developed by the US, was later appropriated by Trujillo, who also counted on cheap Haitian labour.

The novel exposes the difficult life conditions of Chinese labourers in the DR in the early twentieth century. As Don José develops a protective instinct towards little Chan, he is horrified by a man who wants to buy the boy in Santo Domingo. The man tells Don José: "I had a China boy myself and he died. It was not the best investment I made, he only worked for me for six years. You see, the China boys have a special skill for work, and they're not lazy or cause trouble like the Haitians"(Cruz 100). The novel further suggests that Chinese labourers were brought in to replace some of the Haitian work force in the DR, because they have fairer skin than the Haitians. Chen explains that during Trujillo's rule, 1930-1961, Dominicans tried "to minimize the Africanness of their country;" therefore, "Asian immigrants, along with Europeans, were included in the solution for elevating the Dominican race" (Chen 27). Following the incident with the man who offers to buy the young Chan, Don José moves Chan and the rest of the family out of Juan Dolio in order to settle in Los Llanos. He cannot trust "[t]he people of Juan Dolio" because he thinks they might kidnap and sell little Chan because of their extreme poverty (Cruz 100). Los Llanos, on the other hand, offers more security due to its being almost deserted at that time – a result of having been attacked by US forces for its peoples' attempted resistance of the first US occupation. The novel, then, alludes to some of the circumstances which surrounded the arrival of the Caribbean-Chinese, yet it mainly focuses on the character of Don Chan, who while having Chinese looks, sees himself as 'only' a Dominican.

Through the character of Don Chan, Cruz further investigates the meaning of Dominicaness. Despite being an orphan of Chinese origins, he is deeply committed to his adopted country, the DR and Moreno describes him as the most 'Dominican' character in the novel: "No other character in the novel displays a greater sense of patriotism or nationalism than Don Chan who, despite his Chinese descent, is the embodiment of Dominicaness." (Moreno 109). In this novel Cruz investigates the complexity of the concept of 'home', asking whether it is the place people choose, regardless of their race or ethnicity, or simply the place they come from. 'Home' in the novel, is a subjective concept which differs from one character to another. The character of Don Chan enables Cruz to argue that nationality can exceed race identification. Cruz combines Don José, who has Haitian origins, and little Chan, to show the difficulty of associating Dominicans with one single race whilst pointing to the possibility of a pacific coexistence between different ethnicities and races. The anonymous narrator describes how the neighbours observed Don José with little Chan: "The neighbors looked at them and whispered about the odd couple, a dark, tall man and a small Chinese boy" (Cruz 98).

As for Don Chan's nationalistic views, they develop during Trujillo's dictatorship, but mostly he becomes an activist after the dictator's assassination. He forms a group called the Invisible Ones which agitates for the economic independence of Los Llanos, and which encourages Dominican citizens to vote for Bosch in 1963. The Invisible Ones spread around the country under the secret leadership of Don Chan and the novel describes the "optimism" which accompanied the ability to vote after the dictatorship (Cruz 63). However, when a military coup ended Bosch's presidency only seven months after he was voted in and the coup was followed by a civil war, we are told that the Invisible Ones gradually faded from the political scene during Balaguer presidency.

The political events which Cruz examines in the novel highlight the disappointment of Dominicans who were looking forward to improving their country after the fall of the dictatorship. These events also discouraged some nationalists, like Don Chan, from pursuing their activism. Cruz also gives us insight into the extent of Chan's disillusionment with the economic independence of Los Llanos during the months of Bosch's short presidential term. The people of Los Llanos become owners of the lands which they previously worked on. In addition, Los Llanos was becoming a financially independent place on the basis of its citizens' mining for gold and precious stones, and the decision to keep farming products within the community. Soon, however, Don Chan had "to admit that full bellies made the Invisible Ones as indifferent to the injustices of the world as the rich whom he often criticised" (Cruz 65). The novel explores the way in which movements for change in the DR failed to produce long term results. The collapse of the dictatorship, as portrayed in the novel, led to the rise of smaller power groups that took advantage of the poor.

Don Chan's struggle for better conditions for Dominican farmers is also expressed in the US when he comes in contact with coffee consumers. The North-American control of Dominican resources is a frequent theme in the novel. Don Chan comes to see how the US chains take advantage of Dominican coffee farmers. For example, he criticises the US coffee-chain Starbucks because it sells coffee for a high margin in profit while their Dominican coffee farmers are paid cheap wages in the DR:

Don Chan sneered straight at the woman holding a bag from Starbucks.  
–Don't look at me like I'm crazy when you paid four dollars for café con leche. That's crazy. People back home make four dollars a day. You should give the money to someone who needs it (Cruz 158).

The title of the book, which is inspired by a song by well-known Dominican singer Juan Luis Guerra describes how if it rains coffee, then Dominicans can sell it and fulfil their basic needs. It could be concluded that the US dominates the DR economy by controlling the prices of coffee and sugar and taking advantage of the farmers' need to provide for their families. The novel takes us one more time to the DR and examines the work conditions of Dominican workers and the increasing influence of the US in the DR. Cruz uses the vehicle of the immigrant's return in order to revisit the exploitation of Dominican economics. By seeing the DR of the present through Don Chan's eyes, Cruz allows for a comparison to be made with the younger Republic he had left. Chan returns to the island with his daughter-in-law and grandchildren following Esperanza's abandoning of her dream of fully integrating into the upwardly mobile US system.

Whether Esperanza should be seen as a failure or not has been a topic of discussion for some critics. Heredia argues that Esperanza's problems begin because she "fails to acknowledge the racial and social discrepancies between the immigrant Dominican Colón family and the privileged Anglo-American Ewing family in *Dallas*, often confusing reality with fantasy" (Heredia 99). While she has a high expectation of her future in the US, Esperanza's specific dreams are constrained by her class. Although fascinated by the Ewings, her own ambition is to become a housekeeper in a household like theirs, rather than to be like the Ewings' themselves: "She imagined herself working for a rich family. Just like Raul and Teresa, the Ewings' housekeepers" (Cruz 14). Moreno argues that this limited ambition reflects on the concept of success within the immigrant community: "Esperanza's aspiration ... of becoming a housekeeper ... calls into question the definition of immigrant success in both the home and host societies" (Moreno 106-7) and demonstrates that Esperanza has some degree of understanding of her class restrictions. Valovirta, Kokkola and Korkka, however, highlight that Esperanza, while unhappy with her life, is able to provide for her family and raise her children: "the ability to provide for a family in New York on single wages, like Esperanza does, cannot be considered a life of failure. Yet," they add, "from her own perspective, Esperanza fails in the US" (Valovirta, Kokkola and Korkka 240). Esperanza's feelings of disappointment are exacerbated when she meets Patrick Duffy, the actor who plays the role of Bobby Ewing in *Dallas* while on the train to work. Duffy does not only dismisses her as being delusional but also explains to her that he does not have a house in Dallas and he actually lives in California. Hence, Esperanza's dream of a good life in Dallas is destabilised by the fact that Bobby himself does not have the life as depicted on TV. Esperanza feels the failure of her American dream; however, in 1999, she decides to go to the DR to prove to herself that she made the right decision by moving to the US. She treats her return as a validation of her choices in life: "Esperanza ... was glad that her children would see that things here weren't as great as Don Chan had made them out to be ... her children would see what she saved them from" (Cruz 269). Esperanza justifies her choice by describing the DR as a terrible place to her children. Unfortunately, while she believes that she is in a better place, Esperanza is unable to relate to the US culture.

It is by way of this return that Cruz examines the different ways in which those returning from New York and those who stayed home, perceive each other. For example, despite her return being prompted by her sense of failure, in Santo Domingo Esperanza looks down upon the Dominicans, accusing them of all being "thieves" and, for her own part, attempts to take the moral high ground (Cruz 267). She tells her daughter: "Don't take your eyes off the luggage. Give them a chance and they'll steal your clothes right off of your body" (Cruz 267). Esperanza acts as if she belongs to a higher class just because she lives in the US and as a result "had a different air about her. From the moment they landed, [she] was bossing everyone around and

complaining” (Cruz 268). Overall, Esperanza treats her return back home as an opportunity to express her achievements as an immigrant to her children, and to emphasize her triumph over Don Chan’s vision of the DR. She “was glad that her children would see that things here weren’t as great as Don Chan had made them out to be ... her children would see what she saved them from” (Cruz 269). Esperanza wants to prove to her children that the US is a better place for them to live than the DR, and she makes a point of telling them that they will only have to endure the country for a few days. Esperanza wants to take advantage of her long absence from the DR to create an image of herself – returning in triumph, the embodiment of the successful immigrant.

Cruz also describes the attitude towards Dominican returnees from Dominicans in the DR. In their road trip from the airport to Esperanza’s family house in Santo Domingo, the taxi driver describes the case of some Dominican-Americans who are deported from the US and refer to them as being ruined by US culture: “The U.S. turns our people into criminals and then sends them back to us so we have to suffer the consequences” (Cruz 268). Immigrants are treated as outsiders in their mother-country and are seen as a source of its corruption. As Moreno concludes in his article “Dominican Dreams: Diasporic Identity in Angie Cruz’s *Let It Rain Coffee*,” “[t]he increasing prejudice against Dominican migrants has contributed to their exclusion and marginalization, despite the significant role that this group continues to play in the Dominican Republic’s economic, political, and cultural spheres” (Moreno 102). Esperanza feels criticised by her family when she has to justify the fact that in New York, they do not live in a house but in a flat. She also ignores the many questions they ask about Santo’s murder and the story that Bobby has been in “jail” (Cruz 281). Esperanza collapses into tears when her family forces her to face certain aspects of her life as an immigrant in the US. Esperanza is faced with disappointment when she realises that she has not fulfilled her expectations as an immigrant in the US when she is undermined by her extended family.

Cruz highlights some aspects of the way in which Dominican-Americans are perceived in both countries. While Dominicans-Americans play an important role in both countries, they find themselves needing to continuously redefine their relations with members of their family in the DR, North-American mainstream society, and the Dominican-American community in the US. According to Pessar: “The Dominican diaspora in the United States and the Dominican Republic has been frequently misunderstood ... by members of the dominant society on both shores” (Pessar 86).

The return to the DR also brings the reader to the last chapter of Don Chan’s life. Before he reaches Los Llanos, Don Chan decides to take a trip to Juan Dolio, to introduce Bobby to the beach where he was found as a child. When they reach the beach, to his surprise, Don Chan is faced with an armed man who tells him that, unless he has a pass to the hotel, he is not allowed to enter the beach. The narrator describes, through the eyes of Bobby, Juan Dolio as a tourist destination: “Bobby looked to the hotel strip, the wall that separated him from Don Chan’s home, and realized the place was far from where Don Chan had grown up. It was the home of tourists, not what Don Chan had described” (Cruz 273). In fact, Juan Dolio, previously a fishing village, became an important tourist attraction in the late 1980s, partially because of its closeness to Las Américas International Airport. At the same time as industrial production changed in the DR, tourism was constructed to serve American tourists, a development supported by Balaguar’s policies. Amalia L. Cabezas argues that the tourist industry has “allowed the United States to maintain and extend its economic dominance of the region” and explains that the US control is a result of “foreign investments” (Cabezas 31-32).

The return of Don Chan to the DR allows him to see the increasing economic influence of the US by way of an ongoing fight against factory owners who take advantage of local workers in the Free Trade Zones (FTZs) in an effort to fulfil the needs of the US market.<sup>1</sup> Chan becomes reacquainted with Miraluz, a formerly a fellow activist of the Invisible Ones, who now works in a factory that manufactures underwear for Victoria's Secret, a US based chain, and who starts a labour union to protect her fellow female workers. Cruz describes the exploitation of workers in the FTZs factories as follows: "The overseer yelling, - Rápido, rápido. Women squeezing balls of fabric in between their legs, while they trembled because they were afraid to ask for permission to go again to the bathroom" (Cruz 223). Miraluz denounces the bad treatment of workers she encounters in the factory and calls for change. She protests against the working conditions in the factory by trying to unionise her co-workers.<sup>2</sup> In response, the factory owners terrorise Miraluz by sending gangs to beat her children. Heredia suggests that "Cruz creates this female activist character to demonstrate that women contributed to social change in their own way" (Heredia 95), but the wider point of this episode is that Miraluz's work in the FTZs allows readers to see the continued exploitation of Dominicans by North-American corporates and the US' continuous control over the economy of the DR.

The end of the novel further refers to the history of exploitation in the DR. Don Chan connection to his land and history is illustrated when he disappears in the sugarcane knowing it is his time to pass away and he starts to feel the soul of the land in a magical moment:

Don Chan's hands dug into the earth. And as he dug, the earth cracked open and he fell into it, catching glimpses of women nursing their sons; men running, shooting ... As he fell deeper into the earth, he saw women killing their children in rivers and crying; people making love; hurricanes, tornadoes, rainbows, and blocks of ice drifting in the sea; the insides of people's bodies, sprouting tobacco, sugar, and coffee (Cruz 289-90).

Cruz resorts to a form of magical realism to end the novel. One in which Don Chan connects to the history of exploitation and awe of Dominicans. The sugarcane is the place where so many injustices were and are committed against slaves and labourers, immigrants and Dominicans. Sugarcane refers also to the exploitation of cane-workers.

The DR of the late 1990s, as described in the novel, suffered from external interference exerted by the US over - not only its production and labour force - but also its natural resources. The US' interference' in politics, economy, military, industry, media or tourism is continuous. Cruz's novel lays bare the role of the US in the DR. The life story of Don Chan, including his place in the diaspora, illustrates how the exploitation of Dominicans existed not only in the US, where they were drawn to work, but back in their original homeland. The US policies in the DR have had a major part in the increasing amount of Dominican migration. *Let it Rain Coffee* is an invitation to the reader to understand the intertwined relationship between the DR and the US.

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<sup>1</sup> The FTZs are another clear indication of the US economic influence on the DR: they started in the 1960s when major North-American corporations "transfer[ing] several of their own manufacturing subsidiaries to La Romana" and then extending them to other centres in San Pedro and Santiago in the DR (Schrank 1388).

<sup>2</sup> The critic Laura T. Reynolds describes the marginal role of the unions in the FTZs in the 1990s as follows: "unions in the free zones represented a small percentage of workers and were

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largely inactive; unionization has been even more limited in non-traditional agricultural enterprises” (154).

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