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Dominican Futurism

The Speculative Use of Negative Aesthetics in the Work of Rita Indiana

Abstract: This article looks at Rita Indiana’s performance work and latest novel as an example of Dominican futurism. Dominican futurism, like its counterpart Afrofuturism, centers the Dominican body in a technologically enhanced future, positioning it within a speculative world in which Dominicans are the agents of change. This article argues that Indiana’s version of Dominican futurism engages with “negative aesthetics”—defined here as the aesthetics of disorientation, dystopia, and disgust. Negative aesthetics offer a way of staying with the pain and unrest of trauma in speculative texts. The author posits a lineage of negative aesthetics in the Dominican literary tradition, which we can trace back to the work of the Dominican pessimist writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the writers articulating this outlook were invested in colonial attitudes such as anti-Blackness, however, Indiana puts forth a feminist and queer of color version that continues the aesthetic practice while also offering a radical departure by critiquing colonial and neocolonial categories. This article contends that in her Dominican futurism, Indiana pairs the speculative with negative aesthetics to point toward a future that is hopeful while being attentive to the trauma of the past and present.

The video for Rita Indiana y Los Misterios’ “La hora de volvé” begins with a long view of a neon planet. It is positioned against a galaxy and the sun and, as we learn with a quick zoom in, it is populated by Afro-diasporic *merengüeros* (merengue dancers). Set against the eerie lime green landscape and menacing red boulders, these merengüeros begin to dance. They are

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flanking the song's singer, Rita Indiana. They perform a very queer merengue, made so by the fact that while they are keeping the merengue beat, their actual dance steps are simultaneously more robotic than a traditional merengue, and more expressive with the insertion of sweeping arm extensions.¹ The three dancing figures—soon joined by even more merengueros—wear androgynous black clothing and, although Indiana is wearing heels, her out lesbian identity, six-foot frame, and short men's haircut mark her as queer.

For the better part of two decades, Rita Indiana Hernández has been one of the most celebrated contemporary Dominican writers. Her short stories and novels have been widely renowned, with her most recent novel, *La Mucama de Omicunlé*, winning the Grand Prize of the Association of Caribbean Writers. Additionally, in 2010 she embarked on what she has called “una pieza de performance art que se me fue de las manos” (a performance art piece that got out of hand) (*Feria del Libro Bogotá* 2015). Indiana collaborated with a group of musicians to form the electro-merengue band *Rita Indiana y los Misterios*. In 2010 the band released its album, *El Juidero*, on indie label Premium Latin Music.

This article looks at Rita Indiana's performance work and latest novel as an example of what we might term Dominican futurism. I define futurism in line with Mark Dery's (1993: 736) definition of Afrofuturism: “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth [and twenty-first]-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future.” Indiana's work performs a similar centering of the Dominican body in a technologically enhanced future, positioning it within a speculative world in which Dominicans are the agents of change.

My interest here is in exploring how Indiana's version of Dominican futurism centers what Richard Perez (2014) describes as “negative aesthetics”—a way of staying with the pain and unrest of trauma in Latinx literary texts. *Negative aesthetics* refers to a form of writing that attends to the “perverse” history of violence in the Americas, while also making room for transgressive imaginings that move us toward justice. I build off of Perez's theorization to posit a lineage of negative aesthetics in the Dominican literary tradition, which we can trace back to the work of the Dominican pessimist writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *El gran pesimismo dominicano*, and in particular the work of Américo Lugo

that we will examine, was characterized by its defeatist attitude about Dominican culture and nationhood. While the writers articulating this outlook were invested in colonial attitudes such as anti-Blackness, Indiana puts forth a feminist and queer of color version that continues the aesthetic practice while also offering a radical departure by critiquing colonial and neocolonial categories. The article argues that in her Dominican futurism, Indiana pairs the speculative with negative aesthetics—defined here specifically as disorientation, dystopia, and disgust—to point toward a future that is hopeful while being attentive to the trauma of the past and present.

Dominican Pessimism and Dominican Futurism

In his essay “Flashes of Transgression,” Latinx literary scholar Richard Perez (2014) examines Dominican writer Junot Díaz’s novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The novel recounts the history of the Rafael Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic through the life of Oscar, a Dominican nerd growing up in New Jersey. Of this text, Perez (2014: 101) writes: “Somehow, in the face of stereotypes, borders, and legal violence; feeding on the negative, productive possibility of pain; and strengthened by the ethical dimension of rage, an aesthetics emerges.” Perez is pointing toward what he calls “negative aesthetics” in Díaz’s work, defined throughout the piece by words like “rupture” (104) and “narrative perturbation” (107). Perez gestures toward the way that Díaz’s novel produces unrest in its narration of historical trauma—the Trujillo dictatorship—and its manifestations in the present—Oscar’s everyday life. The novel unsettles because it does not shy away from pain, away from what Perez calls “the abyss” (107). In staying with the pain, crafting a literary aesthetic that puts that pain front and center, Perez argues that Díaz’s negative aesthetics paradoxically envision alternate worlds.

This article takes Perez’s notion of negative aesthetics as central to the work of another Dominican author, Rita Indiana. Indeed, Indiana often stays with the ugly, the uncomfortable. In the case of her writing and performance, this manifests as a focus on issues like sexual violence and the attempted extermination of Black and Native peoples. As I will argue, the aesthetic present in Indiana’s work can be traced back to the Dominican pessimist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Of course, the definition of that which is “ugly” or makes one “uncomfortable” varies across time and history, and in that respect while the aesthetic

of Indiana's writing is similar to that of Dominican pessimism, the goals are not. In the context of the pessimist movement, these categories are mobilized not to critique the violence of the state, but rather to justify it. As I will show, Dominican pessimism takes up negative aesthetics to reinscribe normative colonial categories. Indiana, on the other hand, continues the aesthetic practice of focusing on the negative, while using futurism to posit a world in which nonnormative subjects are centered.

To understand the role of negative aesthetics in Dominican cultural production, we need to begin with the movement that preceded *el gran pesimismo dominicano*. In the late nineteenth century (and continuing into the early twentieth century) a utopian movement gained popularity in Spanish Caribbean intellectual circles, which sought to create an Antillean Federation. Many Dominican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban writers were writing from a utopian point of view during this time, among them Eugenio María de Hostos, Emeterio Betances, and José Martí. For instance, Dominican intellectual Pedro Henríquez Ureña wrote in his 1925 treatise *La utopía de América* of a version of the Americas that would be inclusive of diversity and inclined toward social justice. He stated (1989: 10) that in the face of the trials facing humanity, “Sólo una luz unifica a muchos espíritus: la luz de una utopía, reducida, es verdad, a simples soluciones económicas por el momento, pero utopía al fin, donde se vislumbra la única esperanza de paz entre el infierno social que atravesamos todos” (Only one light unifies the many spirits: the light of utopia, reduced for the moment, it's true, to simple economic solutions, but in the end utopia illuminates our only hope of peace within this social hell that we all experience).² Ureña's utopian thinking emerges out of concerns for social justice, in particular with his concern for Indigenous peoples and the working class, as well as a desire to assert the Caribbean in the face of U.S. imperialism. Ureña and others often put forth philosophies intended to be egalitarian—but which in truth relied upon racist and classist assumptions—that appealed to the language of utopianism as part of their hopeful rhetoric.

Even in Ureña's utopian postulation, however, we can begin to see what Danny Méndez (2012) calls “the anxieties of self-representation.” In *Narratives of Migration and Displacement in Dominican Literature* Méndez talks at length about the structures of feeling that characterize Dominican fiction, including malaise and anger.³ We see these, for example, when Ureña (1989: 10) simultaneously posits “the light of utopia” while depicting the Dominican Republic as “el infierno social que atravesamos todos” (this

social hell that we all experience). The utopian thinking of this time period would also, paradoxically, begin to account for the difficulties faced by the Dominican Republic, including the presence of U.S. imperialism.

El gran pesimismo dominicano, then, would emerge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to expand the structures of negative feeling already present in Dominican utopianism. Like the utopianists, the Dominican pessimists maintained a belief that their theorizations were key to fighting imperialism, represented at this moment by the presence of the U.S. Marines on the island in the early twentieth century.⁴ Unlike the utopianists, however, the pessimists would argue that the best way to account for the social ills facing the Dominican Republic was not to posit a utopian outlet, but rather to stare unflinchingly at the negative aspects of Dominican society. In this way, they began to use what I am terming the negative aesthetics that have characterized much of Dominican fiction up to this day.⁵

We can see negative aesthetics most clearly in the work of Dominican pessimist Américo Lugo, who was one of the foremost Dominican intellectuals of the early twentieth century. In his 1916 dissertation, which prefaces many of the arguments he would make throughout his long career, Lugo (1916: 30) writes: “El estado Dominicano no nació viable. Murió asfixiado en la cuna” (The Dominican state wasn’t born viable. It died asphyxiated in the crib). Lugo gives voice here to the dystopian philosophy that became popular among intellectuals and the petite bourgeoisie, and would later extend to the general public: The idea was that Dominican society was doomed to failure. What will later surface in Indiana’s work as the negative aesthetics of disorientation, dystopia, and disgust are present in Lugo’s work in the form of a pessimistic disdain for Dominican society.

A crucial difference between Indiana and Lugo, however, is each author’s vision for a better society. Where Indiana’s work critiques racism and classism, Lugo’s relies upon racist and classist assumptions. Lugo (1916: 24–25) explains:

¿Queréis que un pueblo que ha vivido en la atmósfera de la inmortalidad pública y la injusticia, que está inficionado de vicios, de errores fundamentales, que no conoce más prácticas gubernativas que las que en estas tierras han podido perdurar, las de la tiranía . . . se convierta, lo repetimos, en un pueblo adulto, robusto y sano, lleno de vigor moral, con ideas justas, con nobles propósitos, con hábitos sociales y políticos que le

permitan dar en su nuevo género de vida la misma notación de los pueblos que como Suiza, Inglaterra, y los Estados Unidos de América, no solo necesitaron siglos para llegar ahí, sino que contaban con elementos étnicos superiores por una preparación y una adaptación lenta y natural al medio geográfico y al medio internacional?

(Do you imagine that a people that has lived in an atmosphere of public immortality and injustice, that is infected with vice and fundamental errors, that doesn't know anything beyond the governmental practices that have been able to endure in these lands, those of tyranny . . . will convert, we repeat, into an adult public, robust and healthy, full of moral vigor, with just ideas, with noble intentions, with social and political habits that allow it to become like the peoples of Switzerland, England, and the United States of America, all of which not only needed centuries to arrive at that point, but also had superior ethnic elements that allowed for their slow and natural preparation and adaptation to the physical geography and the international landscape?)

For Lugo the failure of the Dominican nation-building project had everything to do with the failure of the Dominican people, or rather, certain Dominican people. As the excerpt above suggests, Lugo sees the Dominican people as fundamentally immoral, corrupt, and ethnically inferior. He also suggests a spectrum of inferiority, whereby nonwhites are more immoral and corrupt than whites.

In “Apuntes para una bibliografía del pesimismo dominicano,” Rita María Tejada (n.d.) points out that the tenets of *el gran pesimismo* that we see in Lugo are relatively consistent across other pessimist authors like José Ramón López, Emiliano Tejera, Federico García Godoy, and Francisco Henríquez y Carvajal. They are as follows: (1) The lack of nutrition has produced physically and mentally deficient people; (2) the nation cannot govern itself; (3) racial mixing has produced a society that is “inferior, escéptica, pesimista, violenta y servil” (inferior, skeptical, pessimistic, violent, and servile); (4) anarchist individualism, lack of culture, and an excess of African blood make Dominicans politically inept; and (5) all of this means that the Dominican people do not make up a nation (understood here to mean a self-governable people). As Tejada notes, these beliefs are perpetuated in intellectual discourse, and then are in fact expanded on by Trujillo in his eventual rise to power.

Indiana's work explicitly takes on the racism of Dominican pessimism

by naming the presence of anti-Black racism in the contemporary Dominican Republic. Interestingly, however, she does so by focusing on what Richard Perez (2014: 101) has called “the negative, productive possibility of pain.” Like the *gran pesimistas*, Indiana’s focus on the negative is intended to uncover what conditions would make the Dominican people prosper. Whereas the *gran pesimistas* determine that the Dominican public cannot be salvaged, Indiana instead applies pressure to their assumptions.⁶ She turns pessimism on its head to suggest that while it is true that the Dominican Republic was “asfixiado en la cuna” (asphyxiated in the crib), to quote Lugo 1916 again, the blame is not on inferior “blood.” Indiana suggests in her texts that the very colonial and neocolonial regimes that have exploited the Dominican Republic have produced these conditions of desperation. Her use of negative aesthetics is not a form of resignation, then, but rather a “rupture”—to use Perez’s language once more—from which can emerge something different.

It is here that Indiana’s work intersects with futurism. There is in the Dominican Republic, as in other nations, a history of speculative writing. Authors like Josefina de la Cruz, Yerry Barista, Mario Dávalos, and Junot Díaz appeal to the speculative as a way—to quote Kodwo Eshun’s (2003: 297) definition of Afrofuturism—to produce “historicities [that] may be understood as a series of powerful competing futures that infiltrate the present at different rates.” These authors, like Indiana, form part of a corpus of Dominican futurism that has much in common with U.S.-based articulations of futurism by people of color—such as Alondra Nelson’s (2002) and Ytasha L. Womack’s (2013) explorations/theorizations of “Afrofuturism,” Catherine Ramírez’s (2008) “chicanafuturism,” Cathryn Merla-Watson’s (2017) “Latin@futurism,” or Mark Villegas’s (2017) “Afro-Filipino futurism.” All of these acknowledge that because people of color have often been set in opposition to modernity and progress, the very act of claiming technology for them is a radical thing. Another aspect that all of these lineages have in common is that they all acknowledge that “Armageddon been in effect”—to quote science fiction scholar Mark Bould (2007: 180) quoting Public Enemy in his discussion of Afrofuturism. That is to say, the unthinkable has already happened to people of color.

Indiana is writing from within the Dominican Republic, having lived there for most of her life and thus writing from the perspective of a Dominican, not a Dominican American. Her positioning as a non-U.S.-based subject means that she takes up a set of issues particular to the

island—notably the idea that non-U.S.-based people of color are even further positioned as nonmodern subjects. This is particularly true for Black Dominicans who are, according to Lorgia García-Peña (2016: 2), “exiles at home and abroad” because they are systematically expelled from the national bodies of both the Dominican Republic and the United States. Indiana’s positioning is made even trickier, however, by the way she is racialized. From a U.S. perspective Indiana reads as phenotypically white or at the very least white-passing, but within a Dominican framework racial categories are complicated with the additional category of *indio* (Indian), itself subdivided by skin tone—as Ginetta E. B. Candelario (2007) explores in *Black behind the Ears*. To be sure, Indiana receives privilege from her light skin both in the Dominican Republic and abroad. Still, we must recognize that because Dominican racial formations rely upon a triangle of Blackness, whiteness, and Indianness, Indiana’s non-Blackness does not necessarily read as whiteness in all situations, and her racialization is influenced by factors such as how she is wearing her hair (Candelario 2007). Abroad, in the United States or in Puerto Rico where she has also lived, Indiana’s light skin privilege is also tempered by her status as a Dominican migrant—a group that has historically been constructed as a racialized minority in both places.⁷ I read Indiana’s lyrical commitment to discussing issues of anti-Black and anti-Haitian prejudice in the Dominican Republic, as well as her Black and Brown visual archive in music videos, as a willingness to place her physical body in a space the national body deems “other.”⁸

In “La hora de volvé,” which we will examine in a moment, Indiana’s repeated insistence on taking up themes of racial prejudice in a national body that systemically denies its existence is an important move. Such a move allows her to posit a futurism that does not rely on the existence of a white mythical motherland, as the *gran pesimistas* thought of the European nations. Conversely, Indiana also avoids positing a Black mythical motherland. Kodwo Eshun (2003: 291–92) notes that futurist writers working in Africa or its diaspora must contend with the fact that “Africa increasingly exists as the object of futurist projection. African social reality is overdetermined by intimidating global scenarios, doomsday economic projections, weather predictions, medical reports on AIDS, and life-expectancy forecasts, all of which predict decades of immiserization.” Eshun warns that Afrofuturist work that posits Africa as dystopia, or even work that seeks to avoid this by uncritically positioning it as a utopia, is refusing to

contend with the complex lived realities of the African continent. In the Caribbean context, I would argue we can say the same for Haiti. Since its revolution Haiti has been viewed as an outlier in the Americas—a nation built by slaves, but also one destined for demise as the poorest nation in the region. Since the devastating earthquake of 2010, Haiti has increasingly been viewed through even more of a doomsday lens. The situation for its neighbor, the Dominican Republic, is different however. If Haiti is the subject of morbid fascination, then the Dominican Republic is curiously ignored. Outside of the Caribbean no one seems to think much about what a Dominican future might look like. It is neither utopic nor dystopic—it is unimaginable. Eshun (2003: 293) notes that in response the African futurist writer must do the following: “Taking its cue from this ‘dual nature’ of the ‘critical and utopian,’ an Afrofuturist art project might work on the exposure and reframing of futurisms that act to forecast and fix African dystopia.” Indiana’s work makes precisely this double move. It employs critique by exposing the painful and traumatic aspects of Dominican life—including the relationship with Haiti—while also reframing a utopian future that does not attempt to erase these complexities.

Finally, Indiana’s queerness (in terms of both her gender and sexuality) also plays a key role in positioning her as other in the national body. Indiana joins other futurisms put forth by people of color by understanding colonial categories as co-constituted. Feminist philosopher Maria Lugones’s theory of the “coloniality of gender” explains this formulation by arguing that binary gender is a colonial imposition.⁹ According to Lugones (2007: 186), “Colonialism did not impose precolonial, European gender arrangements on the colonized. It imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers.” This creation of a system of binary and racialized gender meant that Native people and African slaves brought to the Dominican Republic could never access normative gender. Indiana’s nonbinary gender presentation pushes back against normative gender categories, acknowledging that binary gender has only ever been afforded to white European bodies. She instead posits a future that centers nonbinary bodies of color. Her out lesbian identity is also central to this positioning, as she additionally suggests that in this future heterosexuality is no longer compulsory. An indication of this is her moniker, *la montra*—a colloquial spelling of *la monstra*, which translates into female monster. As Karen Jaime (2015: 91) has argued, the articulation of the “monster and monstrous

allow for Indiana’s critique of Dominican race relations” as well as other forms of inequality, such as homophobia or transphobia. Indiana has spoken about the fact that the *montra* nickname was given to her by fans in acknowledgment of her talent (referring to someone as a *monstro* is a way to express admiration in the Dominican Republic). Its gendering as feminine, however, points toward how Indiana’s gender presentation and out lesbianism combine with her art to create performances that are not just musically pleasing but also threatening to the social order. In this way Indiana’s articulation of monstrosity is another mode through which she is staying with the pain and unrest of the Dominican past and present—that which is ugly or frightening, like a monster—while also positing a future in which those that have been systematically deemed monstrous—those who are Black, poor, lesbian, or display nonbinary gender—are in fact agents of change. As the following section will explore, Indiana’s incorporation of negative aesthetics into her futurism produces a critique of co-constituted colonial categories (such as race, gender, and sexuality) in order to envision a technologically enhanced future that centers queer Dominicans of color.

The Negative Hopeful

Rita Indiana y los Misterios’ album *El Juidero* (a play on the Spanish word *huir*, which means to escape) contains lyrics that complicate dominant narratives about race, gender, sexuality, and nation. The songs explicitly take on themes of anti-Haitian prejudice in the Dominican Republic, the traumatic legacy of the Trujillo dictatorship, and forced Dominican migration to the United States and Puerto Rico. The lyrics comment on gender identity and sexuality to a lesser extent, but because Indiana is an out lesbian who performs nonbinary gender identity, her aesthetic in all of the accompanying music videos and performances is decidedly queer.

Several of the song texts from this album engage with the speculative to posit a future that centers Dominican people. I want to look here particularly at “La hora de volvé” (“Time to Return”), which tells the story of Dominican migrants to the United States. The video for “La hora de volvé” was directed by Indiana’s frequent collaborator Noelia Quintero. I read the video alongside the song’s lyrics (written by Indiana) as two parts of one cultural text, given Indiana’s insistence that her career in merengue was “otro proyecto de ficción que funciona como otra novela” (another fiction project that works like a novel) (Feria del Libro Bogotá 2015). For Indiana,

her foray into popular music was not an attempt to become a popular musician—she has said in the past that she “disguised herself as a singer”—but rather a performance art project intended to use the Dominican Republic’s most sacred musical form—the merengue—to expose social injustice (Feria del Libro Bogotá 2015). Indiana’s music videos are therefore central to this performance art project, as are her live shows and her interviews.¹⁰

Indiana’s reliance on negative aesthetics in her music has much in common with how philosopher Achille Mbembe (2004) has theorized Congolese rumba. He writes in *Variations on the Beautiful*: “Congolese music has endeavored to account for the terror, the cruelty and the dark abyss—for the ugly and the abject—that is its country” (18). Mbembe is referring here to how Congolese music has incorporated sonic elements akin to screams and chaos, which represent the extreme violence of the Congo’s recent past. Mbembe also sees this music as performing a hopeful function, however. He continues: “To dance in a regime of the ugly and the abject, is to rid oneself, in an instant, of the labour of the slave” (43). Mbembe gives voice here to how in the Congolese tradition music at once offers a critical appraisal of the violence that has characterized Congolese life, and offers listeners an ability to enact hopefulness while listening to it. The same could be said for Dominican merengue, which is considered the national music of the Dominican Republic, and which has also historically been used to treat themes as disparate as romantic love and global capitalism.¹¹ Rita Indiana y los Misterios’ album *El Juidero* similarly uses merengue to take up the traumatic historical legacies of the Dominican Republic.

Lorna Torrado (2013: 466) has written about Indiana’s choice to use merengue, which is a genre that the thirty-year dictator Trujillo used to rewrite Dominican national history in a way that “edifica la identidad nacional a través de la heteronormatividad, la inmovilidad geográfica y el antihaitianismo” (constructs the national identity through heteronormativity, geographic immobility, and anti-Haitianism). Where Trujillo (and his eventual successor Joaquín Balaguer) commissioned merengue to reinforce his ideals of state-sponsored heterowhitening, Indiana instead uses the genre to rewrite Dominican history in a way that centers all that Trujillo marginalized—namely, Blackness and queerness.¹² Through her use of merengue Indiana calls attention to the heteromascularity and anti-Blackness that undergird the Dominican national imaginary.

As the title states, the 2010 song “La hora de volvé” concerns itself with Dominican migrants who have gone to the United States, only to realize the impossibility of the American Dream. To them she says, it’s “la hora de volvé” (time to return). It should be noted that the song’s title is spelled “volved,” not the grammatically normative “volver,” which is itself a nod to the colloquial Dominican pronunciation of the word. Because normative grammar and pronunciation in the Dominican Republic, as in other Latin American nations, is often tied to whiteness and upper classness, Indiana’s choice to use idiomatic pronunciation and spelling throughout the album points to a working-class politics tied to Blackness. The song’s title, which is also its thesis, places working-class Dominicans in a speculative future—one in which the children of the nation have returned home. The temporality of return, however, gestures toward Indiana’s use of negative aesthetics, here appearing as disorientation. The future here is tied to a return to the past, a cyclical temporality that makes those marked as pre-modern also the harbingers of the future.

Lyricaly, the song also occupies a complex position of both critiquing injustice and offering a utopian vision. The coexistence of both of these produces throughout the song a sense of disorientation, a split between joyful images of return and painful images of oppression faced abroad. Visually this disorientation is produced in Quintero’s video though the use of a 1980s aesthetic. Indiana’s genderqueer style is reminiscent of Annie Lennox and Grace Jones, both of whom were known in the 1980s for their use of androgyny.¹³ The costuming and styling highlight this link by dressing Indiana almost identically to her male-presenting dancers, adding noticeable shoulder pads to her shirt, and relying on a 1980s makeup aesthetic of bright red lips and blue eyeshadow (fig. 1). The grainy production quality of the video and two-dimensional illustrations also point toward a 1980s use of technology. This puts a video made in 2010 in the interesting position of being about both the future and the past. If futurism is prophetic, imagining a world in which justice is already centered, then this video juxtaposes that prophetic future against a nonidealized past—one populated by grainy production quality, two-dimensional graphics, and the sounds of a new wave keyboard. This temporal dislocation occurs even as Indiana offers her final invocation “baile/ baile/ baile” (dance/ dance/ dance) against the inhospitable images of a dry red planet (Indiana 2010). The result is the creation of a universe that is both the future and the past, about both progress and stagnation, an indication that the struggles the



Figure 1. Rita Indiana's genderqueer 1980s aesthetic in "La hora de volvé."

video depicts are both solvable and ever present. Like Salvador Dalí's surrealism that it also references, the video uses disorientation to represent the complex social reality of migration that Indiana's lyrics outline. It is fitting, then, that the end of the video should not be significantly different than the beginning, as the disorientation of the text suggests that the future is also the past.

Layered onto this logic of disorientation is an aesthetic of disgust. Where the video has begun with androgynous dancers presenting variations on traditional merengue to the sped-up rhythm of Indiana's electro-merengue, a noticeable shift occurs with the delivery of the line "caía la nieve" (the snow was falling) (Indiana 2010). At this point Indiana's voice transitions into another register, trading in her signature detached delivery style for a disturbing pseudo-yell.

She sings:

Caía la nieve sobre el cuerpo adormecido (the snow was falling on the sleeping body)

Tenías hasta los intestinos entumecidos (even your intestines were numb)

Viste una visión, una discoteca (you saw a vision, a discotheque)

Bajo una enramada dos morenas bajando cerveza (underneath a thicket of branches, two brown girls downing beer)

At this point in the lyrics, Indiana turns our attention toward the cold experienced by Dominican migrants living in New York (many presumably without the money to buy appropriate coats). In a grating shout, she articulates the disgusting image of frozen intestines.

The listener is further disoriented as these images of disgust are juxtaposed against the relief felt by the migrants upon seeing something that reminds them of home—two “morenas” (brown girls) downing a beer. Where the lyrics thus far have outlined the dystopian conditions of poverty that the migrants have faced—their work sewing buttons onto clothing or delivering refrigerators, for instance—this lyric represents the first instance of hope. This lyrical turning point is echoed in the futuristic iconography of the music video by the two dancers clutching their hands in prayer while floating by on an asteroid, followed by a sideways shot of Rita Indiana blowing feathers and birds out of her mouth—symbolic representations of hope and freedom, respectively (figs. 2 and 3). The baseline of the chorus drops at this point, sending the dancers into the video’s signature dance move, a right-left shuffle with hands behind their back, which



Figure 2. Backup dancers float by on an asteroid in “La hora de volvé.”



Figure 3. Rita Indiana blows feathers and birds out of her mouth in “La hora de volvé.”

transitions into a birdlike arm flapping—both likely references to escape via either water or air, as the song’s chorus confirms. The dance move also references the *carabiné*, a folkloric dance performed in the south of the Dominican Republic, in which men and woman traditionally execute a right-left shuffle in pairs. Indiana’s dancers are interestingly shifting between the traditionally male and female parts, as they begin by holding their hands behind their backs (as men traditionally do) and then switch to holding their hands out to their sides (as women traditionally do when grasping their skirts). The presence of the *carabiné* once again offers a disorientating temporal loop, in which a dance most often associated with a folkloric past also becomes a symbol of a hopeful nonbinary future.

Alternating between a Dominican past, present, and future, Indiana then turns to critique the U.S. imperialism that is responsible for producing these disgusting conditions of migrants sleeping with “*intestinos entumecidos*” (numb intestines). The chorus states:

Te llegó la hora papi como a Monkey Magic (The time has come for you
papi, like for Monkey Magic)

Súbete a eta’ nube y depositate en tu calle (Climb onto this cloud and
deposit yourself on your street)

Coge un avión, ¡coño! Una yola al revés (Hop on a plane, damn it! A
boat in reverse)

Tu no lo ves llego la hora de volvé (Don't you see, it's time to return)

The fact that Indiana, a queer figure, delivers the song's thesis—that it's time to return by whatever means possible—from within this queered merengue-verse adds an additional layer to the critique of the American Dream narrative. Indiana's nonbinary six-foot frame—made to look taller by her heeled boots, short shorts, shoulder pads, and a zoomed-out camera angle—suggests a critique of how the American Dream narrative is particularly applied to queer immigrants of color. She pushes back against the dominant narrative that positions the United States as a utopia for queer immigrants of color, suggesting instead that it is a dystopia. She warns that they should “climb onto this cloud and deposit yourself on your street.”

The two main dancers, who are both identifiably men of color, are also becoming increasingly readable as queer figures by virtue of their dance moves becoming progressively focused on body parts traditionally coded as female, such as the hips and chest. The dancers work themselves into a frenzy as the chorus approaches, presumably lending urgency to Indiana's warning that the United States is not in fact the utopia that was promised to Dominican migrants. She continues later in the song: “Todos vuelven a la tierra en que nacieron / Al embrujo infundible de su sol” (Everyone returns to the land that birthed them / to the unmistakable *embrujo* of their sun). The word *embrujo* here can be translated as either enchantment or curse, which is an apt way of communicating that it is both. Indiana is not idealizing the Dominican Republic—after all, many of her other songs openly talk about the corruption and racism of the island. She is, however, holding the U.S. state accountable for the wrongs done to the migrants—both when they arrive in the United States as immigrants, and prior to that with U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic (a military occupation from 1916–24, and an invasion in 1965) that created the need for migration in the first place. Images of airplanes projected against a screen of luggage reaffirm this message. Indiana stands robotically, holding the luggage as black-and-white images of airplanes taking off flash across it. The direction of the airplanes is unknown, producing a sense of disorientation for the viewer unsure if they are coming home to the Dominican Republic or leaving for the United States. Indiana's blank stare into the distance offers no hints (fig. 4). Even as her words caution migrants to return, their tense



Figure 4. Rita Indiana stands holding luggage against a futuristic backdrop in “La hora de volvé.”

suggests that not all migrants will heed this warning: “Y quien quiere ta’ comiendo mierda e’ hielo / Cuando puede ta’ bailando algo mejol” (And whoever wants to is eating shit and ice / When they could be dancing something better). The disgusting image of “eating shit and ice,” which translates more colloquially into “wasting time and eating ice” in Spanish, reaffirms the disturbing aspects of migrant existence in the United States. What looks like old images of airplanes taking off in black and white also reminds us of the generations of Dominicans that have had to migrate to the United States for economic or political reasons. It suggests that U.S. exceptionalism is a myth and that, even for queer migrants of color, home may just be the more desirable place. The American Dream mythology is the real dystopia.

Indiana’s lyrics expand on this message through the use of irony. As the video shows her sitting on one piece of luggage, leg propped up on another, she delivers what sounds like an investment in the American Dream:

Tengo nueve años llenando maleta (It’s been nine years I’ve been filling
up luggage)

Con media, panti, desodorante en decuento (With socks, panties, and
discount deodorant)

Voy a regalarlo cuando llegue donde mi abuela (I'm going to give them
away when I get to my grandmother's house)

Y todo el mundo se pondrá contento (And everyone will become happy)

The background iconography suggests that this happiness will not last, however, as yellow lightning flashes against a pink sky. Indiana's face also offers no indications of hope or happiness, as she stares disinterestedly into the distance. The thought that "everyone will become" happy is ironic, as this video does not have a linear orientation. Futuristic images of hope collide with the video's use of negative aesthetics, producing both a possibility of a different future and no linear time line on which it will occur.

The menacing background visuals echo this messaging, as they produce a sense of disorientation, disgust, and dystopia. There are, for instance, flying boulders that whiz past Indiana and the dancers. There are snakes and monsters made of rocks that emerge from the ground. Disembodied purple legs walk alongside Indiana as she traverses the screen. Yet, the queer dancing of men of color offers a counternarrative. The queer Dominican migrant, here represented by these dancers, is in control of the elements around him. Even as the background portrays chaos, the dancers themselves continue moving joyously, able to avoid catastrophe by the technology of their dance.

On the Speculative Use of Negative Aesthetics Right Now

If Indiana's Dominican futurism has succeeded in pairing the speculative with negative aesthetics, thus offering a vision of the future that is also attentive to the violence of the past, then I want to argue that such a posturing is particularly important in this political moment. Indiana's work is significant, I have suggested, because it accounts both for dystopian realities and for their utopian alternatives. In this final section, I will explore how Indiana offers readers and viewers a window into the dystopian aspects of the contemporary Dominican Republic. I will turn briefly to her 2015 novel, *La Mucama de Omicunlé*, to examine her use of negative aesthetics to bring attention to features of the Dominican present, such as anti-Black racism and misogyny.

In *La Mucama de Omicunlé* Indiana depicts a futuristic world set in the Dominican Republic of 2037, which exists somewhere between utopia and dystopia. The novel tells the story of Acilde, who is at first described using feminine pronouns and adjectives gendered feminine in the original

Spanish. Acilde identifies, however, as a man, and is able to physically become one when he takes Rainbow Brite, a street drug that performs an immediate but painful destruction of his breasts and reproductive system and replaces them with a penis and male reproductive system. From this point on in the narrative, Acilde is referred to with masculine pronouns and adjectives. Acilde is said to have a divine purpose in the Afro-syncretic religion followed by many in the narrative, in that it is his fate to heal the oceans—destroyed as they were by Venezuelan biological weapons that were being stored in the Dominican Republic, and then were inadvertently dumped into the ocean after a seaquake destroyed their holding cell. Acilde is tasked, then, with saving the oceans and the sacred sea anemone that still lives inside of them. Over the course of the narrative Acilde works (with varying degrees of success and focus) toward this goal not only in the present day of 2037, but also in the past. Acilde, like others in the narrative, exists simultaneously in various time lines dating as far back as the seventeenth century, during which French buccaneers lived in parts of what is now the Dominican Republic.

If the setup to this novel seems complicated, then this is precisely the point. Indiana crafts a novel that exists in various time lines, with dozens of characters (many of which are revealed to be the same character existing in different bodies on different time lines), and with several main themes (i.e., the importance of taking seriously ecological destruction, the reframing of gender in a speculative world, and the wisdom of Indigenous spiritual traditions, to name only a few). The sense of disorientation produced in the reader that tries to keep track of these aspects is key to her use of negative aesthetics. Indiana uses confusion to create a sense of unease in the reader about the narrative's dystopian themes.

I want to focus specifically on two scenes in which Indiana uses negative aesthetics in the novel to highlight the contemporary dystopian realities with which Dominican futurism must contend. The first is the novel's opening, in which we find Acilde (then a maid using feminine pronouns):

Acilde activa en su ojo la cámara de seguridad que da a la calle y ve a uno de los muchos haitianos que cruzan la frontera para huir de la cuarentena declarada en la otra mitad de la isla.

Al reconocer el virus en el negro, el dispositivo de seguridad de la torre lanza un chorro de gas letal e informa a su vez al resto de los vecinos, que evitarán la entrada al edificio hasta que los recolectores automáticos, que

patrullan calles y avenidas, recojan el cuerpo y lo desintegren. Acilde espera a que el hombre deje de moverse para desconectarse y reanudar la limpieza de los ventanales que, curtidos a diario por un hollín pegajoso, sueltan su grasa gracias al Windex. (Indiana 2015: 12)

[Acilde] positions her eye and activates the security camera that faces the street, where she sees one of the many Haitians who've crossed the border, fleeing from the quarantine declared on the other half of the island.

Recognizing the virus in the black man, the security mechanism in the tower releases a lethal gas and simultaneously informs the neighbors, who will now avoid the building's entrance until the automatic collectors patrolling the streets and avenues pick up the body and disintegrate it. Acilde waits until the man stops moving to disconnect and return to cleaning the windowpanes, encrusted on a daily basis with sticky soot. (Indiana 2018: 9)¹⁴

In this futuristic world Blackness has been criminalized to such a degree that the security mechanisms automatically eradicate anyone with the virus, notably Haitians. The Haitians stand in as a signifier here for the presence of Blackness in Hispaniola. Because Dominican racial identity has been constructed historically in opposition to Haitian Blackness, the security camera is meant to symbolize not just the eradication of Haitians, but also the eradication of Blackness from within the Dominican national body.¹⁵ The grotesque violence committed against the Black man in this excerpt is therefore a reminder of the routine violence committed against Haitians and Black Dominicans historically, as well as an acknowledgment that this violence is ongoing at the time of the novel's publication.¹⁶ In particular it points to the mass deportation of more than one hundred thousand people of Haitian descent from the Dominican Republic, up to a quarter of whom are reported to be legal Dominican citizens, after the passage of Law 168-13 in 2013 (Amnesty International 2016).¹⁷ The fact that the protagonist, Acilde, a white Dominican trans man, seems to have no reservations about this systemic racism of the security mechanism, is a reminder of the complicity of many white Dominicans in the ongoing racial cleansing of the present. The novel's ending offers no ameliorated conditions for Haitians or for the Afro-syncretic religion that worships the anemone at the bottom of the sea.

Indiana also uses images that elicit disgust in order to make a point about how anti-Black racism and misogyny intersect in contemporary

Dominican society. This is clear in the character of Argenis, who appears as a sort of antagonist in the narrative—an artist turned psychic hotline operator, who is disgruntled by his life situation and often expresses his displeasure through racist and misogynistic outbursts. He also exists, however, in the late seventeenth century, where he is a French buccaneer named Côte de Fer. Argenis consistently displays a hatred of blackness. In the English translation of the novel, translator Achy Obejas makes this clear by translating the word *negro* (Black) as the N-word in several instances when Argenis uses it hatefully (Indiana 2018). Intertwined with his racism is his misogyny, which often appears in the form of rape fantasies, here displayed in a piece of Argenis’s art that depicted “un negro sodomizándola mientras un manco le cortaba la cabeza con una cimitarra” (Indiana 2015: 174) (“a black man sodomizing her [a prostitute] while a one-armed man cut off her head with a scimitar” [Indiana 2018: 127]). The brutality of this detail gestures toward the issue of gender-based violence in the Dominican Republic. Even following the passage of gender-based civil rights legislation in the constitution of 2010, women and particularly women of Haitian descent continue to be victims of an epidemic of “intimate femicide” (United Nations 2013). Indiana includes depictions like these within a speculative world to caution the reader against dismissing the realities of the intersection of anti-Black prejudice and misogyny in the contemporary Dominican Republic.

At the end of the novel, Acilde is unsuccessful in fulfilling his life’s purpose of saving the sacred sea anemone or its habitat, thus allowing the oceans to remain “un caldo oscuro y putrefacto” (Indiana 2015: 114) (“a dark and putrid stew” [Indiana 2018: 83]). In this way the novel’s ending is the logical terminus of the present-day situation in the Dominican Republic: anti-Haitian prejudice, violence against women, and ecological devastation at the hands of foreign interests. The novel’s disorienting time line hints toward these outcomes, as it suggests that across four hundred years Hispaniola has repeated the same history.

To complicate this picture, however, the novel does paint a speculative world in which genderqueer and transgender people can live happily ever after, as Acilde does. In fact, the narrative ends on a utopian note if we consider the axes of nonnormative gender and sexuality. When Acilde, acting as Giorgio, decides not to warn President Bona about the future ecological disaster that the latter will allow to occur, he does so because he chooses his own utopia over saving the oceans.¹⁸ Acilde/Giorgio is happy

living in the late twentieth century in a man's body with his wife, Linda. He fears that if he accomplishes his life mission he will no longer be allowed to live as Giorgio. This catastrophic ending is actually a utopian ending for Acilde/Giorgio, who has used his powers to create the speculative future that he desires—one in which he is a man married to the woman he loves. In this speculative future, Acilde is also able to perform sexual reassignment through a street drug called Rainbow Brite. Although Rainbow Brite costs \$15,000, and thus is not accessible to most people, its existence means that Acilde can live physically as a man after only a one-night process. The fact that this produces a utopian ending for Acilde, and presumably for some other trans and nonbinary Dominicans, suggests that in this speculative world dystopian realities coexist with hopeful futures.

In closing, Indiana's adoption of Dominican futurism alongside negative aesthetics produces a world that is both critical and utopian. Paradoxically, in harkening back to a Dominican philosophical tradition that was invested in colonial hierarchies, Indiana is able to appropriate its aesthetics to place blame on structures of colonial and imperial domination. Her speculative use of disorientation, dystopia, and disgust are thus able to do the work of imagining alternatives to U.S. exceptionalism, heteronormativity, classism, and white supremacy. By using the negative to generate hope, Indiana reminds us that in a contemporary moment in which queer nonwhite Dominicans are living dystopia, contending with the legacy of trauma is the only way to construct a utopian future.

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Notes

- 1 Many scholars have noted the difficulty of applying a category such as *queer* to non-U.S.-based texts (Epps 2008). Of note is Carlos Ulises Decena's (2011) work, which argues for the importance of acknowledging "tacit" sexualities in the Dominican New York diaspora. Throughout this article my use of the word *queer* is meant to be in line with Decena's theorization of tacit subjects, inasmuch as it notes that nonnormative gender and sexuality are often communicated nonverbally through gesture and affect, rather than stated outright.
- 2 All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

- 3 Méndez (2012) takes great care to note, however, that the affective structures we see in Dominican literature are not responses to Trujillo. Rather, Méndez traces Dominican affect back to the “anxieties of self-representation” already existing in the Dominican Republic during the time of Pedro Henríquez Ureña’s writing.
- 4 For more on Dominican pessimism’s rejection of U.S. imperialism, see López 2008.
- 5 Pedro L. San Miguel (2005) alternatively names this aesthetic trend in Dominican literature “tragic narration.”
- 6 It is important to note as well that Dominican pessimism filtered down to people’s conceptions of themselves (Amarante 2016). Pessimism became not just a dystopian outlook shared by the elite class, predicated upon a sense of disgust toward Black and poor bodies. It also became an internalization of the racist and classist norms of Spencerian thinking, reproduced in an everyday attitude of despair.
- 7 For more on the racial construction of Dominican migrants to the United States, see Candelario 2007. For more on the racial constructions of Dominican migrants to Puerto Rico, see Reyes-Santos 2015.
- 8 M. Karen Jaime has written about Indiana’s video “Da pa’ lo’ do’,” in which she appears as the Virgin Mary in brownface. Although the use of blackface and brownface is always problematic, Jaime (2015: 91–92) does make a compelling argument that Indiana’s brownface is like drag because “she challenges the ways Catholicism functions as a form of whitening within the Dominican Republic dating back to the sixteenth century during the Spanish colonial era by recodifying the Blessed Virgin Mary as brown/black.” For more on the history of brownface and blackface in the Dominican Republic and how Indiana disrupts its typical use, see Jaime 2015.
- 9 Lugones’s (2007) theory of “the coloniality of gender” is an expansion of Anibal Quijano’s (2000) theory of the “coloniality of power.” Quijano’s work analyzes the legacy of colonialism in the everyday lives of Latin Americans. Lugones applies a feminist lens to this work to further argue that the imposition of a racialized system of binary gender is one such colonial legacy.
- 10 Indiana has also engaged in other forms of performance art at art festivals and on university campuses. For more on these, see Rivera-Velázquez 2007.
- 11 Dominican merengue artist Juan Luis Guerra is perhaps most famous for using merengue to take up political themes. For more on the history of merengue, see Sellers 2004.
- 12 While Indiana is one of the most visible queer musical figures in the Dominican Republic, she is not the only one. For information on Andy Peña, a merengue turned bachata singer, see Méndez 2011. For information on La Delfi, a gay *música urbana* artist, see Hutchinson 2016. For information on *merengue típico*, a traditional form of merengue in which women accordionists take on somewhat masculine gender roles, see Hutchinson 2008.

- 13 Indiana openly acknowledges Lennox as one of her inspirations in 2010's *El Juidero* with a Spanish-language remake of "Sweet Dreams."
- 14 All translations of *La Mucama de Omicunlé* are taken from Achy Obejas's English translation (Indiana 2018).
- 15 For more on the historical construction of Dominicaness in opposition to Haitian Blackness, as well as its contemporary manifestations, see Mayes 2014 and Torres-Saillant 2000.
- 16 For more on Indiana's use of physical violence to highlight the traumas of Dominican history, see De Maeseneer and Bustamante 2013.
- 17 For more on the most recent iteration of anti-Haitian and anti-Black sentiment in the Dominican Republic, see the postscript to García-Peña's (2016) work, which discusses the passing of Law 168-13.
- 18 Acilde/Giorgio's decision can alternatively be read as hedonism. For more on the queer use of hedonism in Indiana's 2003 novel *La estrategia de Chochueca*, see Palacios 2014.

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