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Mariana F. Past
Dickinson College

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missing the boat?

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Signaling Haiti's Role in Vega's "Encancaranublado"

Mariana F. Past

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For more than three decades, critics of Ana Lydia Vega's 1982 short story "Encancaranublado" ("Three Men and a Boat") have wrestled with the question of the boat at the center of the tale.^[1] Often, discussions contemplate whether the Caribbean protagonists—male migrants fleeing adverse economic and political conditions in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba—can most aptly be sited in "the same boat," geopolitically speaking; not in the same boat; or in an indeterminate imagined space somewhere in between. Critical interpretations situate the story in comparative political, consumerist, and literary-cultural terms: for example, Johanna Emmanuelli-Huertas links "Encancaranublado" with the broad hemispheric vision expressed in José Martí's *Nuestra América*, while Magda Graniela underlines the semiotic difference between the boat people featured in the story and the omnipresent pleasure cruise boats that became popular in the 1980s.^[2] Others address the burlesque aspects of Vega's text, along with chaos and cultural flows in the narrative. Pointing to the story's conclusion, wherein the imperiled protagonists are debatably "rescued" by a racist US Coast Guard official and his Puerto Rican helper, Josefa Lago-Graña submits that "Encancaranublado" primarily deals with Puerto Rico's ambiguous status vis-à-vis the United States.^[3] Indeed, most scholars emphasize the story's ironic ending and the issue of Pan-Caribbean identity. The narrative's beginning, anchored in a Haitian frame, is less explicitly discussed.

Previous interrogations of Vega's text, however compelling, literally and figuratively miss the boat. My rereading of "Encancaranublado" underscores the pivotal placement of the Haitian-made boat—a credible synecdoche for the nation and its revolutionary past—within the Caribbean space, lived and imagined. Fresh evidence thus surfaces apropos the problem Myriam Chancy charts in *From Sugar to Revolution*: the disciplinary exclusion of Haiti within the fields of American, Latin American, and Caribbean studies lends evidence that "racist essentialism has demarcated Haitians and other groups of African descent within the Caribbean as subalterns without agency."^[4] Tellingly, although "Encancaranublado" references a wide variety of figures, places, and emblems of Caribbean culture and history, the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) goes unmentioned, almost. In this sense, Vega's writing is not atypical of Puerto Rican literature: other than the poet Luís Palés Matos, relatively few Puerto Rican writers address the western hemisphere's first black republic.

Through the following exploration of Vega's text and related criticism, I argue that understandings of "Encancaranublado," and of Haiti itself, in the broader frame, have been limited to traditional, exclusive notions of nationalism. As happens within literary works by other hispanophone Caribbean writers, such as Freddy Prestol Castillo and Aída Cartagena Portalatín, Haiti's role within the region is fundamental

yet remains fundamentally unrecognized. Because Vega's work has arguably entered the canon of Caribbean letters, the treatment of Haiti and Haitians in "Encancaranublado" and relevant scholarship begs examination all the more. Vega's story resonates with present-day debates over borders, citizenship, and sovereignty, but critical treatment of the text tends to emphasize national identity, postcoloniality, migration patterns, and issues of language and power.

The short narrative under consideration appears in *Encancaranublado, y otros cuentos de naufragio*, Vega's second book, which received the Casa de las Américas award in 1982. With a title presaging linguistic and cultural contestations ahead, Vega's sardonic, carnivalesque text highlights deep-seated tensions among a trio of prototypical emigrants setting forth for Miami from their respective home countries at an unspecified moment in the twentieth century. "Encancaranublado" offhandedly alludes to the bleak economic and political conditions faced by many during the dictatorships of François and Jean-Claude Duvalier (1957–86), the Cuban Revolutionary period (1959–), and the Rafael Trujillo regime (1930–61). Unsurprisingly, the protagonists' tumultuous encounters end in literal and metaphorical shipwreck, nearly killing them all. Throughout the story, what anchors the migrants to life is the Haitian-made craft, signifying present-day economic desperation enmeshed with subjacent, if neglected, rupture and revolution. But before the boat is further considered, a snapshot of the story is warranted.

Anténor, a Haitian man, travels north under calm skies in a self-fashioned boat whose sail is made from the *guayabera* (shirt) off his back. He decides to rescue Diógenes, a Dominican man emerging from the waters, who expresses great distrust toward the Haitian; differences are temporarily overcome through the pair's recognition of their analogous colonial pasts and contemporary difficulties. When Carmelo, a Cuban—initially spewing insults at everyone—is likewise allowed aboard by Anténor, the Dominican sides with the Cuban against the Haitian; together, the two hispanophone subjects attack the Creole speaker. A fierce storm suddenly brews, imperiling all, and the trio is intercepted by an obviously bigoted white Coast Guard officer and his dark-skinned Puerto Rican assistant. The latter offers the men dry clothing down in the hold and forewarns them of hardships in the United States; he also bridges the distance between his Caribbean neighbors and the precarious circumstances awaiting them in their collective destination.

These exaggerated representations provide ample fodder for analysis on many levels, as suggested by Diana Vélez:

Each character is actually a caricature or stereotype of "national traits." . . . Though the three are not, strictly speaking, stock characters, they do have their particularities based on the histories of each nation, figured as these are in the memories of each character. For Anténor, we're given the determining traits of Haiti: the French Creole language, poverty, illiteracy and vodun religion. Anténor's Creole allows the other two to exclude him. They speak excitedly in Spanish while he marks his presence occasionally with a *Mais oui* or a *C'est ça*. [5]

Anténor—whose brief utterances, curiously, appear in standard French instead of the more plausible Creole—is unquestionably displaced in the context of what Vega depicts as a “monopolio cervantino” (15), wherein the language of Cervantes, imposed by Spain, prevails. While the story only indirectly addresses Caribbean colonial history, it is worth noting that the fledgling Dominican nation elected re-annexation to Spain for some twenty years (1822–44) to avoid being recolonized by its western neighbor, perceived then—and too often now—as black “other.” And contemporary legal disputes over Dominican citizenship, which have resulted in the forcible repatriation of thousands of Haitians since June 2015, gloss over the reality that many present-day Dominicans continue to identify themselves as white descendants of Spanish ancestry. [6]

A closer look at Vega’s protagonists reveals a profound distancing from most things Haitian. Though all the migrants suffer “la jodienda de ser antillano, negro y pobre,” and for a brief moment enjoy “el internacionalismo del hambre y la solidaridad del sueño” (14), Anténor arguably remains the blackest man in the boat. [7] Earlier, the Dominican Diógenes calls Anténor “hermanito” (*little* brother; emphasis mine) to establish his own superiority (14), although the vessel “navegaba después de todo bajo bandera haitiana” (15); [8] this is the only direct reference to the boat’s Haitian origins. Later, as the quarrel intensifies, the Cuban Carmelo helps Diógenes assault Anténor and appropriate his carefully prepared supply of provisions (rum, water, cassava, and tobacco), which the Haitian ultimately throws into the ocean to prevent his newly declared enemies from consuming them. What Vega appears to imply is that Anténor’s agency resides in self-denial. But the Haitian’s sabotaging of his precious stores effectively returns the three Caribbean citizens to an equal footing: all will now suffer the same hungry plight in the shark-infested waters.

Another minor but significant aspect of “Encancaranublado” that has gone unremarked is that the Cuban character hails from Santiago, or the Oriente province. This descriptor is revealing in that the economically ambitious migrant embodies the shared history of Haiti and eastern Cuba, where numerous revolutionary movements have begun; indeed, the 1959 Cuban Revolution has been deemed an “echo” of Haiti’s revolution. So while “Encancaranublado” makes no explicit reference to the successful slave revolution, textual implications surrounding Cuba’s Oriente region do point toward it, albeit faintly. If, as Michael J. Dash proposes, the Haitian Revolution is a “floating signifier” that twentieth-century Caribbean writers seek to pin down to their own ends, within Vega’s story Haiti and its history remain a submerged signifier, suppressed and disavowed (to borrow Sibylle Fischer’s words). [9]

Margaret Carson’s exploration of the “postcolonial Caribbean” presence in “Encancaranublado” examines the linguistic violence committed against Anténor as a metaphor for Dominican political discourse toward Haiti. [10] In the story, when insults fly, Diógenes calls Anténor “madamo,” a highly pejorative racial epithet transcending the more general—and sometimes even affectionately intended—“prieto” (dark-skinned) hurled by Carmelo; this reflects the historically fraught relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Anténor states defensively, while removing water from the boat, “Pa que [Diógenes] se acuerde que los invadimos tres veces” (16). [11] In response, Diógenes declares, “Trujillo tenía razón,” implying that the notorious dictator was justified in ordering the execution of over

fifteen thousand Haitian laborers during the 1937 tragedy known as the “Parsley massacre.”^[12] Richard Turits maintains that these racial tensions were hardly a cause; rather, they were created and reinforced by the genocide.^[13] In any case, Carson may be the sole critic of “Encancaranublado” to acknowledge that although each migrant man took to the ocean independently, only Anténor’s boat has “survived the ocean’s vicissitudes.”^[14]

Haitian-Dominican relations aside, it is striking that scholars addressing Vega’s text have failed to remark that the vessel in question was made by the Haitian, literally and figuratively. If one accepts that Vega’s three protagonists are in the same metaphorical boat at the story’s end, thanks to the ignorant, racist attitudes of the Coast Guard captain who instantly lumps them together into the category of undesirable, dark-skinned foreigner, one cannot deny that they begin their travels in the same boat—which is Haitian-made—and that they owe their lives to its construction. It should not be neglected that Anténor constructed the boat under duress, at great sacrifice, and subsequently saved his Caribbean compatriots from near-certain death. That the fragile craft subsequently shipwrecks as a result of the trio’s fierce dispute (combined with bad weather) evokes the position of Haiti itself.

In a larger, historical framework, given the catalyzing effects of the Haitian Revolution within the Latin American region, Caribbean citizens at home and abroad are similarly indebted to Haiti. As David Geggus observes in *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*, “The slave uprising that began in August 1791 and transformed the immensely wealthy colony [of Saint-Domingue] was probably the largest and most dramatically successful one there has ever been. . . . Haiti became Latin America’s first independent country, the first modern state in the Tropics.”^[15] Indeed, the newly named republic of Haiti instantly became a powerful symbol of black freedom and imperialism, and the victory won by Saint-Domingue’s slaves has surfaced at critical points in Latin American history as a useful paradigm—if not an exact blueprint—for later independence movements. Significantly, the celebrated South American liberator Simón Bolívar was cautious about connecting himself to Haiti; he hesitated to recognize the new black republic and the fact that Alexandre Pétion afforded him considerable military and economic support toward his own revolutionary efforts. So while the notion of *naufragio* (shipwreck) applies in literal terms to the fate of Anténor’s boat in Vega’s story, the metaphor easily extends to the Haitian Revolution, both in the narrative and in the broader frame: a shared revolutionary past, looming large, that is frequently repressed in the Latin American imaginary, where creolophone Haiti is rarely imagined as being in the same, colonially oppressed boat.

In spite of these shortcomings, “Encancaranublado” evinces and eviscerates global and local discourses surrounding its three Caribbean subjects’ stereotyped backgrounds, effectively interrogating notions of “difference” and “otherness” in South-South and North-South relationships. Succinctly but powerfully, Vega explicitly calls on “nuestros bilingües lectores” (20) to continue the struggle against racism and human rights abuses worldwide.^[16] This signals practical, compelling questions: How might Vega’s narrative admonishment be productively translated into action, within the sphere of Caribbean, Latin American, and American studies and beyond? Can these fields be further expanded linguistically and geographically to incorporate important perspectives that have long existed, but tend to stay

submerged? Despite considerable attention brought to the 2004 bicentennial of the Haitian Revolution and the devastating January 2010 earthquake, Haiti too often remains a floating signifier, adrift and at risk. Contemporary readers and scholars must continue defying conventional attempts to apprehend Caribbean nations and their histories through myopic approaches, because all Americans are coterminous travelers and should all be in the same boat.

Mariana F. Past is associate professor of Spanish and Latin American, Latino, and Caribbean studies at Dickinson College and currently chairs the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. She is currently cotranslating, with Benjamin Hebblethwaite, Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Ti difé boulé sou istoua Ayiti* (1977) from Haitian Creole to English.

[1] Ana Lydia Vega, "Encancaranublado," in *Encancaranublado, y otros cuentos de naufragio* (1982; repr., Hato Rey, Puerto Rico: Antillana, 1990), 13–20; hereafter cited in the text. The title of the book and the story at hand is a tongue-twister, simultaneously playing on the Spanish words *encantado* (enchanted) and *nublado* (cloudy).

[2] Johanna Emmanuelli-Huertas, "Antillanos, náufragos, míseros y trashumantes: A un siglo del toque de queda de Martí," *Confluencia* 3, no. 1(1987): 101–4; Magda Graniela, "Semiótica del espacio en 'Encancaranublado' de Ana Lydia Vega," *PALARA: Publication of the Afro-Latin/Romance Association* 9 (2005): 42–46.

[3] Josefa Lago-Graña, "El Caribe, identidad y nación en 'Encancaranublado' de Ana Lydia Vega," *Diáspora*, no. 11 (2001): 52–58.

[4] Myriam J. A. Chancy, *From Sugar to Revolution: Women's Visions of Haiti, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), xv.

[5] Diana Vélez, "We Are (Not) in This Together: The Caribbean Imaginary in 'Encancaranublado' by Ana Lydia Vega," *Callaloo* 17, no. 3 (1994): 830.

[6] On 23 September 2013, the Dominican Republic Constitutional Tribunal ruled to strip citizenship from over two hundred thousand of its citizens. This law, which was internationally condemned, prompted the organization of a widespread protest group, [¡Eso no se hace!](#) (You Can't Do That!).

[7] "The bullshit of being Antillean, black, and poor"; "the internationalism of hunger and the solidarity of dreams."

[8] "Sailed in any case under a Haitian flag."

[9] See J. Michael Dash, “Postcolonialism and the French Caribbean” (lecture, Duke University, Durham, NC, 27 September 2002); Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

[10] See Margaret Carson, “El Caribe postcolonial en ‘Encancaranublado’ de Ana Lydia Vega,” *LL Journal* 4, no. 2 (2009), ojs.gc.cuny.edu/index.php/lljournal/article/view/538/576.

[11] “So [Diógenes] remembers that we invaded them three times.” Haiti thrice invaded the Dominican Republic (1844, 1849, and 1855) in an ostensible effort to unify the island and abolish slavery throughout; in any case, the binary of influence was reversed during the twentieth century, with the Dominican Republic assuming the role of employer to thousands upon thousands of Haitian laborers in the sugar-cane cutting industry.

[12] Carson, “El Caribe postcolonial.”

[13] See Richard Lee Turits, “A World Destroyed, a Nation Imposed: The 1937 Haitian Massacre in the Dominican Republic,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82, no. 3 (2002): 589–636.

[14] Carson, “El Caribe postcolonial.”

[15] David Patrick Geggus, *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), vii.

[16] “Our bilingual readers.”

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