Years ago, I remember reading a moving story about a ship of European immigrants leaving for America, early in the nineteenth century. Some members of the soon-to-be-divided families had brought balls of string to the docks, and as their departing loved ones went on board, they were given an end to hold. The ship sailed off, and the families on shore played out string until their spools ran out, then they let go. Out of sight already, the immigrants on deck knew—as the strings went taut—that this was their last actual connection with their past. They wound up the loose ends, creating new balls to take with them to America.

I remember being flooded with sadness at this plaintive and last-ditch effort to hold on. Those were the days before telephones or e-mail, before cheap flights and traffic back and forth allowed people to stay in touch. I also found myself wondering what the new immigrants did with that ball of string. Did they use it to tie up their first tomato plants or string beans in a garden? Did they braid pieces together to make a strong rope for a clothesline? Did they keep the ball in a drawer to be discovered some future day by their grandchildren, who would ask, “What is this for?”

It is the very question that I imagine a reader of this book, Caribbean Connections: The Dominican Republic, might ask. What is this book for? As the writer of its foreword, I feel compelled in some way to answer that question.

My first response is to urge you to read on. Hold tight to the string of print, and slowly spool the stories, the poems, the essays, the testimonials into yourself, and you will discover something of what it means to be an immigrant who both leaves and also, as the Brazilian musician and poet Caetano Veloso tells us, immediately begins preparing the hour of return. (No me estoy yendo: estoy preparando la hora de volver.)

More specifically, you will discover what it means to be a Dominican immigrant, bringing to the United States of America a rich and
complicated history, a set of assumptions, expectations, dreams and fears. You will discover what it means to be a Dominican in *Nueva York* as opposed to Rhode Island or South Florida, what it means to carry another world inside you until it feels so heavy you have to go back on one of those cheap flights or call home because otherwise your heart will split from *tristeza y desesperación*.

You will discover what it means to be a child of these Dominicans, to find balls of string knotting up your spanking-new U.S.A. skein of ideas about who you are. To have new names and responses for situations the old people used to live with or emigrate from: racism, sexism, poverty. To be haunted with dark moments of your island history: dictatorships that victimized or compromised your kin; Marine occupations that taught them to buckle under; economic situations that forced them to become huddled masses yearning to breathe free, arriving, not from Europe in the holds of ships, but on *yolas* and cheap flights with and without visas to Miami, *Nueva York*, Rhode Island, Puerto Rico.

You will discover what it means to travel that trail of tears and that trail of blood, carrying in your *sub-consciencia* the ones you left behind, the ones you want to forget, your Haitian brothers and sisters, massacres and injustices that *los viejos* many times don't want to talk about.

You will discover a diverse population of hyphenated people who know that the only victims are not the ones left behind in poverty or *compromisos*, but their counterparts here, stuck in substandard housing, with low-paying or no jobs, walking *las calles*, injecting, sniffing up, peddling, *porque que se va hacer* when the dream of America ends up as ashes in the mouths of those too dark, too poor, too hopeless and desperate to be able to turn the green of their cards into the cash of survival.

You will also discover the warmth and inventiveness of a complex collection of people, *de todos colores* and backgrounds, whose energy is boundless, who have not lost faith, who can laugh at themselves and cleverly invent the stories, the jokes, the lyrics to make meaning of experience,
sin pelos en la lengua; a people with a rhythm they can’t shake, who give voice to it in their music and poetry, in merengues, bachatas; a people who can cook up la bandera dominicana wherever you put them, and out of the bottomless olla of their generosity find enough to serve whoever shows up; a people whose young, up-and-coming generaciones are filling the airwaves and libraries and universities and boardrooms of the U.S.A. and of la República with their talent, their activism, their desire to make a difference.

As you read, you will enter into understanding of one of the fastest-growing Latino population groups in America, los quisqueyanos, as the Dominicans affectionately refer to themselves, from Quisqueya, a pre-conquest name for the island. (The native Taínos also called the island Haiti, “the mountainous country,” both names used interchangeably, before Europeans conquered, divided, and renamed it.) You will also partake of a process, an ongoing conversation by voices gathered here, trying to make sense of what it means to be this new kind of immigrant. For the old model no longer applies, the one in which the carriers of balls of string never went back to their villages, but severed themselves completely from their pasts. These days, we stay in touch; we do not disconnect; the balls of string play out and out. This new model of immigration is ultimately about connections, and the only string long enough to stretch across those distances is the string of our words, our stories, our conversations.

And so you, reader, are now holding one end of a string of many voices. I can’t help but hope in these times of division and wars and rumors of wars, that the string played out in books such as this one might indeed provide lifelines. In place of glib sound bites and the violence of chauvinistically severing connections, dividing people into us and them, we can posit connection. By reading, by listening, by speaking in turn, we can create a string of understanding that circles the world. ✨

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