

# What I Learned About the Diaspora Since I’ve Moved to RD

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Like many in the diaspora, I’ve spent the better part of my life feeling like a tree without roots. So in 2012 when I decided to move back to the motherland, I went giddily, thinking I’d magically regrow roots the second I arrived—that I’d finally belong somewhere. I secured a yearlong volunteer position at a foreign-run NGO in Cabarete and packed my bags. Among the “summery” clothes, books, and cariñitos my family was sending with me to Santo Domingo, I inadvertently packed a whole lot of assumptions and pre-conceived notions. I thought I would come to Dominican Republic to serve and give back to the community, but really in the four years I have lived here I have done nothing more important than learn.

One of the hardest lessons to swallow was learning to stop the knee-jerk reaction I had to being called a gringa. Don't get me wrong, yo no soy vendepatria and my cédula says dominicana next to nacionalidad but I will never cease to be a dominico-americana. And acknowledging that at every turn is important. Though I live in RD and plan to stay here for the rest of my life, I continue to benefit from American privilege. I have a solid network in the US, am natively bilingual, and own one of the most powerful passports in the world. I have reaped the benefits of being a dual citizen. Benefits that were ensured through the harvest of Empire, from the systematic disenfranchisement of my own people. Several US occupations, military interventions, and foreign policies that have protected the imperialistic and capitalist interests of the US in the Dominican Republic have solidified those privileges. And as a diasporic Dominican, I have simultaneously suffered under these circumstances and benefited from them. Many of my compatriotas have only suffered them. So now, when people call me a gringa, I simply smile and gently correct them, “Yo no soy gringa, soy dominico-americana.”

Accepting the duality of my identity also meant learning to listen. Years away from my home, being essentially raised elsewhere meant that I had preconceived ideas of how to go about creating change in RD. As a result, much of my initial work was met with indifference at best and hostility at worst. Many questioned my dominicanidad, my credentials—and with time I’ve come to understand why. In a global context, Americans are taught that we are the default, that our way is the best way and our foreign policy makes sure the world knows it. And it means that when we go to bat for marginalized communities in the Global South, that we often must do the work of understanding the repercussions not only of our foreign policy and history, but of cultural imperialism. We do not exist in a vacuum, and when I was trying to do grassroots work in my community in the Dominican Republic, I was doing it without local input, and I had set myself up to fail. Whenever possible in my work in Cabarete I center local, non-diasporic voices, the ones that truly know their communities and have the most stake in it all. I act as a liaison between Dominican locals and foreign tourists and expats. I fight *with* and for my people on issues that concern them, like beach access, quality of life and racism. In the long run, I have found that it has helped to have stood on their same side when the time has come that we’ve ended up with opposing view points on issues that are important to me, like LGBTQ rights or the Dominico-Haitian immigration debate. Now, I’m not seen simply as a gringa who dropped into the middle of a conversation determined to shout the loudest. Now, when I talk folks listen, because there is a mutual respect, and I defer to the locals who are already doing the work I want to support.

In activist circles in the United States, we are taught to elevate marginalized voices, to allow members of oppressed communities to speak for themselves, to listen more than we speak. During that time, I learned the loudness of silence and how it meant complicity in acts of violence—and now that I live here, I have felt it. I have seen the diaspora focus on issues that are considered somewhat more “sexy” than battling against a foreign corporation trying to open a mine on protected land, I have heard the diaspora’s silence as we lose access to our beaches along the coast of our beautiful island. I have understood the bitterness many Dominicans feel against the diaspora, because after four years of seeing the selective outrage, I too have started to feel it. And it’s helped me better understand my role as I attempt to navigate grassroots organizing as a Dominican-American. I’ve learned to tread gently, to accept that I have much to learn and unlearn, to understand that sometimes my voice isn’t necessary and signal boosting local voices is just as valuable if not more so. I have truly come to comprehend Malcom X’s words when he said” “Don’t be in a hurry to condemn because he doesn’t do what you do or think as you think or as fast. There was a time when you didn’t know what you know today.”

Ultimately, not everyone has the privilege of being able to pack up all of their things and move back to the Dominican Republic even for a short period of time—but it has been good for my soul. Four years later, and the motherland never ceases to amaze me or teach me new things and there are lessons I think we could all stand to learn.


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**Mechi Annais Estévez Cruz**

Mechi is an Afro-indigenous, queer Dominicana. Oriunda de Nueva York, she moved "back" to the Dominican Republic where she now resides permanently. She is a writer, a language teacher, a community organizer, and an activist. Mechi feels passionately about decolonizing travel, discussing diasporic privilege, and dismantling systems of oppression. After moving to Cabarete, she was so dismayed by the lack of knowledge of ethical travel practices, the treatment of local Cabaretenses by foreigners and diasporic Dominicans, and the realization that tourism can never be sustainable, that she launched her business Una Vaina Bien Spanish to use language instruction as a vehicle for teaching ethical travel tips to visitors to try to mitigate the negative impacts.

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