

ECOTONES CONFERENCE

Post/Colonial Ports: Place and Nonplace in the Ecotone



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THE PORT OF SANTO DOMINGO: TIDAL DEBRIS, METAL POLLUTION, AND THE PERILS OF POVERTY WHERE THE CARIBBEAN MEETS THE OZAMA

Of all Caribbean port cities, Santo Domingo is perhaps the most vulnerable to climate change impacts. Its port, the site of the New World's first European capital, is formed by the broad mouth of the Ozama, a tidal river subject to frequent flooding and coastal erosion from storm surges growing ever stronger due to climate change. The city's poorest, most marginalized populations, about 400,000 people pushed by rapid urbanization to the most vulnerable riverside land, live in substandard housing in overcrowded neighborhoods like La Ciénaga, La Barquita, and Guachupita, precariously built just above port facilities undergoing deep transformations to allow for cruise-ship docking. Persistent flooding threatens lives and property and brings residents into dangerous contact with the rivers' highly polluted waters, bearing harmful bacteria and toxic concentrations of metals like thallium. The Dominican poor living along the Ozama are—the World Bank has concluded—among the world's most at risk of being affected by climate change. Highly threatened by rising sea levels and expected to undergo far-reaching transformations by 2050 due to climate change, the quandaries of the port of Santo Domingo can serve as a point of entry into the limits of environmental equality under current regional legislation and market forces—and can highlight the role of writers, artists and scholars in addressing climate change and environmental justice concerns that have often been ignored or neglected by government. This analysis, which builds upon Bernardo Vega's 2011 history, *Me lo contó el Ozama (As the Ozama Told Me, Santo Domingo: Fundación AES, 2011)*, uses a multidisciplinary lens that incorporates science, sociology, anthropology, political ecology, cultural geography, literature, and the arts to examine the environmental quandary of the extremely vulnerable population of a port area confronting the impacts of climate change in the 21st century.