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Nature of Dictatorship

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Rewriting the Trujillato: Collective Trauma, Alternative History, and the Nature of Dictatorship

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Abstract: The era of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, also known as the “Trujillato,” is considered one of the bloodiest in the twentieth century, a fact that made the brutalities committed during his reign and the trauma sustained by his victims amongst the most recurring topics in Dominican novels and triggered the emergence of a separate subgenre under the name “novelas trujillistas.” The literary influence of Trujillo’s regime, which is arguably not comparable to that of any Latin American dictator, was not only confined to novels produced in Spanish, whether inside or outside the Dominican Republic, but also extended to texts written in English by exiles hailing from countries directly affected by the Trujillato. This article will examine a number of texts that can together be regarded as the actual chronicles of Dominican history between 1930 and 1961, thus representing the counter-narrative of the official Trujillato and rewriting this era from the victims’ point of view. This will be done through four novels that offer an alternative history of the Trujillato, with each focusing on a different aspect of not only Trujillo’s dictatorship, but also dictatorship in general: “Los que falsificaron la firma de dios” (“They Forged the Signature of God,” 1993) by Dominican writer Viriato Sención, “La fiesta del chivo” (“The Feast of the Goat,” 2000) by Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa, “In the Time of the Butterflies” (1994) by Dominican-American writer Julia Alvarez, and “The Farming of Bones” (1998) by Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat. State-sponsored religious oppression through the role of the Catholic Church in suppressing dissent, the crushing of opposition through the brutal murder of the Mirabal sisters, and the persecution of minorities through the Parsley Massacre against Haitians are tackled in the texts by Sención, Alvarez, and Danticat, respectively, so that the three of them combined offer an expansive account of the different sorts of atrocities committed by Trujillo while Vargas Llosa’s text focuses on the revenge planned by several of Trujillo’s victims and the motives that drive each of them to take part in his assassination. The article will illustrate the way the four texts constitute a reconstruction not only of those years of Dominican history, but also of literature written about this era which evolved from a propaganda machine confined to the Dominican Republic to a cross-border exposure of a reign of terror. It will also examine the contribution of the selected texts to literary depictions of the Trujillato and the dictator novel in general and the role they played as chronicles of the machinations of dictatorial regimes in Latin America as well as regions that have suffered from similar forms of oppression.

Keywords: Dictator Novel, Trauma, Alternative History, Dictatorship, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, Latin America, Latin America Literature

Introduction

This article examines four novels that tackle the era of the Dominican Republic’s dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. The selected novels focus on different stages and aspects of this era. However, it is possible to trace a common line the four of them follow, one that is almost always linked to dictator novels, especially those written about Latin America, in which the genre originated. This line is comprised of three parts which will be the focus of the article: collective trauma, alternative history, and the nature of dictatorship. After providing a brief introduction about the Trujillo era, the literature that tackles it, and the novels subject of this study, the article will then tackle in detail each of the three components. First, an analysis of the collective trauma of the Dominican people under Trujillo will be done through linking it to personal traumas suffered by his individual victims. Second, the article will move to alternative history, one of the most common reactions to trauma, through examining different attempts by characters in the novel to counter the official discourse that aimed at embellishing the image of the regime. Third, the four novels will be analyzed as treatises of the nature of dictatorship in the sense they do not only give insight into the brutalities of Trujillo’s regime, but also offer a panoramic view of the mechanisms of dictatorship in general.

Although Latin America had witnessed several of the twentieth century's most brutal dictatorships, Trujillo's era, known as the "Trujillato," is arguably unmatched by any of its counterparts in the region. For more than thirty years, Trujillo controlled all aspects of life in the Dominican Republic. He had unlimited control over the media, security forces, the legal system, the political scene, and members of his government as well as the details of citizens' private lives ranging from their mobility rights inside or outside the country to the obligation of posting his portrait in every household. He renamed cities and streets after himself and his family members and ran the country like a private estate. His brutal repression of opposition resulted in innumerable deaths, whether through direct killing or torture, so that it was believed that there was not a family in the Dominican Republic that did not lose at least one person to Trujillo's regime.

The remarkably chilling nature of the atrocities committed during the Trujillato and the lasting impact they left on the Dominican psyche even decades after his death set Trujillo apart from the most notorious of Latin American dictators. This is clearly demonstrated in the literature written about the Trujillato, not only based on the number of texts that tackled this era, but also the emergence of a separate subgenre of the dictator novel that has been dominating the Dominican literary scene since Trujillo's assassination in 1961: the "novelas trujillistas" (Gallego Cuiñas and Efraín 2008, 415). Those novels reflect an obsession with the Trujillo era that does not seem to have subsided and that is also demonstrated in other literary works that while not written about the Trujillato are never able to avoid mentioning it in some way or another. "Probablemente no hay una sola obra literaria narrativa dominicana escrita a partir de los treinta que, pretendiendo un realismo mínimo, no aluda o al mismo Trujillo o a las varias manifestaciones de stupider [There is probably not one single Dominican literary narrative written following those thirty years and which exhibits a minimum level of realism that does not allude to Trujillo or the manifestations of his power.]" (Larson 1988, 90).

Despite the magnitude of the literary corpus exposing the brutality of the Trujillo era, four specific novels can be regarded as the actual chronicles of Dominican history between 1930 and 1961 since they offer literary adaptations of different phases of the Trujillo era through depicting the major incidents that characterized his dictatorship. *The Farming of Bones* (1998) by Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat tells the story of the 1937 Parsley Massacre against Haitians living in Dominican border towns. *In The Time of the Butterflies* (1994) by Dominican-American writer Julia Alvarez depicts the brutal murder of the Mirabal sisters who formed an underground resistance group to topple Trujillo's regime. *La fiesta del chivo* (*The Feast of the Goat*, 2000) by Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa follows the assassination plot against Trujillo and its repercussions. *Los que falsificaron la firma de dios* (*They Forged the Signature of God* 1993) by Dominican writer Viriato Sención focuses on the reinstatement of a false democracy under Trujillo's successor Joaquín Balaguer. Together, the four novels constitute a panorama of the Trujillato that combines the most infamous features of his rule as well as dictatorships in general. These include persecution of minorities, brutal elimination of opposition, abuse of power, the cult of personality, the patriarchal discourse, flagrant violations of human and women rights, and the complicity of religious institutions. By doing so, the texts engage in a process of reconstructing the history of the Trujillato, thus offering an alternative history of the Dominican Republic and replacing the official voice with the collective memory created by the stories of the victims, such as Amabelle in *Farming*, the Mirabal sisters in *Butterflies*, Trujillo's assassins in *Feast*, and Antonio Bell in *Forged*.

Personal and Collective Trauma

Personal and collective traumas merge to sum up the experience of living under the dictatorship and analyze the triggers of revolutions that blend personal grievances with national aspirations. In fact, characters of the four texts are mainly driven in their attempts to resist the regime by

motives that are personal at their core that in some cases develop into a national cause. This is the case with many of Trujillo's assassins in *Feast*. Army chief José Renè (Pupo) Román, while being one of the regime's most senior officials, is willing to sacrifice his position and life, not for want of power nor for democracy but only for revenge: "It was rancor, the accumulated effect of the infinite offenses to which Trujillo had subjected him" (Vargas Llosa 2001, 365). Antonio de la Maza and Juan Tomàs Díaz seek revenge for the murder of Antonio's brother Octavio while Amado García Guerrero wants to assuage his sense of guilt for murdering his fiancée's brother upon Trujillo's order.

Pedro Livio provides a peculiar mixture between the personal and the national with his motive for killing Trujillo being the death of the Mirabal sisters. While Pedro asserts that the Mirabal sisters and not justice are the reason for his decision to assassinate Trujillo, the two are actually inseparable. While the murder of the Mirabal sisters does not affect Pedro personally, the hatred he develops for Trujillo as a result drives him to take part in his assassination. His personal shock at the fate the Mirabals suffered for their national struggle makes his motive both personal and national. Antonio Imbert Barrera and Salvador Estrella Sadhalà, on the other hand, are driven by a patriotic desire to end the dictatorship. For both of them, eliminating the dictatorship is not possible without the elimination of the dictator. Urania's inability to retaliate against Trujillo makes her direct her vengeance against the original cause of her trauma—her father. Her return to the Dominican Republic after thirty-six years in exile comes in fulfillment of her pledge to herself at the moment Trujillo raped her: "I thought I had to clench my teeth and let him do whatever he wanted, so I could go on living and take my revenge on Papa one day" (Vargas Llosa 2001, 459).

The death of Antonio Bell's father is the reason for his plan to overthrow Trujillo, or Tirano as he is named in *Forged*. Antonio's decision stems from "his need for assurance that his father's death had not been in vain" (Sencion 1995, 70). Personal trauma for one generation becomes the collective trauma of the following ones. While in *Farming* Amabelle witnesses the massacre in which she loses her lover Sebastien and many fellow Haitians, her personal trauma is transformed into a collective tragedy for the Mirabal sisters as the murder of thousands of Haitians become an eye-opener for Patria Mirabal: "My family had not been personally hurt by Trujillo... But others had been suffering great losses... thousands of Haitians massacred at the border, making the river, they say, still run red" (Alvarez 1994, 53). Personal offences are, however, still involved in the Mirabals' case, starting from Minerva's schoolmate who becomes Trujillo's mistress until the moment Trujillo attempts to molest her.

Amabelle's decision to preserve Sebastien's memory constitutes a conscious attempt to turn her own personal trauma into a collective one where Sebastien is no longer only her lover, but also a victim of the dictatorship. It is through such an attempt that the suffering of individual Haitians turns into an appalling genocide that later influences revolutionaries such as the Mirabal sisters exactly like the Mirabal sisters' death brings about Trujillo's end. That is why, apart from Sebastien, Amabelle focuses on minute details that together weave a complete canvas of the trauma. She does that through "collecting the accidental moments—a nameless young woman's corpse rolling off a wagon pulled by oxen, a sandal dropping from a corpse hung in a tree, an empty black dress floating in the river before a shot rings out" (Strehle 2003, 28–9). For Strehle, romance starts the trauma in Amabelle's case for it is through her love for Sebastien and grief over his loss that she decides to immortalize the trauma of an entire people. The personalization of the trauma is also clear in the marks the massacre leaves on Amabelle and the bodies of surviving Haitians. These marks serve as a constant reminder of the pain each individual suffers. The difference in affected bodily parts, the intensity of the pain, and the visibility of the scar confirm the personal nature of the trauma: "Now my flesh was simply a map of scars and bruises, a marred testament" (Danticat 2000, 227). Deformities become linked to the massacre in Amabelle's mind whereas in the beginning they were the result of injuries sustained in the cane fields: "wondering whenever I saw people with deformities—anything from a broken nose to

crippled legs—had they been there?” (Danticat 2000, 243). The bodies of the novel’s characters as well as those of other victims of the massacre are “sites of memory” in the way their scars bear testimony to their trauma (Shemak 2002, 85). These scars, Shemak adds, act as “historical markers” (88) that defy attempts at obliterating the memory of the massacre. While the novel is a written testimony of the massacre, the scars function as a “corporeal text,” as Shemak puts it (99).

The title of the novel also endows the trauma with a personal dimension since it points to bones being farmed in a clear reference to the use of machetes in the massacre to give the impression that it was carried out by Dominican farmers defending their lands against Haitian encroachment and not the army. There is, hence, focus on the individual pain each victim feels as his or her body is treated like cane stalks during harvest time. Heather Hewett notes that the changes which happen to Amabelle’s body are strongly tied to her emotional trauma: “Her suffering includes physical as well as emotional pain, and the daily experience of living in a changed body is in many ways what makes her unable to forget the past... Focusing on Amabelle’s experience of her body enables us to better understand the ways in which her inner transformation is tied to her physical one” (Hewett 2006, 127–28). Amabelle also links her wounds to the loss of Sebastien. The wounds Amabelle sustains at the massacre correspond in her mind to the deeper wound of losing Sebastien. That is why she is reminded of the comfort he used to give to the now wounded parts of her body. Her bodily pain therefore becomes a result of the presence of wounds and the absence of Sebastien’s caresses, both merging to constitute Amabelle’s trauma.

Collective trauma sometimes reverts to the personal sphere when its effect on the public starts subsiding or the reason for it no longer persists, which is the case with Dedè Mirabal. Being the only surviving sister of the four, Dedè seems to overlook the national impact of her sisters’ life and death and focuses instead on the personal tragedy she is destined to live. Dedè’s belief that collective trauma gradually loses its influence, especially with generations that do not go through similar kinds of suffering, is demonstrated when she hears two young women flippantly discussing the dictatorship. Dedè believes that the struggle of her sisters is lost to young generations who treat the Mirabals as fictional characters. For Dedè, no matter how collective the trauma becomes, the personal side to it remains the most painful: “For the ones like Dedè...the sacrifice is measured in the private grief that cannot be assuaged” (Gómez Vega 2004, 105). For this reason, when Dedè reminisces about her sisters, she does not glorify their martyrdom. Instead she contemplates the personal items found next to their bodies such as the powder puff, the pocket mirror, the leather purse, and the nylon underwear (Alvarez 1994, 314–15). Even though they have become the Butterflies in collective memory, as they were codenamed, Minerva, Patria, and Maria Theresa Mirabal remain Dedè’s sisters and the tragedy remains one that afflicted her and her family. However, this does not affect her determination to preserve the story of their struggle, like Amabelle does, and to take her trauma to the communal level.

A similar form of trauma drives the church, known for its support of Trujillo’s regime, to change sides and join the resistance even if this shift only took place in the last year of Trujillo’s regime, that is following thirty years of what seemed like an invincible alliance. The church is portrayed as Trujillo’s staunchest ally and a partner to several of his crimes. The words of the Papal Nuncio in *Forging* demonstrate how the church helps the regime in suppressing any form of dissent: “[T]he Holy Father is concerned about the possibility that an isolated factor...an act of madness on the part of a simple seminarian...might result in the deterioration of the traditionally good relations between the government and the church” (Senciòn 1995, 92). This pledge of allegiance to Trujillo’s regime sheds light on the church’s policy of sacrificing its seminarians instead of protecting them. This is seen in the way the priests denounce Antonio Bell and are willing to send him to his death in order to not compromise their relationship with the state. Andrew B. Wolff explains the complex relationship between the church and Trujillo’s

government: “[T]he priests actively work to expand their power within a system that could just as easily repress them” (2006, 222). The church, therefore, is aware that Trujillo is a dictator, but allying with him is the only way it can protect itself from being among his victims while keeping a semblance of authority within the limits the regime allows.

The conservatism associated with autocracies and religious institutions makes this alliance smoother as both discourage any attempt at rebellion. Antonio Bell envisions the punishment for his dissent as a mixture of the regime’s brutality and the church’s historical retaliation against dissidents in a way that is reminiscent of the Middle Ages and the Spanish Inquisition, which reveals the church’s traditional role in supporting tyranny: “He would imagine that they were tying him up, hanging him, putting him in a straitjacket, and sending him to Tirano’s dungeons; that they were burning him as a heretic in a roaring bonfire, cutting him up like a side of beef, boiling him, feeding him to the dogs” (Senciòn 1995, 105). The church’s complicity with Trujillo’s regime is taken to another level in *Butterflies*. The nuns allow Trujillo to choose mistresses from the Catholic boarding school to which the Mirabal sisters go, and receive gifts in return for their cooperation and silence. This is the case of Lina Lovatòn, Minerva Mirabal’s schoolmate and one of the major reasons for her awakening. Corruption of the church at the time was no secret and that is why Minerva states as common knowledge that a large number of priests are “on double payroll” (Alvarez 1994, 52).

The unexpected rebellion of the church takes place after thirty years of Trujillo’s rule and is portrayed in *Butterflies* to be the result of the church’s inability to maintain the false position of the protector of its flock. When dissidents are slaughtered right next to a religious retreat in the mountains, the passivity of the church toward the regime’s violations is shown in the way priests instruct their flock at the retreat to hide and pray. Ibis Gomèz Vega points to the symbolism of the “most sheltered corner” in which the priests gather worshippers upon the start of the shootings (Alvarez 1994, 161). This corner, she argues, symbolizes the position of the church throughout Trujillo’s regime and which only changes at that moment: “As the people gathered in the room to pray, the revolution rages outside. The outside world barges in and forces itself on the people who had been gathered by their priest ‘in the most sheltered corner’” (Gomèz Vega 2004, 98).

In fact, the revolutionary movement started by the Mirabal sisters is named June 14 after the day on which the church and Patria Mirabal decide to face the same fate as the revolutionaries killed outside the retreat house: “I couldn’t believe this was the same Padre de Jesús talking who several months back hadn’t known his faith from his fear! But then again, here in that little room was the same Patria Mercedes, who wouldn’t hurt a butterfly, shouting, ‘Amen to the revolution’” (Alvarez 1994, 163–64). When the church loses the only privilege it enjoyed under Trujillo—safety—it breaks away from the regime and joins the revolution. Priests are as traumatized as worshippers when directly faced with the regime’s brutality and upon realizing that the church cannot really provide protection. The role the nuns from Santo Domingo Academy play in helping Urania escape to the United States following her rape by Trujillo constitutes a return of this protection, thus part of the rebellion.

Being a religious woman, Patria’s awakening to the truth about Trujillo’s regime happens through the church with their epiphany taking place at the same moment and for similar reasons. While the church is disillusioned in its ability to protect its innocent, unpoliticized flock, Patria is disillusioned in the church’s ability to follow the path of God. After witnessing the murder of revolutionaries, Patria turns to a rebellious discourse, even if one replete with religious terminology. Her rebellion is based on religion in the sense that true faith cannot allow her to see people unjustly killed. Rebellion, therefore, becomes a religious obligation since the perpetrators of those crimes against God’s laws: “And so we were born in the spirit of the vengeful lord, no longer His lambs” (Alvarez 1994, 164). In doing so, Patria rebels against the patriarchal authority of both the church and the regime as she decides to resist the passivity of the first and the tyranny of the second. Together with her other two sisters, they carve a place for women in the resistance

movement against Trujillo, one that is as feminist as it is patriotic. This blend is rendered inevitable since a blatant manifestation of Trujillo's abuse of power was his sexual exploitation of Dominican women. The political awakening of Patria, pregnant at the time she witnesses the massacre, is also linked to her instinct as a mother when she sees a boy the same age as her son being shot by security forces: "His eyes found mine just as the shot hit him square in the back. I saw the wonder on his young face as the life drained out of him, and I thought, Oh my God, he's one of mine!" (Alvarez 1994, 162).

Minerva's political maturity coincides with her menstruation, which takes place right after she learns about the atrocities of Trujillo's regime from her schoolmate Sinita. Minerva describes the change that happens to her body with the word the nuns use to denote menstruation: "complications." This word also refers to her initiation into the ugly reality of the regime she used to regard with extreme veneration. When Minerva announces the start of her "complications," she seems aware that her life is changing on different levels. Puberty here is not linked to a woman's ability to perform the duties traditionally assigned to her, but rather epitomizes a different kind of maturity. For Fernando Valerio Holguín, Alvarez politicizes the female body to highlight the violations to which it was subjected during the Trujillato and resistance to the patriarchal repression these violations represent: "La sangre de la menstruación de Minerva queda vinculada no solo con la violación sino también con la violencia como crítica feminista al patriarcado trujillista [The blood of Minerva's menstruation is connected not only with violation, but also with violence as a feminist critique of Trujillo's patriarchy.]" (Valerio Holguín 1998, 96). This violation of the female body is shown when Trujillo tries to sexually harass Minerva, an act that strengthens the link between resistance and male intrusion.

The blood of Minerva's menstruation can be linked to Urania's blood after Trujillo rapes her, even though the first is more allegorical. Unlike Minerva who slaps Trujillo, Urania does not stop Trujillo from raping her in what seems like the conventional metaphor of the usurped country as a woman and the tyrant as a rapist. Urania is represented as a typical victim of patriarchy on both the personal and the national levels. She is exploited by her father who offers her to Trujillo and by Trujillo who violates her body. The link between the personal and collective dimensions of her trauma is, thus, rendered closer than that of any female protagonist in the four texts. Despite Urania's passivity, her sexual encounter with Trujillo marks an important stage in his downfall. Trujillo's failure to deflower Urania evokes the loss of his powers, especially that in the patriarchal autocracy he established sexual prowess is an important component of authority. Raping Urania with his finger highlights his despair and renders Urania symbolically triumphant: "For a man who used sex as an instrument of power, and whose reputation as a stud was an essential element in his cult of personality, this had been a devastating blow... Urania was therefore indirectly, unwittingly and ironically, one element in a skein of chance and rational causes leading the dictator to his death" (Griffin 2012, 123). Urania is more of a threat to Trujillo than his victim since she bears witness to the collapse of the virility myth Trujillo constructed about himself: "As a witness of the tyrant's impotency, she demystifies the symbolic value attributed to the male sexual organ as the source of power and authority... In other words, with this approach Vargas Llosa attributes a political dimension to gender domination and exposes the fragility of one of the symbolic foundations of patriarchal power" (Polít-Dueñas 2007, 106–7). Although the threat Urania poses is different from that of the Mirabals, both threats are directed against Trujillo's manhood since they come from the segment of society whose subjugation he takes for granted and whose rebellion would compromise his power. That is why bodily violation takes a different turn when the threat becomes uncontrollable in the case of the Mirabal sisters, whose fate could have been faced by Urania had she not escaped to the United States. The fingerprints Dedè finds on her sisters' necks, which prove they were strangled by Trujillo's henchmen, are an example of this violation, similar to Urania's blood and the scars on Amabelle's body.

The response of the Mirabal sisters to violation and the tyranny it epitomizes is the most radical since they are the only indignant female characters that become active agents of change. Because of the role they play in shaking Trujillo's grip on power, their assassination is considered the main trigger of his downfall and their struggle marks the first recognition of female agency in the resistance movement. However, resistance in cultures that are socially and politically dominated by patriarchal values is looked upon differently when women are involved. Part of the fascination stems from the common belief that women are unable to engage in activities seen as "manly." Antonio Imbert, for example, is not aware that women can take part in revolutionary activities until he meets Minerva Mirabal: "until he knew Minerva Mirabal, it had never occurred to him that a woman could dedicate herself to things as manly as planning a revolution" (Vargas Llosa 2001, 162). Through the same logic, the killing of female revolutionaries is thought of as a most horrid act since women are always seen as weak and unable to defend themselves against such a brutal regime. Men presumably can. This is demonstrated in the way the killing of the Mirabal sisters makes Pedro Livio see the regime as more brutal: "Now they were killing defenseless women too, and nobody did a thing about it!" (Vargas Llosa 2001, 287). For Livio, killing women is more of a transgression and this explains why, brutal as he had been for thirty years, Trujillo is particularly punished for killing women. The word "defenseless" is quite ironic in this context since the torture and murder of most of the conspirators, who are all male, prove that all freedom fighters, regardless of their gender, can be defenseless before a ruthless regime.

Official versus Alternative History

Apart from the actual struggle of the Mirabals, Trujillo's assassins, and Antonio Bell—all of whom take actual steps toward ridding the Dominican Republic of Trujillo—the struggle of telling the real story constitutes a different form of resistance. The stories told by survivors of the trauma complete a vital phase in the toppling of dictatorships that ones who sacrificed their lives for the same cause could not: countering the official narrative. George Bornstein (1993) notes that one of the most important characteristics of an authority is possession of a unified text that renders its policies the only valid means of communication between the ruler and the ruled. This text constitutes what Bornstein (1993, 2) calls "authoritative founding documents": "Most modern political states insist on codifying or producing authoritative founding documents like constitutions setting forth their own foundation and their claim to legitimacy."

Having exercised absolute control over all forms of expression in the Dominican Republic, countering Trujillo's official discourse is quite a tenuous task. This is especially the case with atrocities that risked sinking into oblivion owing to the dominance of Trujillo's version of the events. This is clear in Trujillo's justification of the Haitian massacre where he claims that he only stained his hands with blood because the Dominican Republic was fighting an existential battle and was threatened with erasure had Haitians lived: "If I hadn't, the Dominican Republic would not exist today. The entire island would be Haiti, as it was in 1840. The handful of white survivors would be serving the blacks" (Vargas Llosa 2001, 193). The argument of Father Romain, who as part of the church represents the official discourse, echoes Trujillo's racist policies against Haitians and supports their elimination: "Our motherland is Spain; theirs is darkest Africa, you understand? They once came here only to cut sugarcane, but now there are more of them than will ever be cane to cut, you understand? Tell me, does anyone like their house to be flooded with visitors, to the point that the visitors replace their own children?" (Danticat 2000, 260). Father Romain's statement also offers a stark example of brainwashing tactics practiced by the state with his stance completely shifting after his efforts in rescuing Haitians.

According to Gus Puleo, this type of narrative that aims at countering official history is categorized under the genre called "falsa crònica" or false chronicle, which occupies a middle

space between oral tradition and written chronicle. Applying this view to *Butterflies*, Puleo notes that Alvarez challenges the “one-dimensional and univocal record of society” and replaces it with a humanizing account of the tragedy of the Mirabal sisters through a collection of stories that depict the lives of people who suffer under the dictatorship (Puleo 1998, 11). The title of Alvarez’s novel, Puleo argues, is a clear demonstration of the reversal of official history since, unlike many texts written about Trujillo, she does not mention the dictator’s name and instead makes it the era of the Mirabal sisters. This not only offers a different type of history, but also reverts the patriarchal discourse altogether: “the title of Alvarez’s novel becomes a pressure point, as it recalls the time of the sisters, *las mariposas*, to which a relentless machismo would prove to be susceptible” (Puleo 1998, 15). While Dedè is the main storyteller, Alvarez complements her in the mission of having the real story of the Mirabals known. Dedè preserves the sisters’ memory in Dominican collective memory and Alvarez tells the story, which she writes in English, to the rest of the world. They are both, therefore, involved in the same process even if at different levels. Their union for a common cause is a typical example of female solidarity that undermines both machismo and injustice like the sisters did.

Like trauma, the lines between the personal and the national are blurred in storytelling as it becomes a means of assuaging the guilt that haunts the survivors. Storytelling is rendered, in fact, the duty of those survivors as they embark on a persistent endeavor to preserve the memory of those who died. It becomes, in one way or another, the purpose of their survival. That is why after the death of her three sisters, Dedè dedicates all her time to listening to all testimonies from people who saw them in their last hours so that she can tell the whole story. When she is ready, she turns from a listener to a teller and instead of collecting stories becomes the one from whom stories are collected. “How did I turn, I wonder, from being the one who listened to the stories people brought to being the one whom people came to for the story of the Mirabal sisters?” (Alvarez 1994, 312). Dedè’s survival does not place her in a better position than her dead sisters with survival presented as a punishment rather than a blessing, or a different type of death: “This is your martyrdom, Dedè, to be alive without them” (Alvarez 1994, 312). The same applies to Amabelle who should have died with Sebastien had she accompanied him to the border and who can only find comfort through repeating his story. Through a series of sentences that all start with “his name is Sebastien Onius,” Amabelle seems to be conjuring the spirit of a national hero whose martyrdom needs to be engraved in the collective memory of all Haitians both as himself and as one of the many victims of a genocide endangered with erasure: “His name is Sebastien Onius and his story is like a fish with no tail, a dress with no hem, a drop with no fall... His name is Sebastien Onius and his spirit must be inside the water cave at the source of the stream where the cane workers bathe...” (Danticat 2000, 281–82). Amabelle’s invocation personalizes victims of the massacre who have been treated by the regime as a horde of worthless blacks and by their masters as unrecognizable cane cutters. She, thus, saves him from becoming “part of a mass of anonymous blackness” (Subramanian 2013, 50). By doing so, she defies Trujillo who works throughout his life on downplaying the magnitude of the massacre.

Like Dedè, Amabelle is experiencing what Dominick LaCapra calls “fidelity to the trauma,” which stems from the survivor’s insistence on not letting go of the dead: “Part of this feeling may be the melancholic sentiment that, in working through the past in a manner that enables survival or a reengagement in life, one is betraying those who were overwhelmed and consumed by that traumatic past” (LaCapra 2001, 22). Yet unlike Dedè who finds solace in telling her sisters’ story, Amabelle is unable to live with the guilt and is only released from it when she lets herself drown in the river to unite with the dead she believes she has abandoned. She only does that after Trujillo is assassinated as if she can only rest in peace after Sebastien and her other fellow-Haitians are avenged. She punishes herself with living after Sebastien’s death then rewards herself with dying after Trujillo’s death.

Urania Cabral decides to tell the story of her violation a long time after Trujillo’s death and only to female members of her family, thus rendering the narrative hardly subversive and

rendering Urania rather passive in comparison to Dedè and Amabelle especially that her liberation is not the result of a radical action on her part. Urania's battle is quite different from that of Dedè and Amabelle who, despite the personal dimension of their stories, contribute to the formulation of an alternative history of the Trujillato. Urania's story, while exposing Trujillo's brutality, remains personal. Urania could be considered more representative of the majority of Dominicans who for years remained unable to share their stories: "Urania's continued and long-unvoiced terror, so many years after his death, similarly mirrors the legacy of dread and silence sown by his dictatorship" (Griffin 2012, 118). Urania's story is like the stories of her compatriots in the way it contributes to the corpus of testimonials against Trujillo: "The survivors of the Trujillo era lived on, like Urania, wounded and damaged by the regime, and the telling of her story—which is *their* story—accomplishes the political ends of remembrance and condemnation" (Marcus-Delgado 2004, 131).

In this case, the urge to tell the story can in itself become indicative of the will to turn the personal trauma into a collective one, thus taking part in the rewriting process. It is also noteworthy that it is only after Urania tells the story that she declares her willingness to keep communicating with her family after going back to the United States, a sign of reconciliation with the country with which she severs all ties for thirty-six years. Telling the story, therefore, can be seen as the means through which the country can be separated from the dictator as reconnecting with the former follows retaliation against the latter. The testimonials of which Urania's story becomes part are rendered as important as those of Dedè and Amabelle when seen against the magnitude of rhetoric Trujillo managed to construct around himself. Trujillo's was not an official history in the traditional sense since it was not confined to political propaganda through his officials or state-owned press, but extended to all aspects of intellectual life in the Dominican Republic: "El dictador se rodeò de una serie de poetas, narradores, críticos de arte y literatura, historiadores y juristas que fungieron de voceros del régimen e ideólogos [The dictator surrounded himself with a group of poets, narrators, art and literary critics, historians, and lawyers who functioned as spokespeople of the regime and his ideologies.]" (Gallego Cuiñas and Efraín 2008, 420).

Storytelling is multilayered for Senciòn since *They Forged the Signature of God* is also the novel written by Arturo Gonzalo about the assassination of his friend Antonio Bell for plotting to overthrow Trujillo, or Tirano in the novel. The murder is ordered by Tirano's secretary and later successor Dr. Ramos, as Joaquin Balaguer is named in the novel. The novel, which focuses more on Trujillo's legacy, depicts Balaguer's era, presumably the start of democratic transition, as a disguised continuation of Trujillo's. Senciòn's storytelling also takes a different shape since the novel implicating Balaguer in several atrocities, whether during the Trujillo era or while in power, was released during Balaguer's presidency, thus "pitting the author against the dictator" (Wolff 2006, 224). Senciòn compares himself to Arturo Gonzalo in the way he becomes the only author to directly challenge the president by writing a book that uncovers crimes he was extremely cautious in hiding: "Except in the specific case of Arturo Gonzalo, nobody, civilian or military, would be able to prove that Dr. Ramos ever ordered the execution of an opponent" (Senciòn 1995, 245). By making Dr. Ramos order the killing of Gonzalo following the publication of the novel, Senciòn also predicts his own assassination at the hands of Balaguer, thus implicating the president in a crime he had not yet committed and which, at that point, would become too brazen to commit. Balaguer, therefore, is rendered incapable of taking the action he would have normally taken when faced with opposition. The novel, therefore, paralyzes Balaguer in the way it forces him to exercise self-restraint toward Senciòn in order to maintain the democratic image he has worked on projecting since Trujillo's death: "After the publication and rapid dissemination of *Los que falsificaron la firma de Dios*, to kill Senciòn would be to allow him one final act of self-determination and validate Senciòn's 'reading' of his government. It would also lend credibility to the other scandalous claims Senciòn makes throughout his novel. Joaquín Balaguer must contradict Senciòn's prediction in order to maintain the public

appearance of complete control: Balaguer has been ‘checkmated’ by Senciòn. In other words, the dictator has been disempowered by literature” (Wolff 2006, 235).

Because Balaguer was keen on maintaining a semblance of democracy, Senciòn did not meet Gonzalo’s fate. However, the Dominican Republic’s National Fiction Award that the novel received was withdrawn following the president’s denunciation of the author. In other words, Balaguer was in a position where he had to contradict Senciòn, thus indirectly admitting the danger literature poses to authoritarian regimes, including those that attempt to project a different image. It is noteworthy that Senciòn attacks Balaguer with the same weapon he used to construct a false image of Trujillo’s regime—literature. The novel can be considered a direct refutation of the poems and poetic speeches Balaguer wrote about Trujillo’s greatness and the prosperity of the Dominican Republic during his rule.

The ending of the novel, which predicts Balaguer’s death, represents another direct challenge to the dictator. In the final enigmatic scene, which offers a typical example of Latin American magical realism, Balaguer is attacked by a rooster from the offspring of the one that was the reason for the disappearance and death of Antonio Bell’s father, Càstulo Bell. Antonio learns that Càstulo was arrested following a cockfight in which his rooster defeated that of a soldier, Cocolo Cantera, who does not tolerate the public insult. He decides to retaliate against the regime whose brutality and corruption, represented by Cantera, cause his father’s death. He is inspired in his decision by his grandfather Santiago’s story about another cockfight a year after Càstulo’s disappearance in which Juanito, a descendant of the rooster that defeated Càstulo’s rooster, attacks and kills both Cantera and his rooster in another enigmatic scene.

Even though Antonio does not live to see his father avenged, Juanito does. Juanito attacks Balaguer at the end of the novel, revealing that the earlier attack on Cantera was not coincidental: “Santiago interprets Cantera’s death as a sort of supernatural reprisal against the person guilty of his son’s disappearance, hence inviting a mythological interpretation of both this and another significant segment of the text when Juanito resurfaces in the novel’s final scene and again avenges himself, this time attacking the dictator” (Wolff 2006, 237). Juanito, in this sense, represents Antonio’s spirit that cannot rest in peace until it avenges itself not only against Dr. Ramos in person, but also against an entire despotic regime that starts with Tirano and continues with his successor, who for Senciòn is only a “self-serving neo-Trujillist” (Lòpez-Calvo 2005, 81). Antonio, thus, takes revenge on both dictators. The anticipation of Balaguer’s death signals another triumph of the alternative version of history Senciòn is providing in the novel. This time, however, alternative history does not chronicle past events but instead anticipates future ones. Alternative history is, therefore, taking the lead and initiating the action through announcing the death of the dictator and the dictatorship he inherited.

The Nature of Dictatorship

Through Balaguer’s death, Senciòn is not only hopeful about the future of the Dominican Republic, but is also stressing the strong link between the regimes of Trujillo and Balaguer, the latter being only a more subtle extension of the former. He also argues that the dictatorship is not only manifested in the person of Trujillo, but in his legacy as well. While the death of Trujillo was considered a major step toward putting an end to his dictatorship, the fact that Balaguer was one of his closest aids rendered that almost impossible. Dedè’s portrayal of the changes that took place in the Dominican Republic following Trujillo’s death denotes a superficial transition to democracy: “He means the free elections, bad presidents now put in power properly, not by army tanks. He means our country beginning to prosper, Free Zones going up everywhere, the coast a clutter of clubs and resorts. We are now the playground of the Caribbean, who was once its killing fields” (Alvarez 1994, 318).

The posthumous tribute Balaguer pays to the Mirabals and his seeming advocacy of their cause does not deceive Dedè into believing that the Trujillato is entirely over. This could be part

of the reason why she always wonders if it was worth her sisters' sacrifice. Amabelle's suicide after Trujillo's death also casts doubt on the likelihood of a democratic transition, at least not in her life. It is as if the maximum comfort she could get is the assassination of Trujillo, the person who perpetrates her trauma, yet the prevalence of justice seems quite far-fetched. The brutal retaliation against the conspirators in *Feast* demonstrates that dictatorship, no matter how absolute, is never actually one person. Rather, it is an entire system that desperately, and fiercely, tries to rescue whatever is left of its interests following the fall of its head. Antonio Imbert's prediction that getting rid of Trujillo is only a first step that is likely to be followed by grave consequences at first indicates that the actual elimination of a dictatorship is not realized just by killing the dictator: "even if things didn't go well at first, at least a door would be opened" (Vargas Llosa 2001, 154). Balaguer's succession represents a typical post-dictatorial scenario where a senior official from the ousted regime takes over with minimal, if any, transformation toward democracy and a legacy that at times persists for as long as the dictatorship itself. That is why while each of the novels differs in the degree of hope it displays, none of them predicts an instant transition from tyranny to justice. This is not only because they tackle actual historical events, but also since this kind of development, or rather lack of it, is typical of dictatorships in general, not only Trujillo's.

It is in this sense that the novels, while depicting a specific dictatorship, present an analysis of the nature of dictatorship. True, Trujillo's dictatorship is not typical of all dictatorships owing to the fact it is considered the bloodiest in Latin America and one of the bloodiest in the twentieth century, hence representing despotic regimes at their most brutal. Yet, what makes the Trujillato one of the most suitable eras for analyzing modern dictatorships is the fact that it offers an amalgamation of the main characteristics of a dictatorship such as suppression of freedom of expression, brutal elimination of opposition, persecution of minorities, alliance with religious institutions, subjugation of women, and the creation of a fabricated official narrative. The response of Trujillo's victims, which ranges from the seemingly passive silence, emotional trauma, and suicide to the overtly active insurgency and assassination, is also exemplary of the different levels of impact a dictator can have on citizens.

The milder reproduction of Trujillo's regime by Balaguer is also very typical of the initial obstruction of the democratic process following the overthrow of a firmly established dictatorship, whose strongmen do not withdraw from the public scene with the death of the dictator but, instead, strive to salvage what they can from a collapsing order. That is why Trujillo was not only one of the several Latin American dictators who constituted, individually or through fictional dictators that combine him with several of his counterparts, the subject matter of the dictator novel, but was also the one Latin American dictator about whom whole novels were written. This interest in the Trujillato was not confined to resident Dominicans like Senciòn, but also exiled Dominicans like Alvarez and exiled Haitians like Danticat as well as non-Dominicans like Vargas Llosa. In fact, Vargas Llosa, being the most internationally renowned among the four authors, played a major role in giving the world outside Latin America a profound insight into the Trujillato.

Trujillo offered ready-made material for dictator novelists for he combined all the traits of the Latin American fictional dictators, each of whom was in turn the combination of several real life dictators, including Trujillo. Trujillo can be easily identified with Gabriel García Marquez's General, Alejo Carpentier's First Magistrate, Augusto Roa Bastos's *The Supreme*, or Miguel Ángel Asturias's *The President* as well as other fictional and real dictators across the world. That is why examining the Trujillato does not only provide insight into this specific era, but also into the nature of dictatorship in general. Literary adaptations of the Trujillato do what historians cannot—delve into the emotional scars this regime has left on its victims as those victims are allowed to tell their version of the story. That is why these novels and other works about this era serve as testimonials that deconstruct official history and rebuild the nation through an alternative narrative, which unravels the reality of a despotic regime that had for decades ruthlessly crushed

any attempt at exposing its crimes or jeopardizing its grip on power. Through the exploration of personal-turned-collective traumas and the way they come together to create a new chronicle that abandons the official discourse and portrays a shockingly faithful image of tyranny, another history is born, one that empowers the victims and condemns the victimizer in an attempt to reclaim the usurped nation on both the private and public levels.

Conclusion

The four novels are as universal as they are localized, for while they tackle a tyrannical regime in the Dominican Republic, they offer an insightful account of dictatorship in general. This is demonstrated in the way personal trauma gives rise to collective trauma, which becomes the main impetus for resistance, whether through armed struggle or rewriting the history of the nation, which in turn chronicles this very trauma. The novels are typical “novelas trujillistas,” hence constitute an integral part of the dictator novel cannon, one that focuses on the brutality of the dictator through the suffering of his victims. The fact that the novels are written by a Dominican, a Dominican-American, a Haitian-American, and a Peruvian makes novels about Trujillo the most diverse among texts written about other Latin American dictators, whether real or fictional. In fact, it is hard to find any fictional Latin American dictator who is not linked to and/or inspired by Trujillo in one way or another. The same would apply to literature written about dictators from other parts of the world. Rewriting the Trujillato is, therefore, not solely about Trujillo, but also about how the traumas perpetrated by tyrannical regimes metamorphose into a new history that condemns tyranny, immortalizes struggle, and rebuilds the nation. The literary texts through which the Trujillato is rewritten are among numerous examples of horror turned into art, a process that is neither confined to that era nor to Latin America and which, in fact, is centuries old.

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