The Success of Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies* and the Morbid Fascination of Dancing with The Dictator

When she began to write the story that became *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Julia Alvarez had a defined purpose. In the novel’s postscript, Alvarez explains that, with every trip to the Dominican Republic and every new thing she learned about the Mirabals’ lives, she asked herself, “What gave them that special courage?” (Alvarez 323) She then goes on to explain that she let her writing run with her imagination and “began to invent them [the Mirabal sisters]” (323). She mixed legend with fact and produced the sisters of *In the Time of the Butterflies*. It is no secret that the characters of Maria Teresa, Patria, Minerva, and Dedé are fictional imaginings of the historical women. The author herself admits that she has neither the talents nor the “inclinations of a biographer to be able to adequately record them” (324). That doesn’t mean that she had no factual sources to work with; it means that her desired influence went beyond the reaches of reality.

Historical accounts of the Trujillo regime are shocking. But they fail to engage readers who want to see more than just statistics. Alvarez gratifies the desire to engage on a human basis with her portrayals of both Minerva—the protagonist—and Trujillo—her antagonist. We have certain historical evidences of both, but the literary details are what makes *In the Time of the Butterflies* a particularly engaging and well-read book. Although it is not unique in telling the
story of the women who helped topple the Trujillo regime, *In the Time of the Butterflies* is unique in coloring those characters with personality that the salvageable facts cannot afford. I argue that *In the Time of the Butterflies*’s wild popularity and wide readership must be due in part to the characters that Alvarez inserts into the history using her creative liberties. This can be seen most significantly in the characters of Rafael Trujillo and Minerva Mirabal on the night of the ball at the Casa de Caoba.¹

In order to understand the significance of what we learn about Minerva and Trujillo in this chapter, we must first acknowledge what is considered historical about both the characters and the ball at which they interact, because not everything we read about them is based in fact.

Between Alvarez’s work and *Tres Heroínas y Un Tirano*, Miguel Aquino Garcia’s account of the Mirabal sisters and their relationship to Trujillo is considered more historically accurate. After all, the prologue to his book begins with the declaration that Aquino Garcia’s purpose in the book was to “recoger la esencia de los hechos verídicos alrededor de la lucha antitrujillista y del asesinato de las hermanas [Mirabal]” (“gather the essence of the true acts around the fight against Trujillo and the assassination of the [Mirabal sisters]”) (Aquino Garcia 11). Because of this distinction of purpose between the two authors, comparing the dance scene in this book with the dance scene in *In the Time of the Butterflies* serves to enlighten us about what Alvarez interprets about the characters of Minerva Mirabal and Rafael Trujillo.

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¹ Although all the Mirabal sisters develop some kind of an intellectual and emotional relationship with the antagonist of the novel, the scope of this paper only includes a study of Minerva Mirabal. A study of the intellectual and emotional relationship developed by the other Mirabal sisters would provide excellent insight into the power of this text, but such a study is not included in this essay.
In Aquino Garcia’s text, there is no mention of that climactic slap that Alvarez describes. He even makes a note of this outside the context of the story of the ball as an effort to explain his fact-based writing process (xv). Alvarez’s account of Minerva slapping the presumptuous Trujillo is not historical (in spite of the mention of it in *Trujillo: The Death of the Goat* on page 69. The incident is referred to as a “report”; in other words, an uncited rumor). But it was inseparable with Alvarez’s idea of who Minerva Mirabal was because she had originally heard Minerva’s story with the misreported slap. *Time* published an article on December 12, 1960 that briefly recounted reasons to disbelieve the public story of the Mirabal sisters’ deaths. Included in its story about the women’s lives is the following line: “When Trujillo tried to exercise his Dominican version of droit du seigneur, Minerva's response was a stinging slap on the face” (*Time* 34). Alvarez herself writes that just reading the article brings her back to “the dark living room of our New York apartment secretly paging through this magazine I was forbidden to look at” (Alvarez, “Chasing” 1). Her fascination with the story of the Mirabals began with reading the account of that slap. This image of Minerva, then, was more true to Alvarez than the historical events were. This realization begs the question: if Alvarez knew that the slap never happened, what does she accomplish in including a record of it?

Steve Criniti interprets Alvarez’s use of the slap as an intentional inclusion of an “important mythic and symbolic detail despite its apparent lack of factual basis. Here we see in Alvarez not only a departure from historical evidence, but also a kind of purposeful mythification in her presentation of the legendary slap” (Criniti 56). I agree with Criniti’s analysis here, and would add that the slap does more than mythify the dance experience. If we read Alvarez’s book as a perspective into emotional realities rather than historical realities, it
becomes clear that the slap is one prominent brush stroke in a portrait of the relationship between protagonist and antagonist. Criniti and I are in opposition in our opinion to that of Maya Socolovsky, who believes that Alvarez “attempted to de-mythologize the Mirabal sisters” (Socolovsky 12). Including a detail that has no significant historical evidence points to the importance of the idea of the Mirabal sisters rather than the reality of the Mirabal sisters. And it is the detailed idea of both Minerva and Trujillo that sets *In the Time of the Butterflies* apart from other books about the Trujillo regime.

In order to better understand the nature of a relationship between two characters, it is crucial to understand the individual characters. Various accounts have been made of Rafael Trujillo, from *Trujillo: el último de los Cesares*—which may have been written by a CIA operative—to *Portrait of Trujillo*—which was published during the dictator’s reign by a Colombian author who praises the dictator for “the natural dignity of his presence” (11) from the first page of the first chapter to the end of the book. Perhaps because few who did not agree with Trujillo remained close to him, we have limited accounts of who he was personally that are not colored by an anti- or a pro-Trujillo agenda.

We do, however, have accounts of Trujillo’s regime and political influence, and these indicate his lack of concern for the lives of other people. At “a dance given in his honor,” the dictator “stated his intention to eradicate the Haitian presence once and for all” (Roorda 131). He has been credited with the deaths of tens of thousands of Haitians in a slaughter known as The *Perejil Massacre of 1937* (Roorda 128). This massacre is mentioned in passing in *In the Time of the Butterflies* when Patria is feeling helpless against the force of an evil that will kill to gain power, but the event is not described in detail (Alvarez 53). Haitians tend to be darker skinned
than Dominicans—whose rulers have historically tended to have “atypically light skin” (Planas)—and this massacre was considered an ethnic cleanse by the Trujillo regime. This massacre was and is public knowledge. Its effects permeate current racial Dominican public policy and have inspired modern lynchings (Miller). It was not enough for him to get rid of those he disliked; he needed to have complete control over those he liked. Miguel Aquino Garcia takes on the task of historically piecing apart Trujillo’s relationship with the Mirabal sisters in Tres Heroinas y Un Tirano. He writes, “Trujillo usaría entonces este enorme poder para satisfacer sus más íntimas aspiraciones personales, que no se limitaban al simple disfrute del poder material. Estas aspiraciones incluían la necesidad que sentía de la continua exaltación de su persona” (“Trujillo would use [his] enormous power to satisfy his most intimate personal aspirations, which were not limited to the enjoyment of material power. These aspirations included the need he felt to exalt himself”) (Aquino Garcia 62). He needed to hear himself referred to with adoration and respect, so the people began to refer to him astride God’s name in their daily prayers and vocal expressions of hope (62). Clearly, this dictator required total control and respect.

In comparison with a massacre, the evidences of Trujillo’s sexual advances towards individual women are less clear. After all, the women who refused his advances were never physically forced into fornication or adultery; they did, however, tend to see tragedy strike their family in the form of unemployment (64). In telling the story of the ball at Casa de Caoba, Alvarez succeeds in giving people a personal glimpse into the entitled, predatory nature of this dictator as well as a long look into the mind of a venerated martyr of the anti-Trujillo movement. Alvarez does this effectively by embellishing fact with her ideals. Vivian Gornick, an essayist
who has been badgered about the factual nature of her creative content, wrote, “What mattered most to me was not the literalness of the situation, but the emotional truth of the story” (Lazar 7). Alvarez’s version of the ball at Casa de Caoba represents the emotional truth of the story, not the actual events, and her work has been loved and venerated because of it.

Enter the Mirabal family. This family is made relatable by creative styles of narration, which, according to Charlotte Rich, are common to Alvarez’s works (Rich 166). The sections that focus on Minerva’s thoughts tend to be longer than the sections narrated by her sisters. According to Rich, Minerva’s character and the chapters about her are “characterized by . . . defiance” (169), which makes her perspective an ideal lens through which to meet the dictator at the Casa de Caoba on Discovery Day. But the ball is not the first time we’re introduced to the influence of Trujillo in In the Time of the Butterflies.

The structure of this book within the frame story begins with Trujillo entering the lives of the Mirabal sisters, and the book ends when Trujillo ends their lives. Our fascination ebbs and flows with hints and mentions of the dictator, beginning with the suggestion of his infiltration into the Mirabal family in 1938, a section of story that begins with Dedé’s narration of, “[I remember] a clear moonlit night before the future began” (Alvarez 8), which suggests that In the Time of the Butterflies is, in a way, more about the influence of Trujillo on the Mirabal sisters than about the Mirabal sisters themselves. Our first opportunity as readers to meet the infamous Trujillo intimately is presented when a note invites Papa to attend the ball and implies that Minerva is to come along. The way the Discovery Day Dance section of chapter six was written mirrors the way the fascinating scent of how something rotten gets stronger the closer you get to it, which could not be replicated by a historical account.
We catch a whiff on page 94, when Minerva’s internal narration first sees Manuel de Moya. “Everyone knows his [Manuel de Moya] real job is rounding up pretty girls for El Jefe to try out” (94). The phrase *rounding up* is not acceptably used for anything but partial numbers and livestock. This reference to the way Trujillo’s secretary of state collects young women at once dehumanizes the victims of his hunt as well as degrades the powerful Trujillo regime to backwards agricultural stewards. This detail is repeated by historical events, but hearing it from Minerva’s mind causes those of us who are identifying readers to feel personally victimized by the dictator and his henchmen.

Minerva’s internal narration continues as she regards the mansion where the party will be hosted. She muses, “This is supposed to be El Jefe’s party mansion, where he keeps his favorite of the moment” (94). *Keeps his favorite* connotes a kind of passivity and possessiveness. The nonspecific phrasing of *his favorite* is dehumanizing. Again, it is Trujillo’s actions that make things happen, not the women that he is acting upon. These details confirm what readers familiar with the topic probably already know about Trujillo, but they are presented in a way that permits them to feel Minerva’s repulsion. Again, readers can come to identify with her by sharing her emotions.

Trujillo’s sense of entitlement is shown again after he begins dancing with Minerva. Minerva narrates that Trujillo’s eyes moved “over my body, exploring it rudely with his glances” (98). In other words, Trujillo felt comfortable suggesting he had the right to access her body physically. He further objectifies her by saying, “Perhaps I could conquer this jewel as El Conquistador conquered our island” (99), referring to her. In doing so, he is indicating that she is
an object to be won over. This intensifies readers’ discomfort since we (the readers) have been living in this “jewel”’s head for the duration of the ball and may feel personally objectified.

The historical account that Aquino Garcia presents refers to the previous conversation, but only details one exchange between Trujillo and Minerva. Concluding the short conversation, Trujillo asks Minerva, “Y si yo le mando a mis súbditos para que la conquisten. . . ?” (“And if I tell my subjects to conquer you. . . ?”), to which Minerva responds, “Y si yo conquisto a sus súbditos. . . ?” (“And if I conquer your subjects. . . ?”) (68). This factual exchange suggests a little about Minerva Mirabal’s confidence; the image of the afore-discussed slap that Alvarez gifts us confirms it beyond a shadow of a doubt.

The nature of the writing of *In the Time of the Butterflies*, then, allows us to peek into Minerva’s head plentifully and feel that we know the heroine. It is just as significant, though, that we get a look into Trujillo’s mind.

Up until this point, Trujillo already smells like a collector of sexual livestock. As Minerva has the opportunity to observe him, he becomes not only objectifying, but competitive in his possession of women. In a country where whiteness is equated with some measure of power or success (Davis), a half-Cuban wife is a prize, indeed. So it should be no surprise to readers that, when, “under the tablecloth, a hand is exploring the inner folds of a woman’s thigh” (96), the hand belongs to Trujillo and the thigh belongs to the senator’s half Cuban wife. This awful and titillating detail had to be seen from under the tablecloth, however, to pack its clout. It was not something that was widely reported in accounts of the ball; it is not even mentioned in Aquino Garcia’s strictly historical account. The private nature of this action (for can it be called interaction when there is no mention of the woman’s response, or even a mention of her name or
any identifier beyond her ethnicity and her marital status?) is what makes it so frustrating and fascinating. Trujillo’s displays of bold sexual intent while he dances with Minerva convey the overpowering sex drive that he has come to be defined with. This glimpse under the table serves not only to confirm such suspicions, but ignite indignation. As far as we can tell, that woman did not consent to be groped. In the scene, her husband sits very nearby. This event is calculated to be outrageous because it is indicative that Trujillo feels entitled to whatever he wants, and he seems to want whatever he should not have. If we were to rely on historical accounts, our image of Trujillo’s character would never include this outrageous and memorable aspect. Alvarez’s creative liberties allow us to hate the Mirabals’ enemy even more.

Although *In the Time of the Butterflies* neither claims to offer a historical account of either Minerva or Trujillo, nor specifically follows either of their lives, this book manages to fill a gap in knowledge for many readers. In spite of historical inaccuracies, *In the Time of the Butterflies* gives a personal perspective into an evening in the life of the possessive, entitled dictator through the eyes of a respectable and relatable heroine. Personal anecdotes color Trujillo’s character in a way that statistics about deaths, imprisonments, and economics cannot. A great part of the morbid attraction of this book is its glimpse into the character of Trujillo—which is a collage of history, legend, and imagination—and its contrast with the bold and perceptive Minerva Mirabal. In coming to know the Mirabal sisters and the man they were resisting, Alvarez invites her readers to engage with the story on a personal level. This personal aspect, which is especially evident in the ball at Casa de Caoba, makes *In the Time of the Butterflies* such a riveting success among readers. After all, it’s the details that allow us in our morbid fascination to dance with El Jefe.
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