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The Poetics of a Dominican Holocaust and the Aesthetics of Witnessing

Andrew M. Merrill

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The Poetics of a Dominican Holocaust and the Aesthetics of Witnessing

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This study examines Julia Alvarez's best-known works, *García Girls* and *In the Time of the Butterflies*, to explore the intertextuality within Dominican-American fiction through the vocabulary and methodology of trauma studies and witnessing. Alvarez's work indicates that traditional academic discourse about witnessing often translates trauma survivors into tourists by legally dispossessing them from the witnesses they could provide as they seek to assign blame and pass judgment on the source of their traumatic experience. This process of exclusion threatens to hinder the ability of Dominican-Americans to work through their shared, traumatic experience with the Trujillo regime. Furthermore, this study contends that as Alvarez privileges fiction and the imagination, instead of historiography, as the appropriate sites for witnessing, she invites other members of the collective to share their witnesses in an effort to populate the structure of the *trujillato* in order for the collective to better come to terms with their shared trauma.

Keywords: *García Girls*, Holocaust, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Julia Alvarez, trauma, witnessing

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Having heard about the pitfalls, pratfalls, and minefields that inhabit academic studies, I imagined that the completion of this study would be more unpleasant than it turned out to be. The intellectual odyssey that this study represents has become one of the most rewarding experiences of my academic career.

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The Poetics of a Dominican Holocaust and the Aesthetics of Witnessing

The literature of Dominican-American authors like Julia Alvarez, Angie Cruz, Junot Díaz, Loida Maritza Pérez, and Nelly Rosario demonstrates the impossibility of escaping the haunting presence of Rafael Trujillo. Trujillo was assassinated in 1961 after thirty-one years as dictator of the island nation, an era known as the *trujillato*. Historical comparisons between Trujillo and Napoleon, Stalin, or Hitler (Crassweller 4) might help explain why Dominican-American authors seem compelled to witness their traumatic experience with the *trujillato*. Yet, in his interview with María Hinojosa, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Díaz asks “How do you articulate something for which there is almost no metrics?” and especially how do you articulate the fact that “dislocation, transition, and transformation” continue to inflict trans-generational and transnational trauma?

While literary critic Isabel Zakzrewski Brown argues that Julia Alvarez’s second novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1995), provides a specifically Dominican iteration of the “*novel of the dictator*” (98), a review of other Dominican-American authors indicates that *Butterflies* might be understood best as a Trujillo novel. Angie Cruz’s *Let it Rain Coffee* (2005) and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008) both represent additional attempts to witness the impact of Trujillo’s regime on successive generations. The constellation of Dominican-American literature around a witness of the *trujillato* might serve as evidence for Dominick LaCapra’s notions of the “founding trauma,” where a specific, shared cultural traumatic event becomes “the valorized . . . basis for identity” (23). LaCapra’s interpretation that the consistent imagination of Trujillo provides the material for a uniquely Dominican aesthetic blends the aims of each member of the collective as a search for a homogeneous collective identity. Dominican-American literature, however, demonstrates that each unique witness

valorizes heterogeneity over homogeneity. For example, Alvarez recovers a witness of the upper class Mirabal family, Cruz recovers a multi-ethnic (Sino-Dominican) witness of Don Chan and his family, while Díaz explores the witness of Afro-Dominicans in the US who continue to deal with the effects of the Trujillo regime. We might discuss each of these witnesses as individual encounters with the regime and not in terms of a unified, coherent search for identity. Trenton Hickman persuasively argues that Trujillo provides “an object of narrative desire” that, among other things, gives Dominicans something against which they can define their own iteration of “*dominicanidad*” (157). Since virtually all Dominican authors write of the *trujillato*, Hickman’s and LaCapra’s interpretive approaches seem compelling; however, an examination of Dominican-American literature as witness text asks readers to reevaluate the claim that underpins both Hickman’s and LaCapra’s argument: that Dominicans seek to define themselves against Trujillo through their literature. In fact, when we view the literature as testimony, we find that rather than defining themselves against Trujillo, Dominicans often admit that they have become Trujillo in various ways.

Alvarez’s, Cruz’s, and Díaz’s novels illustrate Kalí Tal’s assertion that survivors possess a “duty to both the living and the dead to testify . . . of the horrors [they have] seen” (1-2). Their writing indicates that, although “there is . . . no substitute for experience” (15), they will take “an active part in the creation of world history” (5). These authors exhibit a willingness to expose the seismic, transgenerational reverberations of Trujillo’s violent excesses, but critics of trauma and witnessing highlight one key conflict that haunts witnesses and threatens to disqualify their testimonies: survivors need to tell their stories, but language seems inadequate to the task. Trauma scholar Dori Laub explains that Holocaust survivors wanted to survive not only to “tell their story,” but that they “needed to tell their story in order to survive” (78). Tal calls it the

“duty” of the survivor to tell the story of the traumatic experience (1). Critic Cathy Caruth argues that the traumatic experience “demands our witness” (5). While these trauma scholars admit that the survivor bears an imperative to provide a testimony of the event, they also argue that the translation of traumatic experience into language is inhibited by the way that the particulars of the experience resist transcription into language (Caruth 5; Laub 79; Tal 2). Laub explains that, for trauma survivors, “[t]here are never enough words or the right words . . . the story cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory, and speech*” (78). The experience of Oscar Michelena, one of Trujillo’s political opponents, offers one example of the challenges trauma survivors face when they attempt to share their witnesses. Michelena suffered a seventy-four day incarceration at the notorious Ozama prison that highlights how traumatic experience resists full articulation. During his incarceration, he was beaten with “an iron whip,” cut open, bruised, starved, and held in a tiny cell (Crassweller 111). When he was released, his interviewers note that Michelena “seemed dejected and dazed and quite broken in spirit” (111). Though historians have recorded his witness, what words could he have used to describe the emotional process of having his spirit broken? Unlike this case recorded by Trujillo biographer Robert Crassweller, the articulation of Dominican-American experience with the *trujillato* exists primarily in fiction, and seems to be a Dominican-American attempt at creating a witness archive like the one historians have generated for Holocaust survivors. Díaz’s response to Hinojosa’s question captures the problem afflicting Dominican-American authors: no metric exists to grant these authors a register into which they can articulate their own traumatic experience, which inhibits the compulsion to testify of the *trujillato* and the trauma that persists beyond his death among Dominicans.

This tension between the imperative to witness and the inability to offer the definitive witness provides one driving force behind the compulsive return by Dominican-American

authors to their shared trauma. Both *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and *Butterflies*, the earliest Trujillo-themed novels in English, represent attempts by Alvarez to provide not only a witness to the trauma of the Trujillo regime, but also an articulation of what it means for Dominican-Americans. *Butterflies* demonstrates the power of Laub's contention that "no amount of telling seems ever to do justice" to the compulsion to share one's witness (78). I will argue that Alvarez's novels complicate attempts to categorize them in witness taxonomies because each novel represents a return to her own experience. I will also contend that Alvarez's second novel codifies the Dominican experience of the *trujillato* in terms of a Holocaust in an attempt to find a historical analog, one that provides the absent metric to which Díaz alluded in his interview. Finally, I will argue that Alvarez's attempt to encode her narrative in terms of Judeo-Christian ritual sacrifice in order to find meaning in the traumatic experience has led to a persistent fixation on representing the *trujillato* among other Dominican-Americans.

To understand how readers might better conceptualize how Alvarez's novels present a challenge to various witness taxonomies by asking us to reconsider the prescribed way to find closure through witnessing, we must realize that witness scholarship often falls into patterns of descriptive taxonomization where critics and survivors alike dispute the nuances of who qualifies as a witness and who can provide a specific type of witness. Witness taxonomies often critique the function and the historicity of the witness, both the individual who provides it and the story that is told. Giorgio Agamben provides one taxonomy of witnessing, in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999), by outlining a genealogy of witness types that might participate in, or be excluded from, legal proceedings aimed at the assignation of blame and the prosecution of the perpetrators: *testis* and *superstes*. *Testis*, he contends, describes a person called to give third-party witness in a legal proceeding (17). The law prefers the *testis* because its distance (physical, emotional, and

psychological) from the event provides objectivity. *Superstes*, on the other hand, describes “a person who has lived through an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it” (17).

In this context of witness classification, the temptation to read the story of the *García Girls* as a *superstes*, or first-person witness text representing Yolanda García’s witness of what happened to her family, and to read *Butterflies* as a *testis*, or third-person witness text representing the Mirabal family’s story, remains compelling. Such simple categorizations, however, ignore the nuances of Agamben’s argument. In the postscript to *Butterflies*, Alvarez explains her purpose in writing the novel. She writes that she wants to witness on behalf of the Mirabal sisters who resisted the Trujillo regime knowing that “any hint of disagreement resulted in death for the dissenter and often for members of his or her family” (323). She further explains that she “hope[s] this book deepens North Americans’ understanding” of the nightmare that Dominicans endured during the *trujillato* (324). It seems that Alvarez intends to testify to the atrocities of the Trujillo regime, to assign blame to Trujillo, and to encourage readers to pronounce judgment. If this is the purpose of the novel, then Agamben’s complication of the testimonial categories within his taxonomy threatens Alvarez’s project. Agamben argues that all attempts to reconstruct the atrocities of the past, to assign blame, and to pass judgment on those who have perpetrated the crime fail to pass his litmus test: *testis* witnesses have not experienced the event from beginning to end, meaning the witnesses are still alive and have not reached the end, and true *superstes* witnesses, the “complete witness[es]” who lost their lives by going to the gas chambers “will never tell; not really, not completely” because they are dead and “[t]he past belongs to the dead” (33). In this way, Agamben questions the goal of witnessing as outlined by Tal since a person who underwent the traumatic experience, without paying the ultimate price,

may not qualify as either *testis* or *superstes*. Agamben nuances the three types of *superstes* witnesses (the survivor who can witness, the survivor who cannot, and the one who died) by introducing a new category to his taxonomy, the *Muselmann*. He traces the etymology of the term to Auschwitz where it was used as slang for those who had given up hope and lost their ability to communicate (44-45). Agamben extends this usage of the term to also include the “complete witnesses” that cannot testify because they have been killed. In order to provide the right kind of evidence, then, Agamben argues we must recover *Muselmänner* witnesses. Only then could a court assign blame and pronounce judgment.

Where Agamben focuses his analysis of the witness on those who have immediate connection to the trauma, Gary Weissman focuses his analysis in *Fantasies of Witnessing* (2005) on witnesses who gain cultural significance through their attempts to provide aesthetic representations of traumatic events. Rather than pursue a legal inquiry, he focuses on representations that seek to provide an understanding of the traumatic event. Weissman demonstrates sensitivity toward labels used to categorize those who culturally mediate trauma. He “resist[s] using traditional witness categories, like ‘secondary witnesses,’ ‘vicarious witnesses,’ ‘retrospective witnesses,’ ‘witnesses by adoption,’ or ‘witnesses through the imagination’” because such categorization “contributes to a wishful blurring of otherwise obvious and meaningful distinctions between the victims and ourselves” (20).

Instead of using these labels, Weissman offers the “nonwitness,” a person with “no immediate, familial connection” (5) to the traumatic event, as an alternative category. Weissman’s “nonwitness” might be thought of as a sub-category to Agamben’s notion of *testis*, but one who nonetheless gains cultural capital within the economy of witnessing by representing traumatic events. Nonwitnesses wield significant cultural power to control the meaning of trauma

since they include “most of the individuals who produce educational, scholarly, literary, and artistic work” (5), and who, consequently, mediate traumatic experiences today. While Agamben challenges the legal validity of a witness that such historical documenters might be able to provide, Weissman grants limited license to these individuals to operate as witnesses in lieu of survivors or those who might have died. Weissman limits the ultimate authority of these “nonwitness” testimonies by conceding that generational distance makes the historical event “susceptible to revision” (6). For this reason, Alvarez’s project to preserve an aesthetic representation of the Mirabal sisters acquires a level of earnestness but risks getting the facts wrong, a danger she openly embraces in the postscript. Weissman further complicates the Agambenian dyad of the *testis* and the *superstes*, arguing that a “hierarchy of suffering” grants greater authority to those who were in more dire circumstances (21). In the end, both Agamben’s and Weissman’s testimonial categories problematize any survivor-witness testimony, like that of Julia Alvarez. Alvarez lived through the regime, which disqualifies her as *testis*. She is also still alive, which disqualifies her as *superstes*. And yet, if we discuss the *trujillato* in general, rather than the Mirabal’s experience more specifically, Alvarez also resists classification as a nonwitness, since she experienced the Trujillo regime.

The resistance of Alvarez, her novels, and her open admission that she will recover a witness of the past through the “imagination” (*Butterflies* 324) threatens the discussion of her witness in terms of historiography’s claim to historical veracity. The categories within Agamben’s taxonomy and his judicial paradigm prescribe that historical verifiability underpin the authority he grants to Holocaust witnesses. At some level, those who seek to represent the Holocaust in Weissman’s study suffer from the same historiographical impulse to record verifiable past events. Part of what drives the need for historical verisimilitude is the mechanism

of holocaust denial.¹ Laub's work with Holocaust survivors caused him to proscribe the rejection of an Auschwitz survivor's testimony because she remembered the facts incorrectly:

Many months later, a conference of historians, psychoanalysts, and artists, gathered to reflect on the relation of education to the Holocaust, watched the videotaped testimony of the woman, in an attempt to better understand the era. A lively debate ensued. The testimony was not accurate, historians claimed. Since the memory of the testifying woman turned out to be, in this way, fallible, one could not accept—nor give credence to—her whole account of the events, [lest] the revisionists in history discredit everything.
(59-60)

Laub warns that the purpose of the listener is to “understand not merely [the witnesses’] subjective truth, but the very historicity of the event, in an entirely new dimension” (62). He argues that the witness not only testifies to “empirical historical facts, but to the very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination” (62). For Laub, the “secret of survival” is the desire to witness the traumatic event. If, in Agamben's case, the trial relies on the historical accuracy of a witness's testimony, then Laub's archival project disqualifies most witnesses from the discussion because the difficulty articulating the emotional impact of the event or of accurately remembering an event makes revision possible. In the Michelena example, though he might be able to deploy analogies to describe the pain, those words could not convey the experience of the whip tearing through his flesh or the specific psychological nature of the experience in any of its particulars. The fact that he might rely on analogies, however, could create potential revisions to the historical facts of his trauma. In Weissman's case, those who seek to represent trauma perform meticulous research and visit the museums that memorialize the event in order to

understand it and derive meaning from it. Laub's caution, however, is that the real responsibility of those who did not experience the event is to provide a forum for individuals to tell their stories, recognizing the historical inaccuracies, but understanding that the witness will uncover more than the historicity of the event.

Laub warns against the rigorous demands of historiographers and imagines that psychoanalysis provides the appropriate forum for the recovery of trauma narratives. LaCapra envisions that historiography provides the superior methodology for recovering and transmitting traumatic narratives. LaCapra posits that a properly construed historiography might be the appropriate vehicle for articulating one's trauma in a way that "may never transcend" the traumatic memory, but, he hopes, "may to some viable extent counteract, a reenactment, or acting out, of that disabling dissociation" (42). In the postscript to *Butterflies*, Alvarez argues that the traumatic era in the Dominican past "can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination" (324). Alvarez's claim aligns with the claim in LaCapra's argument that fiction "may . . . involve truth claims [and] provide insight into phenomena such as slavery or the Holocaust . . . by giving at least a plausible 'feel' for the experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods" (13). What LaCapra finds markedly problematic with this tidy characterization of fictional witness is that it purports to deliver what no account might deliver: closure to the traumatic event (15-16). In reworking Hayden White's notions of the fictionality of history, LaCapra argues that a transformation from the historical to the fictional occurs because fiction sacrifices the integrity of the verifiable truth-claim in order to achieve the "poetic, rhetorical, [or] performative" goal of closure (15): in LaCapra's analysis, the structure of fiction requires the imposition of closure on a narrative. As discussed above, histories of trauma resist closure because the meaning of the

event cannot be understood. The distrust of closure possesses an analog in Laub's study because the event does not end for the survivor. In spite of Alvarez's claim that fiction and the imagination are the proper sites for the transmission of traumatic memory, LaCapra supposes the power of historiography over both fiction and the imagination because the very structure of fiction requires an author to imagine closure to an event that cannot end. Where LaCapra understands closure as the goal of fiction, the intertextuality of Dominican-American literature demonstrates a resistance to closure as successive authors add their narratives.

According to Agamben's taxonomy, *García Girls* is most easily discussed as a *superstes* witness novel: Yolanda tells the story of her family's experience with the Trujillo regime. However, the fact that Alvarez thinly veils her life in the guise of the García family creates an aesthetic which combines the function of Agamben's *superstes* with the function of Weissman's nonwitness, since Alvarez desires, at a practical level, to share the story of Dominican diaspora with an English-speaking, American readership. William Luis convincingly analyzes the novel as a search for Dominican identity by observing that the characters "[look] back in order to understand their present and future" (266); *García Girls* offers readers a historico-fictional account of one family's attempt to understand its present in terms of the past. The narrative traces the lives of the García family (comprised of Carlos, Laura, Carla, Sandra, Yolanda, and Sofía) from Yolanda's trip to the Dominican Republic in 1989, back through past experiences of awkward assimilation and cultural hybridization in New York City, terminating in a Trujillo-ruled Dominican Republic. As the narrative regresses through time, it confronts readers with the transgenerational reverberations of a cultural trauma which imagines the *trujillato*. By the end of the novel, Yolanda inserts her present-day self and explains the genesis of her desire to tell her story: "I grew up a curious woman, a woman of story ghosts and story devils, a woman prone to

bad dreams and bad insomnia” (290). Rather than focus on the challenges of hybridity as Luis has done or on *Butterflies* as an alternative political discourse as Isabel Brown,² Shara McCallum,³ and Charlotte Rich⁴ have done, this study will situate the *trujillato* as the “story ghosts” and “story devils” which cause the “bad dreams and bad insomnia” of Dominican-Americans. Placing the *trujillato* in these terms helps us to understand how Dominican-American literature asks us to rethink the typical categories and taxonomies that we apply to trauma survivors, and the narratives we allow them to tell. Though Trujillo might provide a desirable point of foundation and simultaneously a point of departure for Dominican-American writers who seek to establish their own iteration of *dominicanidad*, as Hickman rightfully argues (157), *García Girls* complicates notions that such a point of founding/departure is desirable (even if only paradoxically so).

If we discuss the novel as a *superstes* witness of the Trujillo regime, what seems most unusual about this novel is the conspicuous absence of the person of Trujillo from the narrative. If we read the novel as a discussion of how the regime has forever deformed the lives of Dominicans, it seems that the novel should present a self-aware discussion of the many ways that Trujillo has ruined lives. Contrary to the expectation that Trujillo appear in a Trujillo novel, Trujillo does not receive explicit treatment until one-third of the way through the novel. In a chapter attributed to all four of the sisters, the narrator hints that Trujillo caused the dislocation of the García family from the Dominican Republic and that the dictator lies at the root of the trauma the family has endured. The narrator frames a discussion of the girls’ subterfuge to keep their parents from knowing what they were up to at school: “we had devised as sophisticated and complicated a code and underground system as Papi had when he and his group plotted against the dictator” (110). The narrator reveals the reason for the García family’s forced relocation, but

reduces the cause, Trujillo, to simply, “the dictator.” If this novel imagines Americans, with little exposure to the regime, as its audience, it seems euphemistic to merely call him “the dictator” because it substitutes a less offensive term, in this case “the dictator,” for something that would be harsher or more fully enumerative of Trujillo’s atrocities against the Dominican people. The narrator finally names Trujillo when Yolanda gives a preview reading of her speech for Teacher Days (142-43). Her speech makes Carlos nervous and she calls him “Chapita,” which the narrator explains was “Trujillo’s hated nickname” (147). Though this explanation is the second direct incantation of Trujillo’s name, careful reading of the novel before this point indicates that Trujillo haunts the earlier pages of *García Girls* precisely in a way that authorizes this novel as more than just a mere explanation of Alvarez’s struggle with creating a new, unique identity by hybridizing the languages and cultural values of the Dominican Republic and the United States.

The most puzzling euphemistic treatment of Trujillo’s permeation in Dominican culture across international borders and across generations occurs during the celebration of Carlos García’s seventieth birthday. After the four girls have left home and married, they returned every year and repeated the same ritualized celebration of their father’s birthday. The narrator tells readers that each year Carlos forbids the attendance of his sons-in-law, and he offers envelopes of money to his “harem of four girls” (26). What seems like an innocuous family ritual reenacts Trujillo’s own cult of the Benefactor. Crassweller explains that Trujillo understood that “in order to govern, one must open the road with money” (74), indicating that Trujillo might give “from five to ten thousand dollars” (82) to the widow of a murdered opponent that he hoped to romance. Crassweller uses this example to explain that Trujillo used both money and the threat of imprisonment (or assassination) of male rivals in order to terrorize Dominicans. Lauren Derby explains that Trujillo’s insatiable sexual conquest of “the daughters of the bourgeoisie . . . as a

means of humiliating the elite” serves as one example of the previously neglected “economy of male personal status” that served as the foundation for his power (1117). If Carlos’ distribution of money and the exclusion of male rivals for his daughters’ affection as merely a *superstes* witness of the birthday celebration, then we miss the damning indictment that Alvarez provides of Dominican complicity. The act of Carlos’ signing one of the bills “branding them his” reinforces Carlos’ behavior as *trujillista* because we can read “them” as a pronoun that modifies either the bills or, more likely, the daughters. This scene indicates that the perpetuation of *trujillismo* might be the heritage of Dominicans because, by excluding the sons-in-law as a precondition for the distribution of money to his daughters, Carlos has adopted *trujillista* behavior. If we simply read this moment as a representation by a chronologically-distanced nonwitness, we miss the potential cultural significance for Dominican-Americans who continue to suffer the repercussions of the *trujillato* in their daily lives.

Contrary to the no-males-allowed tradition, Sofía brings both her husband and her infant son to the birthday party, which allows Carlos to demonstrate further *trujillista* characteristics. The narrator highlights that Sofía’s husband is a blond-haired, blue-eyed German and that her son is the “first male born into the family” (26). The narrator’s judgment of Carlos’ motives in heaping praise on Sofía’s infant son at Carlos’ birthday celebration provides further euphemistic witness of the *trujillato*’s reach. In his excited approval of his grandson’s name, Carlos traces the etymology of the name through a European genealogy: from the Anglos “Charles the Fifth, Charles Dickens[, and] Prince Charles” to the more ancient and ambitious Frank, “Charlemagne” (26). The narrator’s pronouncement of the “grandfather’s Caribbean fondness for a male heir and for fair Nordic looks had surfaced” (26-27) appears innocuous, yet it suggests the Third Reich’s racial eugenics. Historical context helps elaborate how Alvarez’s characterization of the

grandfather is precisely that he is *trujillista*, that even the revolutionaries who fought so hard to remove Trujillo have perpetuated his behavior within their own families. This intimate family celebration, which should serve as a tender reminder of family solidarity, demonstrates how a euphemistic treatment of the Trujillo regime trades a jarring enumeration of the precise reasons that the Trujillo-like behavior of Carlos and others like him continue to haunt Dominican-Americans for a pleasant representation of the reality of Dominican eugenics. For this reason, reading *García Girls* as a witness text asks us to carefully reconsider Hickman's conclusion that "Dominican-American fiction [indicates] the possibility of a community that does not deny the *trujillato* but has found a way to dismantle the structures that allowed it to emerge in the first place" (171). Rather than providing an apparatus for the dismantling of the architectures that allowed Trujillo to establish his regime, *García Girls* indicates that even Dominicans who fought Trujillo adopted the behavioral structures of the *trujillato*. In terms of LaCapra's notions of the founding trauma (23), *García Girls*' euphemistic treatment of Trujillo resists the idea that Dominican-American literature valorizes the *trujillato*. Instead, it indicates that the insinuation of *trujillista* behavior into the lives of Trujillo's Dominican opponents represents an additional valence to the trauma Dominican-Americans face: *trujillista* behavior has become integral to the cultural fabric of Dominican-American experience.

Whereas Luis predicts that this confrontation and reconciliation with her own past through the autobiographically fictionalized García family will allow Alvarez to exorcise the trauma caused by Trujillo regime from her own life (277), the publication of *Butterflies* challenges the idea that witnesses can so easily deal with trauma. While cynical readers may argue that the persistent return to the *trujillato* in Dominican-American literature is all about profit, it is more probable that the return to the experience of the *trujillato* demonstrates the

difficulties a cultural group faces when confronting shared traumatic events when they realize that they might have all played a role in perpetuating the collective trauma. Cynical readers fail to ask why, exactly, Dominican-American narratives avoid imagining Trujillo's interior psychology. Cynical readers ignore that the peculiar avoidance of psychologizing Trujillo indicates why readers should focus their attention on the problems of trauma and witnessing when discussing Dominican-American literature. Trauma resists reconciliation so that no matter how many times witnesses retell their past traumas, closure to the traumatic event will remain elusive. Alvarez's return to a witness of the *trujillato* in *Butterflies* echoes Tal's argument that "[t]raumatic events are written and rewritten" in an effort to codify the experience in a way that allows the victim closure (6). This return provides literary evidence for Laub's warning that one issue plaguing trauma victims is the event "that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect" (69). Because the *trujillato* has not ended—or cannot end at least in the inevitably failed reconciliation of its trauma—it produces a compulsive return to the *trujillato* in Alvarez's literature. Under Agamben's witness taxonomy, readers might interpret the publication of *Butterflies* as an admission that closure can only be found in the assignation of blame to Trujillo and the issuance of judgment upon the Trujillo regime. However, while the temptation is great to understand the transition between *García Girls* and *Butterflies* in such basic Agambenian terms as either *testis* or as the historical recovery of a *Muselmann* witness, Alvarez's return to the *trujillato* must be understood in context of her own experience with the *trujillato* because she equates the genesis of the novel to her personal experience with the Trujillo regime ("Something" 209). The transition from *García Girls* to *Butterflies* might even ask that we challenge LaCapra's assertion that historiography,

properly construed, may “never transcend, but may, to some viable extent counteract, a reenactment, or acting out, or that disabling dissociation” caused by trauma (42) by presenting readers with a history of the Mirabal sisters that does not counteract cultural reenactments of the *trujillato*.

As a witness text, *Butterflies* challenges any classifications we might give it in Agamben’s taxonomy. Alvarez survived the Trujillo regime, which means that the novel cannot be understood as a *testis* text, which aims at providing a third-party historical account; indeed, Alvarez lacks the emotional and psychological distance from the trauma of the regime in order to provide a *testis* witness. Even if readers attempt to read the novel in terms of Alvarez’s proximity to the *trujillato*, the postscript to the novel disqualifies reading it as *superstes* witness because Alvarez tells us that *Butterflies* contains the story of the Mirabal sisters (324). A discussion of the novel as Alvarez’s recovery of the *Muselmänner* (“complete witness”) testimony of the Mirabal sisters likewise breaks down when confronted with Alvarez’s own early experience with news of their death and her own subsequent imagination of their story. The novel’s resistance to categorization indicates that the confrontation of the testimonies of survivors with Agamben’s legal taxonomy reveals an integral problem with the assumptions that underpin his categories. Though Agamben privileges either the emotionally and psychologically distant or the dead as the appropriate witnesses in a legal case, he obscures the implications of his claim: he marginalizes survivors. By arguing for the disqualification of survivor testimony in juridical proceedings, his categorical preference for the dead or silenced deterritorializes survivors from the witness they might provide because his understanding of the *testis*’ superiority converts survivors into tourists—individuals who merely experienced an event as bystanders. In terms of Agamben’s study, which interrogates the role of the witness in the Holocaust, this particular move to

transform survivors of Auschwitz into tourists seems unethical. Reading *Butterflies* as a witness text indicates that the attempt to categorize witnesses either for legal proceedings or as an effort to enforce the historiographic constraints of the verisimilitude of the testimony as truth-claim risks marginalizing individual witnesses who continue to suffer a trauma that crosses generations and geopolitical borders. As a witness text, *Butterflies* asks readers, interested in trauma and witnessing, to resist categorizing witnesses and to focus on how each unique narrative allows us to populate the structure of the event in an effort to understand what happened. Though the temptation to argue that Alvarez subordinates her own witness to that of the Mirabal sisters in *Butterflies* remains strong, the novel resists notions that hierarchical inequalities grant privileges to specific groups. The novel can be read as her continued effort to make sense of her own traumatic experience.

Alvarez's first experience with the Mirabal story indicates that the death of the sisters became part of her own personal traumatic experience with the Trujillo regime, which then becomes part of her own personal witness. Autobiographically, Alvarez pinpoints an article from the December 12, 1960 issue of *Time*, written about the Mirabal sisters' death, as the genesis of the *Butterflies* project. She writes of a memory when her father brought the issue home with him and proceeded to forbid his daughters from reading it. In explanation, Alvarez writes that her "parents still lived as if the SIM might show up at our door any minute and haul us away" ("Chasing" 197). Alvarez's parents fear reprisal by SIM [*Servicio de Inteligencia Militar*: Trujillo's *Schutzstaffel*] operatives, which is compounded by the appearance of the *Time* magazine because the article indicates the regime will eliminate all opposition. These experiences in Alvarez's household ask us to read *Butterflies* as a recovery of Alvarez's own past traumatic experience. By reading the novel this way, we come to understand Laub's argument

that trauma “has no ending” and “[attains] no closure” (69). Though it might seem odd to Alvarez’s naïve readership that someone might continually fear reprisal from the Dominican secret police, the disappearance of the academic Jesus de Galíndez in 1956 from New York (Galíndez xi); the assassination of Guatemalan president Castillo Armas on July 27, 1957, in the Guatemalan presidential palace (Crassweller 334-35); and an assassination attempt made on the life of Rómulo Betancourt on June 24, 1960, which was made on Venezuelan soil all attest to the SIM’s extensive reach (Crassweller 414-16). These assassination attempts negated the safety of expatriation: the trauma of the *trujillato* could extend beyond the borders of the Dominican Republic and across multiple generations. Alvarez explains in an interview that this trauma initially caused her to make a “pact . . . not to tell the story, to remain silent, to behave,” to forsake her duty to provide her witness (“Windshield” 137).

As a survivor, Alvarez cannot escape her duty to witness on behalf of both the living and the dead, and she seems driven by the survivor’s guilt she feels. Primo Levi argues that survivors “are not the true witnesses”; instead, they “are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom” (qtd. in Agamben 33). Alvarez notes the same kind of uneasiness at her privilege when she writes of her first thoughts on the Mirabal sisters: “these three brave sisters . . . stood in stark contrast to the self-saving actions of my own family” (“Chasing” 198). To some extent, the struggle that Alvarez’s Dedé encounters upon being left as the lone remaining sister can be read as Alvarez’s witness to her own struggle to explain why her family was spared and not the Mirabals. Because of the episode with the *Time* magazine, we can understand both of Alvarez’s first two novels through the same contextual lens she provides when describing Dedé in the frame story. Alvarez writes, Dedé set “up her life as if it were an exhibit labeled neatly for those who can read: THE SISTER WHO SURVIVED” (*Butterflies* 5).

If we understand that Alvarez writes as much about Dedé as she writes about herself, we realize that she must tell and retell her story to explain why she survived. She continues this parallel when she describes her representational efforts in the postscript: “what you find here are the Mirabals of my creation, made up but, I hope, true to the spirit of the real Mirabals” (324). This statement evokes the way that Alvarez describes Dedé’s efforts to remember her sisters, noting that Dedé’s “memory is playing dolls with the past” (9). In some respects, Alvarez provides the objective correlative for Dedé—Alvarez’s novel, conceived as an imaginative reconstruction, too, plays with the Mirabals as if they were dolls. Alvarez is playing with the past in effort to write and rewrite her own story in a way that allows her to reconcile her past trauma.

While the García family’s dislocation and the Mirabal sisters’ assassination constitute important Dominican experiences of the *trujillato*, other events like incarceration, violence against the body, and execution do not adequately flesh out the archive of indicting evidence against Trujillo in Dominican-American literary witnesses. Alvarez drives this point home in *Butterflies* by setting up the sisters’ story to witness Trujillo’s propensity to consume everything Dominican. Trujillo’s insatiable appetite to consume the Dominican Republic economically (Crassweller 124-28; Derby; Galíndez 177-80) was rivaled by his appetite for the people, especially women. Crassweller notes that Trujillo “delighted in both the company and the bodies of women” (79). Crassweller indicates that Trujillo’s lieutenants gathered as many as thirty women twice a week so that Trujillo could select a few for sexual conquest (80). Trujillo pressured those women who did not offer themselves willingly by dishonoring them publicly or threatening family members with incarceration (80-81). Crassweller explains that as Trujillo aged, his appetite for women increased “according to some mathematical formula of progression which denied biology itself” (434). Rather than twice a week, Trujillo’s lieutenants gathered

women three times a week and the groups grew from thirty to forty women each time. *Butterflies* asks us to consider how an author might accurately represent a witness of Trujillo's physically tangible, but hard to quantify, predilection for the consumption of the Dominican people. As noted earlier, by examining Carlos García's behavior at his birthday, even those who opposed Trujillo adopted his behavior. Alvarez's return to a witness of the *trujillato* represents her attempt to make meaning of the mechanism of behavioral cooptation and the seismic trauma, whose aftershocks continue to vibrate destructively in the Dominican present.

Tal predicts that witnesses like Alvarez will codify their experiences so that "narrative form gradually replaces content as the focus of attention" (6). Tal contends that the process of encoding events as narratives helps convert a "frightening and uncontrollable event into contained and predictable narrative" (6). We might productively understand Tal's argument as a logical extension of Laub's contention that "no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion" to provide one's witness to the traumatic event (78). In fact, Laub argues that survivors must bear and re-bear their witnesses since each successive telling might come closer to helping survivors understand what happened. Laub contends that those who do not tell their story risk becoming "victims of a distorted memory" and that the act of "'not telling' . . . serves as a perpetuation of tyranny" of the traumatic event (79). Perhaps this fear of repeated tyranny provides one compulsion for Alvarez to retell her witness in *Butterflies*. In the retelling, however, Alvarez adopts a particular narrative structure as the most descriptive of her experience: the Holocaust. When Alvarez writes of her earliest attempts to write the story of the Mirabal sisters, she explains her struggle: "I couldn't yet imagine how one tells a story like this. *Once upon a holocaust, there were three butterflies*" ("Chasing" 202). From the inception of this project, then,

Alvarez understands that she will aestheticize the story of the Mirabal sisters as the victims of a holocaust.

Many scholars level criticism at the invocation of the Holocaust as a potential signifying narrative structure for understanding one's traumatic experience. James Young argues that "as new [traumatic] experiences are necessarily grasped and represented in the frame of remembered past experiences, 'incomprehensible' experiences like the Holocaust will always be made—at least rhetorically—comparable" to these new events (99). However unpopular Young's argument might be, Tal, in reworking Miriam Greenspan's argument, "consider[s] it imperative to reduce the Holocaust from 'holy object' to 'something which happened in history,'" so that we can understand how the Holocaust has been invoked and represented in contemporary culture (8). Witness scholars, like Agamben and Weissman, demonstrate unease at the suggestions of Tal, Greenspan, and Young that the Holocaust must be demythologized or desacralized because the Holocaust represents a historical event without analog. However, Agamben and Weissman also desacralize the Holocaust by arguing against the use of the term Holocaust to describe the Final Solution. Both warn that the term holocaust derives from a Greek word denoting that a sacrifice—which has been placed upon an altar and offered to God—has been completely destroyed by fire (Agamben 28; Weissman 24). Weissman adds that the term *holocaustos* makes scholars uneasy since it "suggests that God accepted the destruction of the European Jews as a sacrificial offering" and implies that Nazis "played a quasi-priestly role in preparing this sacrifice" (24). Therefore, although Agamben and Weissman argue against the semantic migration of the term, Alvarez's invocation of the *holocaustos* prescribes that two elements appear, beyond the mere consumption of the sacrifice by fire: an offering to Deity and the preparation of the offering by quasi-priests.

The imagination of the Mirabal sisters' experience in terms of a *holocaustos* demonstrates that Alvarez understands the event as meaningful, at least in terms of the power of sacrifice to atone, appease Deity, or offer gratitude, but Holocaust scholars warn against envisioning human suffering in terms of meaningful sacrifice. By framing the traumatic moment as meaningful, in a pseudo-historiographic narrative, we might read *Butterflies* as evidence of LaCapra's claim that historiography may counteract perpetual reenactments of traumatic events. For example, in order to appropriate and incorporate the narrative codes of a religious Holocaust, Alvarez must cast the death of the sisters in terms of religion. Though the novel treats the Mirabal family's pious devotions, Alvarez deploys Patria's narrative, more specifically, to frame her holocaust narrative in terms of religion. One Easter, Patria finds herself inquiring from her priest Padre Ignacio what these difficult times require of devout Dominicans, but she dares not get "too critical [because] we all knew there were priests around who would report you to the SIM" (154). What may be most jarring about Alvarez's deployment of Holocaust codes is not the individual piety of Dominicans, but perhaps the need to convert Trujillo into a divine presence who demands and accepts the death of the sisters as worthy sacrifices made to him.

The portraits of Trujillo and Christ hang side by side in the Mirabal home (17); Dominicans throughout the nation duplicated the practice of hanging a portrait of Trujillo in their homes (53). Where Hickman reads the inclusion of these portraits in terms of Foucault's reworking of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon (159), Isabel Brown reads the portraits as a metonym for Trujillo's presence through the Dominican Republic (102). While both these interpretive readings of the portraits are compelling, they seem reductive when considering the way Alvarez encodes the novel in terms of a *holocaustos*. The portraits, when taken individually, seem innocuous, an admission of the separation of Church and State. This same logic, however,

seems to indicate that one owed devotion to both the divinity of Christ and the secular office of Trujillo. In order to sacralize the death of the sisters as an oblation to Trujillo, though, Alvarez must merge the sacred and the secular. Alvarez achieves this alchemy by utilizing the religious worldview of Patria. When Patria and Minerva relax together on a hammock, Minerva catches Patria “gazing at [their] portrait of the Good Shepherd” and remarks, “They’re a pair aren’t they?” (53). Patria, still mourning the loss of a baby, finally understands Minerva’s hatred for Trujillo: Trujillo had eradicated all males in the Perozo family, murdered “Martínez Reyna and his wife . . . in their bed,” and authorized the Parsley Massacre of 1937 (53). For all of these wrongs, Patria looks to the picture of Christ to “challenge Him” for all the wrongs that he had let happen in the lives of Dominicans and Haitians and notes that the “two faces had merged” (53). In this moment, at least through Patria’s religious narrative, Alvarez succeeds in blurring the line between Trujillo and Christ, setting in motion a transformation that will enable her to write a novel that finds meaning in the experience of the *trujillato* through the narrative of sacrifice. The juxtaposition and merging of the two portraits asks that we return to the first invocation of the portraits in order to nuance the other associational problems inherited by Dominicans when Alvarez, through Patria, makes this meaning-making move. When Minerva originally tells us about the portrait of Christ, she also explains that it depicts Christ as the Good Shepherd, surrounded by “a whole flock of the cutest lambs” (17). If the Mirabals, and all other Dominicans, represent the lambs that surround the now sacralized version of Trujillo and we understand Trujillo as a Judeo-Christian deity, then it follows that Alvarez has created a Dominican Republic in which the death of every individual can be understood as a sacrifice placed on the altar.

Patria's experience helps readers to see Alvarez's conversion of Dominicans into sacrificial lambs for Trujillo's consumption at the altar. Patria suffers the direct effects of the *trujillato* when her son, Nelson, is incarcerated. Patria admits that as she walked by the portraits in the Mirabal home, she found herself "praying a little greeting" (202) to the portraits. Though she claims that she did not pray to Trujillo's portrait because she felt he was "worthy" of her prayers, she does note that "I wanted something from him, and prayer was the only way I knew how to ask" (202). Complicating her intention to re-individuate Trujillo from Christ, she "set up a vase on the table right under his picture [and] every day [she] changed the flowers and said a few words" (202). This act of devotion in setting up a shrine to Trujillo undercuts her efforts to fully individuate Trujillo as separate from Christ. It seems that the religious narrative through which she chooses to describe her own experience asks us to interrogate her admission that she hoped her simple offerings at the shrine would "turn [Trujillo] to his better nature" (203). Patria provides one way to understand her propitiation according to a Faustian narrative by remarking that Fela, the superstitious servant in the Mirabal home, "thought that I was trying to strike a deal with the evil one" (203). By extending Patria's earlier pictorial merger of Trujillo and Christ and understanding Patria's propitiations in terms of a Christian narrative where small sacrifices are offered to turn away the wrath of God from the sinner and invoke mercy toward the penitent, we see how Patria's worldview, even in this moment of intended differentiation between Trujillo and Christ, causes her to reinforce the Holocaust paradigm that Alvarez establishes in the narrative.

One final moment where the deployment of Patria's religious narrative frames *Butterflies* in terms of a meaning-making Holocaust occurs when Patria travels to Santo Domingo to retrieve Nelson from the presidential palace. When the guards march out Nelson and other

prisoners that Trujillo has graciously decided to pardon, Patria swears she hears the voice of God calling her name. When her husband explains that it was “Trujillo calling [her] to receive [her] prisoner,” she declares, “I know a godly voice when I hear one. I heard Him alright and He called my name” (226). Patria literally hears the voice of Trujillo, but Alvarez points out that, to Patria, it is the voice of God by using capitalized pronouns. By merging the identities of Jesus Christ and Rafael Trujillo, Alvarez continues to frame the impending execution of the Mirabal sisters as a *holocaustos*, offered to Trujillo, who in the narrative, by this point, has become deity. Patria explicitly understands her life in terms of *holocaustos* as she describes her petitions. When she makes her prayer to El Jefe’s portrait to release her son, in accordance with the Judeo-Christian narrative that she accepts as descriptive of her own lived experience, she relies on the Biblical narrative of Abraham and Isaac: “*I’ll be your sacrificial lamb*” (203). Patria continues to use the same Abrahamic narrative to understand her life when she refers to Nelson as “my first born, my little ram” (220). It is this moment where the multivalenced, associational subject positions within a Dominican Holocaust become fully realized. Trujillo is the deity to whom Dominicans owe propitiation in the form of personal, and at times literally corporeal, sacrifices. Dominicans are the lambs over which Trujillo watches as a shepherd, but also who must be sacrificed when necessary. As Tal predicts, eventually form takes precedence over the content when rewriting trauma. In this case, the form is Judeo-Christian ritual sacrifice.

If we are to understand *Butterflies* as a revisit to Alvarez’s own trauma that encodes the experience according to a particular narrative, then the deification of Trujillo through the alchemy of Trujillo and Christ provides merely one element of the religious holocaust. In order to write the story of the Mirabals as a sacrifice, Alvarez must also encode some of the characters as quasi-priests who present the sacrifice at the altar for the consumption by a now deified

Trujillo. Though the earlier analysis Yolanda's critique of her father, Carlos, in *García Girls* provides the most damning indictment of Dominican complicity by intimating that even those who fought against the regime adopted and perpetuated Trujillo's behavior, Alvarez's return to a witness of the *trujillato* in *Butterflies* provides a more troubling portraiture of Dominican complicity. For this role, Alvarez need not stray too far from actual historical events. Many Dominican men were eager to aide Trujillo's consumption of women. Most often, those complicit in this system were high-ranking officials who had the most to gain (Crassweller 434; Espaillat 40). These men were more than willing to help shepherd women toward the predatory appetite of Trujillo. It is through Minerva that readers get an exclusive look at how Dominicans become quasi-priests in the offering of one another as sacrifices as Alvarez paints a portrait of Manuel de Moya, a top aide, whose job it is to round up women for Trujillo:

Manuel de Moya is pacing back and forth at the entrance. I recognize him from the last party, and of course his picture is always in the papers. "Secretary of State," people say, winking one eye. Everyone knows his real job is rounding up pretty girls for El Jefe to try out. How they get talked into it, I don't know. Manuel de Moya is supposed to be smooth with the ladies, they probably think they're following the example of the Virgencita if they bed down with the Benefactor of the Fatherland. (94)

Don Manuel serves as an analog for other men, just like him, who willingly lead fellow citizens to Trujillo as offerings, just as the priests of the Old Testament led lambs to the altars as oblations to God. If Alvarez hopes to witness that men, like Don Manuel, are complicit perpetrators in the trauma Trujillo's regime caused, deploying themes of Old Testament sacrifice to describe their involvement risks exculpating them by attributing their behavior to performing

their duty before God. If Alvarez exonerates these men, however, then she avoids assigning blame and asking readers to pronounce judgment, tasks that Agamben identifies as crucial to witnessing. The risk of exoneration highlights how narrative structure might actually inhibit Alvarez's ability to provide an accurate witness.

Despite this potential risk, Alvarez sacralizes the ritual of leading Dominicans to Trujillo as offerings of propitiation through the experience of Minerva. After Enrique's imprisonment for the Mirabal flight from Trujillo's Discovery Day party, Mercedes and Minerva travel to the Governor's mansion to plead for the release of Enrique. While there, Minerva suffers the indignity of a suggestion by Governor Antonio de la Maza, which signals that he, too, understands his role in facilitating the offering of fellow Dominicans as sacrifices to Trujillo. Don Antonio tells Minerva, "I believe there is a way you can help your father," implying that for sexual favors her father might be released (104). What makes Don Antonio's suggestion most nefarious, in terms of the expiation and propitiation of a holocaust offering, is that Minerva may substitute herself on behalf of her father. His suggestion intimates the sacralization of Minerva's substitution for her father in a way analogous to Jesus Christ. As government officials, both De Moya and Don Antonio might have resisted the compulsion to act as priests leading their fellow men and women to the altar as sacrifices; however, they impotently accept their roles as those priests who present other Dominicans to Trujillo for his own consumption.

These men, though visible examples, through the power granted them by the state, of complicity among Dominicans, do not comprise the entirety of Dominican collusion. In Alvarez's return to Dominican complicity in *Butterflies*, the family patriarch once again receives critical attention. When the Mirabals receive the invitation to the Discovery Day party, the matriarch of the family, Mercedes Mirabal, rejects Mate's petition to attend the dance and

implicates Enrique's complicity in taking Minerva: "expose another young, single daughter to danger, ¡No señorita!" (90). As we might expect from Alvarez's treatment of Carlos, all Papá can muster is a very weak "Trujillo is the law." Rather than face Trujillo's wrath, Enrique weakly offers up his daughters in another simulacral display of levitical oblation. Papá only acts in self-preservation; Patria's complicity, however, cannot be described by survival instinct. She permits her young daughter, Noris, to accompany her to retrieve Nelson and realizes, "¡Ay, Dios mío! What could I be thinking, bringing her along!" (223). The fact that most Dominicans act as quasi-priests explains why Alvarez, in an effort to understand what happened, allows Patria to admit that she "wanted to start believing in [her] fellow Dominicans again" (222). She further notes that the real work, after Trujillo's death, will be "forgiving each other for what we had all let come to pass" (222). In her appropriation of *holocaustos* codes, Alvarez demonstrates that at least one reason for continuing trauma in Dominican-American literature is the fact that all Dominicans, at some level, deserve blame for deifying Trujillo. They also deserve blame for serving as quasi-priests in presenting each other for Trujillo's consumption: either in the interest of self-preservation or, as Patria indicates, out of naïveté. The problematic part of using *holocaustos* codes as a register into which Alvarez can describe her imagination of Dominican-American experience is that it creates meaning where perhaps none existed.

We revisit the question raised by Díaz in his interview with Hinojosa, "How do you articulate something for which there is almost no metrics?" As Alvarez indicated in the postscript to *Butterflies*, traumatic experience can only "be understood by fiction [or] redeemed by the imagination" (324). If trauma represents the unspeakable in our experience, then Alvarez's assertion that the imagination allows us a register into which we can write our experience seems a logical choice. However, the privileging of the imagination as a site for traumatic expression

seems to create other problems in terms of Dominican-American writers' efforts to narrate their encounters with the *trujillato*. A unique intertextuality has developed in Dominican-American witnesses of the *trujillato*. As one example, Díaz makes two specific references to *Butterflies* in his novel *Oscar Wao*. In describing the beating of one of his characters in a sugarcane field, Díaz asks, "What was to keep the assassins from returning to finish what they had started? After all, they had killed the world-famous Mirabal sisters, who were of Name" (156-57). Díaz notes that the Mirabal family was "world-famous" and "of Name," meaning Alvarez portrays the experience of an upper class Dominican family. By noting that not even family prominence can save a Dominican from Trujillo's violence, Díaz intimates that Alvarez's narrative of the "world-famous" sisters fails to represent more than a microscopic fraction of the collective's experience because she ignores the common and everyday Dominican citizen. Díaz seems to indicate that, although the perpetrators of atrocities against Dominican citizens might think twice about abusing and assassinating "world-famous" Dominicans, nothing would stop them from torturing and murdering ordinary Dominicans. In the footnote, Díaz performs his own revision to Alvarez's description of the *trujillato* by explaining that the true site of violence against the bodies of Dominicans does not occur on the altar of Alvarez's *holocaustos*, but rather in the sugar canefield (157).

Díaz's move to recover control over the narrative from Alvarez indicates an overt rejection of the Holocaust narrative that Alvarez uses to encode Dominican-American experience. As LaCapra notes, narrative structures require an author to create closure for poetic, or rhetorical purposes (15). This potential failure by historical recuperative projects that rely on the imagination provides one reason for LaCapra's claim that a historical narrative should not aim for closure, but that it should aim for what he calls "empathetic unsettlement" (41). He

argues that empathetic unsettlement “should have stylistic effects . . . which cannot be reduced to formulas or rules of method” (41). Though he does not equate formulas and rules with generic conventions that aim at producing closure, LaCapra’s claim that empathetic unsettlement “poses a barrier to closure . . . and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events” (41) indicates that he might see formulas, rules, and generic conventions as analogs. In order to produce empathetic unsettlement, LaCapra privileges the historian because the historian possesses the objective distance necessary to avoid appropriating the experience. Empathetic unsettlement, then, intends to create an understanding of an event while counteracting “a reenactment . . . of that disabling association” by not producing identification between the reader and the event.

Díaz’s rejection of Alvarez’s tame aesthetic representation of the *trujillato* as sacralized *holocaustos* indicates a distrust of tidy narratives, that purport to offer closure, reinforces LaCapra’s argument. However, where LaCapra presupposes the objective distance of the historian, Díaz’s project requires that we reconsider the ability of the historian to counteract the reenactment of trauma. The development of the Dominican-American canon in response to Julia Alvarez’s witness texts indicates that the preferable method for working through trauma might be the continual reimagination of an event by multiple members of the community. As each member adds her dialogic response to the narratives of others, the resulting body of literary work populates the structure of the traumatic experience in ways that allow the collective to better come to terms with the past. Though the event might be unspeakable, the passing of the torch from Alvarez to her compatriots indicates that imagination is the place for the transcription of that which has no metric, or linguistic register into which one may safely write traumatic experience.

Notes

¹ Weissman summarizes Deborah Lipstadt's work in *Denying the Holocaust* (1993) to explain that Holocaust denial does not mean denial that the event took place, but deniers argue that events have been misrepresented (6-7).

² Brown reads *Butterflies* in terms of Linda Hutcheon's notions of historiographic metafiction because, she argues, the novel aims to reconcile feminism's rebellion with the ambivalence of postmodernism by recovering an alternative history of the regime.

³ McCallum reads *Butterflies* as a "Caribbean" text through "the theoretical construct of creolization" (94) in order to explore how the novel represents the "sisters' struggles as analogous to those of people in other Caribbean countries in the wake of colonialism" (97). As Caribbean literature, McCallum argues that the novel reclaims a historical consciousness of the Dominican Republic as an uncolonized land.

⁴ Rich reads *Butterflies* in terms of Bakhtin's theories on polyphony, heteroglossia, and dialogism to explore how both the content and structure of the novel speak out against Trujillo's regime in a way that attempts to humanize the struggle against tyranny. She concludes, however, that in an effort to demythologize the sisters, Alvarez remythologizes them (180).

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