Reclaiming Julia Alvarez: *In the Time of the Butterflies*

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I mean, by "The Antilles," the reality of light, of work, of survival.
I mean a house on the side of a country road, I mean the Caribbean
Sea, whose smell is the smell of refreshing possibility as well as survival.
—Derek Walcott
The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory

Overwhelmingly, Julia Alvarez has been grouped with Latino writers, appearing in anthologies such as *Growing up Latino: memoirs and stories* and *Iguana Dreams: new Latino fiction*. Ruth Behar, a reviewer of *In the Time of the Butterflies*, links the novel to others by US Latina writers, citing Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek* and Christain Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*. Behar says: "in her engaging new novel, the Dominican American poet and writer Julia Alvarez joins these Latina writers in the feminist quest to bring Latin American women into the nation and into history as agents, out from under the shadows of those larger-than-life men who, too often, have treated the countries under their rule as personal fiefdoms" (6).

Claiming Alvarez as a Latina writer would seem logical given the importance of the bilingual experience for much of

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her writing. In their introduction to *Iguana Dreams: new Latino fiction*, Delia Poey and Virgil Suarez suggest that Latino "unity" is based on this experience of language:

> While we may speak with different accents and use different expressions, we all share the experience of bilingualism. The ability to communicate in two languages, and more importantly to think and feel in two languages, brings with it the phenomena of at times being unable to express oneself fully in only one [. . .]. We, as Latino writers and readers of Latino fiction, however, assert that the intermingling of the two languages is an effective means of communicating what otherwise could not be expressed. Thus many Latino writers use Spanish in their work because it is an integral part of their experience. (xvi)

This definition of Latino writing would certainly include Alvarez's other works and explain her frequent positioning as a Latina writer. Her first novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, for example, directly addresses many of the issues surrounding "the experience of bilingualism." But Poey and Suarez's proffered thematic and formal lens, while useful for understanding much Latino fiction, is less useful for interrogating the political, cultural and social struggles which are the foci of *In the Time of the Butterflies*. While Alvarez also incorporates a blending of Spanish and English into this novel, language is not the primary site of struggle in this text. Moreover, the text's and Alvarez's desire to offer a definition of Dominican identity is mediated from and through a specifically Caribbean perspective.

This essay will first present a discussion of our classification of texts as *Caribbean*, employing the theoretical construct of *creolization* to aid in this process. Subsequently, close readings of Alvarez's text will support the placement of her novel within a Caribbean model of interpretation. In turn, the essay will demonstrate the value of claiming Alvarez as a Caribbean writer, *as well as* a US Latina writer, and of considering *In the Time of the Butterflies* as belonging to and coming out of a Caribbean literary tradition. I emphasize "as well as" here because my attempt is not to reject previous classifications of Alvarez as a Latina writer. Rather, I suggest that she, and other writers in

similar liminal positions, occupy a number of places in our contemporary systems of classification of ethnic writers.

Because it allows us to recognize parallels of experience among various Caribbean countries, I invoke the construct of creolization to proceed with demarcating a Caribbean literary tradition. Theorists Jean Bernabe, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphael Confiant offer a definition of creolization in their essay "In Praise of Creoleness," elucidating the term by stating that it is "'*the world diffracted but recomposed*,' a maelstrom of signifieds in a single signifier: a Totality" (892).[1] A moving signifier, creolization thus bespeaks an idea which will not sit still.

As a paradigm for Caribbean identity, creolization seeks to denote people of the Caribbean as a group with certain commonalities while simultaneously belying the notion of singularity. *Creolization* is an attempt to express the *shared position* of a people searching for ways to represent themselves outside the gaze of the colonizer. While it may be argued that such representation, being truly "outside," is not possible, that a state of constant flux is difficult if not impossible to achieve, that the desire for a fixed or essential identity will be ever present, creolization seeks to counter these by emphasizing the *process*, the *searching*. In great part, this process, at the heart of the concept of creolization, allows us to recognize the similarities between the variegated countries to which we refer collectively as *Caribbean*, geographically and politically, but which do not all share a common language or identical histories.

Yet, while language per se is not a unifying experience—as the Caribbean is divided linguistically into the Anglophone, Hispanophone, Francophone, and Isophone regions—the historical relationship to language among the many peoples of the Caribbean is a unifying experience. Specifically, this relationship is one in which language has been imposed upon the colonized by the colonizer and in which *creole* languages have arisen as a form of resistance to this forced unlearning of the original tongue. Similarly, while histories are not identical among the islands, the experience of slavery and the plantation economy

and the resulting class and racial dynamics is a commonality among the various countries we denote as Caribbean. Moreover, being taught to privilege the colonizer's history, culture, religion and social structures and then learning to undo this teaching by legitimizing and praising various *creolized* aspects of Caribbean culture (i.e., Carnival and other masking traditions, Santeria, Rastafarianism, Voodoo, Reggae, Calypso) is an essential and consolidating Caribbean experience. Recognizing these intersections, I therefore designate as "Caribbean" those texts concerned with a people geographically rooted to that area of the world bound by the lesser Antilles and the Caribbean Sea, searching for historical consciousness and sharing a comparable cultural, economic, and political foundation as well as present-day reality.[2]

The identification of Latin America vs. the Caribbean is important if we are fully to understand these two regions and their present day histories and identities. Primarily, I argue, as other scholars and writers have, that the Atlantic slave trade and its manifestations, as they occurred in the Caribbean, accounts for this difference. In his appendix to *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James articulates this point:

> The history of the West Indies[3] is governed by two factors, the sugar plantation and Negro slavery [...]. Wherever the sugar plantation and slavery existed, they imposed a pattern. It is an original pattern, not European, not African, not a part of the American main, not native in any conceivable sense of that word, but West Indian, *sui generis*, with no parallel anywhere else. (391–92)

In her novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Alvarez renders an emblem of identity which resonates first with a Dominican experience and then with a larger Caribbean one. She achieves this in two primary ways: first by weaving historical narratives of colonization particular to the Dominican Republic into her text and second by presenting the period of Rafael Trujillo's rule in Dominican history in terms of a search for a national identity that would try to mediate the hegemonic structures implemented and exacerbated by colonial practices.[4]

Moreover, in this novel, Alvarez undertakes two even more far-reaching projects which are central to our reading of her text as *Caribbean*: first, she attempts to reclaim historical consciousness and to narrate a sense of a common Dominican identity via the sisters' connection to the *campesinos*[5] and the Tainos, the indigenous people in the Dominican Republic; second, she offers a strong critique of the "post-colonial"[6] situation of the Dominican Republic by presenting a world where dictators like Trujillo, the Dominican ruling class and the United States replace the original colonizers, though certainly in different ways and to different ends, as I will point out throughout this essay.

While I agree with several scholars' suggestions that Alvarez's novel succeeds in giving women a historical place within the context of revolution, based on the particular struggles of this text, I add that we must see this revolution as one specific to the Caribbean. Representing the Mirabal sisters' personal histories, Alvarez simultaneously offers us a view into the life of Dominicans after independence from the Spanish and under Trujillo's rule. This view is confined to the first-person perspective of these four women, who are from a white, upper-class Dominican home; however, their relationship, or lack of relationship, to the *campesinos* and the Afro-Dominicans present in the text reveals a great deal about the class and racial divides extant in Dominican society.[7] In addition, the sisters' historical awareness of the Tainos—albeit a romanticized one—and of the effect the Conquistadors and the US have had and continue to have on the island, lends insight into the dynamics of colonialism and imperialism. Through the story of *las mariposas*, Alvarez presents a trope for Caribbean people and countries in search of an historical identity. The representation of the sisters' struggles as analogous to those of people in other Caribbean countries in the wake of colonialism marks *In the Time of the Butterflies* as a decisively Caribbean text.

Alvarez constructs the narrative frame of the novel via conversations between Dedé, the surviving Mirabal sister, and the *gringa dominicana*—Alvarez's double, I suggest—who has

returned to her birthplace to uncover information about the sisters' execution.[8] The story unfolds via Dedé and the *gringa dominicana's* present-day interchange in 1993. Interspersed are flashbacks to the time before Dedé's sisters have been killed. In these flashbacks, we are privy not only to Dedé's version of the story but also to the three deceased sisters' first-person accounts of their lives—as "invented[ed]" by Alvarez—leading up to the hijacking of their car and their murders (323). This four-voice, first-person narrative is one Alvarez also uses successfully in her novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*.

Early in their lives, the Mirabal girls are sent to a convent boarding school to be educated—in scholarship, religion and the role of women. After graduating and returning home, only to be denied the privilege of attending university in the capital, the eldest sister Minerva is frustrated by her feelings of helplessness and is confused by what she witnesses happening to the nation. When as a young adolescent girl she went away to boarding school, she left her parent's home with faith in her country and in Trujillo still intact; at the convent, she even sleeps with Trujillo's photograph under her pillow to feel his presence watching over and protecting her.

But after Minerva learns that the family of her friend Sinita had been massacred for opposing Trujillo, after Minerva sees her beautiful and innocent friend Lina coveted and ruthlessly courted by the already married Trujillo, her faith is shaken. Both of these almost-personal brushes with Trujillo's treachery are enough to make Minerva begin to open her eyes to the unthinkable possibility that *El Jefe* is perhaps not the saviour the Dominican people have enshrined him as. It is as the "country people say," Minerva thinks while still at the convent:

> until the nail is hit, it doesn't believe in the hammer. Everything Sinita said I filed away as a terrible mistake that wouldn't happen again. Then the hammer came down hard right in our own school, right on Lina Lovaton's head. Except she called it love and went off, happy as a newlywed. (20)

Minerva's and Lina's varied responses to Trujillo comment on the differences between women in the Dominican Republic, and Alvarez suggests that Minerva represents the feminist and more enlightened stance. While Lina accepts Trujillo's right to make her his mistress and "call[s] it love," Minerva sees it clearly for what it is, a strategy of domination. Years later, Lina will become pregnant, be shipped off to Miami and—like so many of Trujillo's mistresses—end up in disgrace. This passage reveals Minerva's movement toward political and social consciousness.

Living in an extremely patriarchal society, however, Minerva's burgeoning consciousness does not find easy routes for action. Dedé remembers her sister's frustration during the time following their return from school. One afternoon, while taking inventory in the family store, the two sisters meet Virgilio Morales—a "radical young man" from the university (68). Reflecting on the impact of this meeting on Minerva's life, Dedé notes that "Lio presented a very real opportunity," specifically for Minerva, as a woman, I would add, "to fight against [Trujillo's] regime" (66). For Dedé, Lio's ideas are frightening, too "lofty," not substantial enough to hold onto: "she had wanted something practical, something she could use to stave off her growing fears" (77). But Minerva is growing into her own awareness of how Trujillo wields power in the country and does not yet know how to reconcile her own family's stability with the instability of other Dominicans. The fact that, Lio's ideas, idealism and fervor provide a foundation upon which to construct Minerva's own political identity, awkwardly positions her to counter male hegemony.

The framework of Communism, to which Lio introduces Minerva, plants the seeds for her fight against Trujillo's injustice and ultimately for her fight for the rights of the *campesinos*. The valuing of the *campesino* we witness in Minerva, and later on in the other Mirabal sisters, is an offshoot of Marxist–Leninist thought pertaining to the rights of the proletariat. We can see how such ideology would have been liberating for Lio, Minerva

and other "intellectual" Dominicans who were involved in the resistance movement. As an ideology *for* the masses but orchestrated *by* the elite, it entered the Dominican intellectual scene on the heels of Trujillo's reign and attempted to counter the remnants of colonialism and the introduction of US imperialism. The United States' ardent opposition to Communism furthered many of Trujillo's opponents' attachment to Communist ideals and Communism thus became not only a form of resistance to Trujillo but to the US as well. For Minerva in particular, whose upper-class background does not place her in a position of being immediately threatened by Trujillo, it offers an avenue to understanding the economic and social position of those suffering around her.

While the rights of the *campesinos* are not the initial focus of Minerva's opposition to Trujillo, the incorporation of colloquial phrases representing the "golden-skinned" Dominican folk such as "until the nail is hit, it doesn't believe in the hammer", reveals Minerva's connection to the *campesinos* (160). Similarly, at Trujillo's Discovery Day Dance—an event to celebrate Columbus and his "discovery" of the "new world," which precedes Minerva's formal involvement with the resistance movement—she makes two other references to the *campesinos* which further suggest their importance. In one instance, when repeatedly offered remedies for her headache by Trujillo's Americanized Secretary of State, Manuel de Moya, an exasperated Minerva finally responds by suggesting that they "try the country cure" (97). When de Moya asks "what cure is that?" his ignorance proves to Minerva "that he is not a man to trust," thus indicating the importance she places on the wisdom to be obtained from the *campesinos* highlighting the value she places on Dominicans who look to their own cultural traditions rather than, like de Moya, to American culture as a source of identity (97). In the second instance, while dancing with de Moya after their interchange, Minerva thinks to herself: "sure enough, as the *campesinos* say, *Un clavo saca otro clavo*. One nail takes out another. The exciting rhythm of Alberti's 'Fiesta' overwhelms

the pulsing throb of my headache" (97). Again, Alvarez portrays the language of the *campesino* as integral to Minerva's consciousness alongside the decorum of the dance.

But even before the Discovery Day Dance, Minerva has begun to look to the *campesinos* as a symbol—albeit a romanticized one from her position—of national identity for the country. When driving back with her father, after meeting her "outside family," Minerva watches the men all around her: "All the way home I kept seeing them from the corners of my eyes, men bending in the fields, men riding horses, men sitting by the side of the road, their chairs tipped back, nibbling on a spear of grass, and I knew very well I was looking at what I wanted at last" (92–3). Certainly the freedom that men have—freedom to which Minerva is denied full access under the Dominican patriarchal system—is one of the things she laments as she herself gazes slantly at these men. However, this passage also speaks to Minerva's desire to identify with not just any man but specifically with the *campesinos*, who Minerva views as the "common man". Her desire, in this passage uncomfortably blends into the resistance movement's push to create a national identity via the *campesinos*.

The Taino, another group being revived in the resistance movement's search for a national identity, also plays an important role in Alvarez's narrative. Attempting to articulate a common historical consciousness for all Dominicans, Minerva and several others exhume the Tainos as the original and thus truest Dominicans. By way of several references throughout the novel, as with the references to the *campesinos*, Alvarez portrays Taino traditions as natural aspects of the characters' consciousness—thereby suggesting the survival of Taino ontological thought to the present. Manolo, Minerva's husband, takes the name *Enriquillo* as his code name in the resistance, paying homage to the great Taino chieftain. Even Jaimito, Dedé's husband who remains passive to Trujillo's terror, is aware of Taino history: on their honeymoon, he points out an area of one of the Dominican Republic's famous lagoons

where "the Tainos had fished and later hidden from the Spanish" (189).

Perhaps the most important mention of the Taino, though, occurs during the pivotal scene in the novel, the Discovery Day Dance. It is the first time we witness the Mirabal family's personal exposure to Trujillo's cruelty. If before Minerva has been the only Mirabal agitating against Trujillo, after that event no one in the family is able to remain blind to his petty, childish and vengeful behavior. In this scene, Minerva tells Patria that her theory for the poor weather they see each time around that year is that "the god of thunder *Huracan* always acts up around the holiday of the Conquistador, who killed all of his Taino devotees" (93). Even before they are involved in the resistance, the sisters both appear familiar enough with Taino belief systems to recognize *Huracan* and his role, thus suggesting inclusion of Taino culture in their understanding of the natural world. In this scene, Alvarez critiques colonialism and Trujillo's reenactment of colonial practices via the symbolic force of the Taino god: the torrential rain that begins precisely as Minerva slaps Trujillo allows the Mirabals to make their exit and also leads to the ruin of Trujillo's party. Meaningfully, Alvarez suggests that *Huracan* is the only one capable of exacting a small measure of revenge against Trujillo.

Alvarez's interspersion of the original inhabitants' history throughout the text, and specifically at the Discovery Day Dance, serves as a way of bringing the Taino into present-day Dominican consciousness and of resisting Trujillo and the celebration of "discovery". While saying this, however, I must also acknowledge that the Mirabal sisters' perspective of the Tainos, like that of the *campesinos*, veers toward idealization. Based on the tendency for *indianista* works to romanticize the Indian culture, it is important to remember, once again, the limited perspective the sisters offer due to their own social positions (135).

Moreover, we might question the motives for the Mirabal sisters' idealization of the Tainos in the context of the Hispanophone Caribbean Scholar Rodriguez-Luis's suggestion that

parallel racism in *Enriquillo* resulted from such idealization in the Dominican Republic:

> In Santo Domingo [. . .] the indianista novel *Enriquillo* represents much more than the typical ignorance of the real Indian that characterized other indianista works [. . .]. *Enriquillo* expresses the will to hide the reality of the African-origin Dominican through the idealisation of an indigenous inhabitant no longer existing, and, above all, of his relationship with the conqueror (the Spanish king accepts as just Enriquillo's rebellion and grants him a privileged status). This served also the need of a bourgeoisie in the process of consolidating itself through entering the US orbit [. . .] to justify that transition, which called even more urgently for rejecting the blacks. (135)

In this light, it is no coincidence that Manolo, a white upper-class Dominican like the Mirabals, takes *Enriquillo* as his code name in the resistance. Coupled with the near exclusion of the Afro-Dominican experience from the text, except as rendered only briefly and distantly via the sisters, the references to the Tainos throughout the novel must be viewed ambivalently. The inclusion of Taino history advances Alvarez's argument that colonization has erased Dominican history and simultaneously tries to combat that erasure. But, as Rodriguez-Luis's criticism reminds us, we must be critical when reading and interpreting that gesture. While we should not overlook the importance of the textual references to the Tainos, we must be aware that even Alvarez's renditions of the Tainos bear the indelible mark of the rhetorical erasures of colonization.

Despite the limitations, one of Alvarez's important gains in portraying the sisters' relationship to the *campesinos* and the Tainos is to impel the reader to acknowledge that once the Conquistadors leave the island, the ideology of colonialism continues. At the Discovery Day Dance and through his continued oppression of the Dominican people, everywhere apparent in the text, Trujillo celebrates and glorifies Columbus: in doing so, he embodies the colonizer mentality. When Trujillo says, while dancing with Minerva, "perhaps I could conquer this jewel as El Conquistador conquered this island," his position as the new colonizer—and Alvarez's judgment of that position—could not be more explicitly stated (99). In addition to the

sexism here—sexism which runs throughout the text, often under the guise of "cosas de los hombres" or *machismo*—Trujillo is clearly aligning himself with the most infamous colonizer, in deed and in speech (92).[9]

In particular, Alvarez makes the link between the racism Trujillo's policies in the Dominican Republic and the Conquistadors who eradicated the Tainos—primarily through forced labor and the introduction of disease—and uprooted Africans from their homeland, bringing them to the Dominican Republic to work and live as slaves. During the time that Minerva, Mate, and the men in the family are imprisoned, Patria makes two specific references to Trujillo's racially motivated practices. First, she describes Don Bernardo, the man who has "come through for [them] [...] at a time when most people [are] avoiding the Mirabals," as the "next door angel disguised as an old Spaniard with an ailing wife" (214–15). She then explains that he had emigrated from Spain "under a refuge program Trujillo had instituted in the forties to 'whiten the race'" (214–15). Her mention of Don Bernardo, and this "program," provides an example of a specific program Trujillo had enacted to increase racial division.

Shortly after this reflection, Patria proceeds to collect her son Nelson, who is being released as a part of Trujillo's show of good will.[10] Upon entering the room where she is reunited with her son, Patria comments on the guards present: "posted at each [door] was a fine-featured guard from El Jefe's elite all-white corps" (224). While brief, her commentary accentuates the privileging of the "fine-features" possessed by whites—a ranking even Patria appears to accept as her comment bears no overt criticism of this racist standard of beauty. Nevertheless, her comment illustrates Trujillo's connection to yet another form of racism: his "all-white corps" embody Trujillo's re-visioning of colonial attitudes toward anyone of African descent.[11]

Perhaps most significant for Alvarez's overall strategy of exposing the vestiges of colonization, however, is the fact that she does not blame Trujillo alone for the continuation of the

repressive systems in place in the country. While Alvarez might have been even more far-reaching in her criticism of the ruling class, especially in regard to race relations, there is still extant in the text her critique of the individuals who would have kept Trujillo in power, individuals who backed him and without whom Trujillo would never have been able to wield control. Most pointedly through Minerva's perspective, Alvarez levels blame against Minerva's father, the president of their local branch of *Trujillo Tillers*, and Minerva's brother-in-law Jaimito, both of whom represent the ruling class of Dominicans who effectively participated in their own "colonization."

When Minerva discovers her father's affair, it is one of the first signals for her that *Papa*, like Trujillo, is not quite the man she has believed him to be. After discovering his "outside family" and insisting that he take her to meet her sisters, Minerva comes closer than anyone else to confronting his hypocrisy and, in a way, to confronting the hypocrisy in which her whole family is implicated. Her father has been cheating on her mother with *una campesina* for ten years, producing four other Mirabal girls in the process. Minerva, wants an explanation: "I know the clouds have already rained [...] but, Papa, why did you do it?" (92).

To her question, he simply replies, "*cosas de los hombres* [...]. Things a man does," dismissing any personal responsibility for his actions and revealing a "colonizing" mentality similar to Trujillo's but on a smaller scale (92). While Señor Mirabal's actions are representative of patriarchal and "upper class" attitudes, these attitudes are ones that Alvarez links throughout the text to a colonizing mentality. What Minerva begins to realize with the affair, is the way in which her father mirrors Trujillo. Like Lina Lovatan in Trujillo's case, Don Mirabal's mistress is *una desgraciada*: she is a disgraced woman in a community that looks down upon affairs but, ironically, simultaneously turns its gaze so as not to acknowledge such indiscretions.

Minerva's questioning of her father's political stance continues when, at the Discovery Day Dance, he pushes her to accept El Jefe's invitation to sit at his table. When they arrive at the party, de Moya extends the invitation to Minerva on Trujillo's behalf and her sisters "exchange a scared look" (94). They have already been alerted to potential danger by the note attached to the invitation, stipulating that "la señorita Mirabal not fail to attend," and by the stories they have heard about "young women drugged, then raped by El Jefe" (90, 95). But contrary to her and her sisters' reactions, Minerva's father responds by saying: "It is really quite an honor [...]. Go on, my daughter. You are keeping Don Manuel waiting" (94). As Minerva leaves she gives her father "an angry look" and wonders if he has not now "lost *all* his principles" (95). Her questioned faith in her father's "principles" allows us to look critically at Don Mirabal's compromised position of authority: living in terrified compliance of Trujillo, he sacrifices his own daughter.

Minerva's most blatant criticism of her father comes after his death, however, at a time when all the sisters but Dedé have become involved with the resistance. One afternoon after Jaimito has left the home, Minerva, Patria, and Mate approach Dedé and attempt to enlist her in the struggle. Dedé resists, offering the excuse that Jaimito would not want her to be involved while recognizing that, in truth, she is "hiding behind her husband's fears, bringing down scorn on [her husband] instead of herself" (179–80). Minerva responds to Dedé's fear with anger, shocking all of her sisters with a condemnation, not only of Jaimito, but also of their father and all the other men whose silence in the face of inhumanity and whose prosperity at the expense of others have kept Trujillo in place:

> "In his own way, Papa was a *trujillista*," Minerva announce[s] [...] "His advice was always, don't annoy the bees, don't annoy the bees. It's men like him and Jaimito and other scared *fulanitos* who have kept the devil in power all these years." (179)

As Minerva articulates in this passage, it is not only their fear for personal safety, but also their desire to preserve their tenuous grip on power and economic prosperity, which prevents men like Don Mirabal and Jaimito from speaking out against Trujillo's terror. Minerva's remark when she first thinks of her father's affair is one we can easily read as applicable to Alvarez's critique of the complicity of the ruling class who kept Trujillo in power: "It was [they] who would have the hardest time living with the shabby choices [they'd] made" (89).

Alvarez wants us to see how Trujillo and his supporters keep colonial systems of oppression in place inside the Dominican Republic. But equally she wants us to acknowledge the United States' interference and imperialist policies. Throughout the text, she presents several examples of these US policies in action and reproaches these policies, either directly, via the characters' remarks, or indirectly, via the symbolism inherent in the scenes.

One subtle example of how the US usurps Spain's colonizer position in the novel occurs when Mate, at university with Minerva, explains her reasoning for discontinuing the study of French: "I decided to take English instead—as we are closer to the U.S.A. than France... *Hello, my name is Mary Mirabal. I speak a little English. Thank you very much*" (124). The translation of her name from *Maria* to *Mary* indicates the process of renaming heritage and culture through language—symbolically marking the loss of yet another tongue—instigated by US presence in the Dominican Republic.

Walcott's essay, "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry," discusses the threat the US poses for the entire Caribbean. While he refers specifically to the British Caribbean, the presence of the US in the region from the latter part of the last century onward is applicable to the other islands as well and especially to the Dominican Republic, which suffered multiple occupations by the US in the twentieth century alone. Walcott says: "But we were American even while we were British, if only in the geographical sense, and now that the shadow of the British Empire has passed over us in the Caribbean, we ask ourselves

if, in the spiritual or cultural sense, we must become American" (3). Because of its proximity to the Caribbean, precedents set by the Monroe Doctrine and the United States' rising position as a world superpower, we might see how US imperialism supersedes the legacy of colonialism in the "New World."

In addition to the present-day US presence, the history of US occupation is remembered unfavorably in the text. Before the trouble with Trujillo begins, the sisters go on a pilgrimage with their mother, who has planned the trip as a retreat to come to terms with her husband's infidelity. Curious about the resistance the *gavilleros* and *campesinos* staged when the Yanquis invaded, Minerva asks her mother if she "sympathized with the *gavilleros*" (56). To this, her mother replies:

> Of course, I sympathized with our patriots. But what could we do against the Yanquis? They killed anyone who stood in their way. They burned our house down and called it a mistake. They weren't in their own country so they didn't have to answer to anyone. (57).

Doña Mirabal's answer provides significant background on the fraught nature of the US–Dominican relationship during the period of American occupation. Her perspective, as a Dominican who lived through that ordeal, details Yanqui cruelty and oppression which coexisted with the United States' stated reasons for invading the country—to bring peace and tranquility to the nation.

Later, when the sisters are embedded in the resistance, Alvarez offers more commentary on the United States' motives for getting involved and staying involved in Dominican affairs. After Minerva and Mate are released from prison, their husbands and Patria's husband remain incarcerated. When it appears imminent the men will be killed, Minerva, Patria and Mate try to take action, seeking out Dr. Viñas, an individual in Cibao still involved with the movement, for advice. Unfortunately he offers dismal news, explaining to the women that the resistance is unable to move against Trujillo because the "gringos pulled out on their promise of pineapples [ammunition]"

just as they were planning on staging a crucial attack. Dr. Viñas' remarks here are vital in revealing one underlying motivation for US foreign policy:

> "They got cold feet. Afraid we're all communists. They say they don't want another Fidel. They'd rather have a dozen Trujillos [...]. Their only ideology is, well, you know." He pat[s] his pocket. (273)

In other words, the United States' fear of Communism and desire to protect its own economic interests takes precedence over its concern for humanitarian violations occurring in the Dominican Republic. As suggested by Viñas's commentary, US inaction is a form of action which allows Trujillo to go unchecked by external pressures, permitting him to continue his terrorist practices.

A few days after their visit to Dr. Viñas, Minerva is forced to pack up her home in Monte Cristi as "the SIM [are] opening a new office" there and are confiscating her house to use for that purpose (276). On the drive up, Dedé, accompanying Minerva to aid her in packing, jokes that she "would have given [herself] up to those good-looking gringos" were she a young girl when they had invaded (276). Minerva responds to her sister's desire with ardent disdain for the US:

> "Gringos, good-looking? Mujer!" [...] All [Minerva] could think of was how they deserted Viñas and his men. 'They look like somebody stuck them in a bucket of bleach and forgot they were there. That goes for their passion, too!' (276–77)

Her commentary on US desertion of "Viñas and his men" reflects bitterly on US laissez faire foreign policy regarding Trujillo. Moreover, her racialized disgust for fickle US politics, their lack of "passion", echoes the critiques of many Dominicans we hear throughout the novel.

Earlier in the novel, specifically in the Discovery Day Dance scene, Alvarez has offered a nuanced criticism of US involvement in Dominican affairs, describing the United States as aiding Trujillo's perpetuation of racist and economic divisions instituted by colonialism. At the dinner table, seated next to

Manuel de Moya, Minerva remembers the tale of how Don Manuel became the Secretary of State:

> The story is Trujillo met him on one of those shopping trips he periodically makes to the States to order his elevator shoes, his skin whiteners and creams, his satin sashes and rare bird plumes for his bicorn Napoleonic hats. He hired the model right there on the spot. A tall, polished, English-speaking white Dominican to decorate his staff. (95–6)

Minerva's account and Alvarez's portrayal of Trujillo reveal him to be vain, superficial, materialistic, and racist, all qualities and ideals she associates with US culture that seem to be imported along with actual commodities and people Trujillo brings back from his visits. One of the results of US involvement and presence, denounced in this passage, is the increase in materialism which furthers the already wide divide between the "haves" and the "have nots" (234). In addition, this passage depicts the privileging of white skin and the English language which the United States' presence exacerbates. Alvarez parallels the history of race relations and slavery in the US with that of the Conquistadors.

Early in the novel, Dedé remembers when Lio had given both she and Minerva a "long lecture [... on] the rights of the *campesinos*, the nationalization of sugar, and the driving away of the Yanqui imperialists" (77). The specific word choice, "yanqui imperialist," is key to how we read Alvarez's stance. Throughout the text, the US is constantly referred to as those "yanquis," "yanqui imperialists" or "gringos." This diction supports Alvarez's substantial condemnation of the United States' involvement in and occupation of the Dominican Republic. Even if the reader is unfamiliar with the historical relationship between the two countries, Alvarez's implications are clear and resounding. "Gringo" is a derisive term for American. "Yanqui" is also a pejorative, a term coined by Southerners during the US Civil War and used to degrade Northerners. Reclaimed by Caribbean people who have lived under US occupation, it is uttered with equal bitterness. The text only hints at the problem of the sugar-cane industry with the mention of the need for

the "nationalization of sugar." But the connotations of "imperialism" and its proximity to the mention of the sugar cane industry, as well as the numerous derisive remarks about the US, allow us to intuit the criticism aimed directly at the US.

In a myriad of ways, then, Alvarez's novel recreates the hegemonic structures entrenched in the Dominican Republic and reveals how these structures are perpetuated. While praising her accomplishments—and I do think there are many laudable moments in the novel—I remain, however, very critical of her treatment of the Afro-Dominican experience in the text. For the most part, as I have suggested throughout this paper, this experience is ignored. As I have stressed earlier, the fight for the rights of the *campesinos* is not extended to all Dominican "folk"; in other words, there are few scenes, and almost no overt textual commentary, illustrating how race influences the construction of class in the Dominican Republic.

We know that one of the central concerns for the sisters' resistance to Trujillo, coming from Minerva especially, is their belief in equality for all people. In addition, one of the text's and Alvarez's important criticisms of Trujillo and the ruling class is their propagation of inequality. Yet the narrative frame she constructs, or at least the way she uses it, limits her ability to be completely honest about racial imbalances of power. While we glimpse Afro-Dominican life, it is through the second-hand perspectives from the Mirabal sisters, who are themselves steeped in the perspective of their own class and racial positions.

Perhaps the scene which most aggressively confronts the issue of race occurs when Mate is in prison and she and her fellow inmate Magdalena, an Afro-Dominican woman, have a "long talk about the connection between people" (239). Yet, while Mate relays important questions which the women raise—"Is it our religion, the colour of our skin, the money in our pockets?"—she does not give any detail on what they discuss in response to these interrogatory remarks, quickly changing the subject. The silence that surrounds the issue of race,

here revealed through Mate's inability to write about it even in her diary, is everywhere apparent in the novel.

The sisters rarely voice their protest to racial injustice in the way that the plight of the *campesinos* and memory of the Tainos, while certainly idealized, are lamented. This is an especially curious lack given the sisters' distance from these other groups and their physical proximity to at least two Afro-Dominican women who are crucial in their lives. There is Magdalena, as I have already noted, who Mate "learns so much from," though what exactly she "learns" we are never told (253). There is also Fela, a domestic worker in the Mirabal home, who impacts the entire family. She offers the young Mate assistance in making suitors fall in love with her and later acts as a medium for the sisters' spirits, allowing Minerva's daughter Minou to have access to her dead mother's voice.

What we receive are stereotypical versions of both Afro-Dominican women: the "tragic mulatta" in Magdalena and "mystic healer" in Fela. Elizabeth Martinez, a critic who praises the novel for revealing "powerful links between the spiritual and the political," is also careful to point out that "the book is [not] perfect. It tells us almost nothing about the issue of color and the particularities of Afro-Dominican experience" (39, 41). Alvarez portrays the sisters' resistance to discussing race as a reflection on their social position, and speaks to similar resistance in Caribbean countries, to acknowledge racism. Yet, even if we can account for this lack based on the limitations of the first-person, four-voice narrative, we are still left to question why Alvarez does not allow the *gringa dominicana* a more active role in speaking against these racial politics.

Behar suggests that a possible reason for this lack is that Alvarez does not take advantage of the form of the novel:

> Had Alvarez developed the voice of her alias, the *gringa dominicana* who returns to her abandoned homeland to learn about The Butterflies from the history weary Dedé, she might have been able to offer a more nuanced view of what revolutions look like the morning after. But rather than explore the limits of recovering and reclaiming the past, she chooses to downplay the

role of the novelist bearing witness to history. She forfeits a golden opportunity, I think, to add depth to her story and break with the predictable four-voice narrative. (7)

Continuing with Behar's critique that Alvarez "downplay[s] the role of the novelist bearing witness to history," I raise a similarly troubling question in terms of the novel's conclusion: left with the "history weary Dedé," why does Alvarez, via the *gringa dominicana*, not take a more active role in reflecting on the sisters'—including Dedé's—limitations? The fact that the novel is framed by a third-person narrator implies Alvarez's presence. Her postscript, in which she explains her reconstruction of the sisters via her "imagination," confirms our sense of her looming over each page. Yet, at the end of the novel, the *gringa dominicana* leaves and we remain with the unreliable Dedé, who seems uncertain whether we must "study [our] history" so as not to "repeat it," or whether we must forget the past so as not to be "haunted and full of hate" (313, 319). After Alvarez's valiant attempts to reclaim and reassert the importance of history throughout the text, and after her detailed examination of the way colonization has marginalized certain groups of people from history, her decision to have Dedé's ambivalence toward history close the text resonates poorly with me. Moreover, it leaves me to question why Alvarez, via the *gringa dominicana*, silences herself here.

While I am not fully able to account for Alvarez's choices, and cannot help but view these omissions as a weakness in the text, I am interested in looking at the possible functions they serve. At the end of the novel, thinking about the current state of the island and her sisters' deaths, Dedé asks "was it for this, the sacrifice of the butterflies?" (318). Dedé's question leads me to consider how Alvarez represents the "sacrifice" people in the Caribbean have been forced to make in the time of revolutions and what has come out of these sacrifices.

As I have already suggested, one of Alvarez's greatest contributions to Caribbean literature with this novel is her critique of the "post-colonial" situation in the Dominican Republic

during the time of Trujillo, where she re-envisions how dictators, the ruling class and the US "replace," in some senses, the original colonizers. Her observations are ones that I have also asserted are analogous to other Caribbean novels about countries facing similar circumstances. Merle Collins' *Angel*, for example, invokes the Grenadian revolution and also admonishes US presence in that revolution; in this regard, *Angel* can be seen as a sister text, supporting our reading of *In the Time of the Butterflies* as belonging to a Caribbean tradition. Following this logic, since Alvarez withholds her own analysis of what "revolutions look like the morning after," after her open and sure criticism of the revolution during the time of Trujillo, I speculate that she, like Collins's protagonist Angel, wants to leave *us* to question and create the present and future of the Caribbean (Behar 7).

While I still feel unable to fully resolve what I see as Alvarez's forfeiting her right to speak, I defend her choice insofar as I recognize how it aids her in achieving one of her aims: in her postscript she notes that she wanted to present this narrative as a means of "acquainting" readers with the story of the Mirabal sisters. Further, she incites us to go beyond her text, to raise more questions and to search for more answers (324). Through her novel and her presentation of US involvement in the Dominican Republic, coupled with the effects of Trujillo's regime, Alvarez leaves us still asking the following: after colonialism, dictatorship and US imperialism, what are we left with in the Dominican Republic? What are we left with in the Caribbean?

Notes

1. The phrasing here is reminiscent of Derrida's theory of signification and differance. Derrida says that, because the process of signification is an endless one, there are no origins to which we can return or even create that would not be false. This idea is especially useful when talking about Caribbean identity, as individuals such as Derek Walcott make clear in their conscious decision not to choose one origin. Based on that idea,

however, I would question their use of the word totality which seems stabilized. Still, the attempt to reach for several signifiers represented in one single signifier is an interesting one provided the single signifier remains representative of all signifieds.

2. I am indebted to Professor Nicole King and to all of the readings and class discussion in graduate course, "Creolization and Literary Form: The Writer as Critic," offered in the Spring 1996 semester at the University of Maryland at College Park, for helping to inform my own theoretical understanding of creolization and in turn of Caribbean literature and identity. In addition, I wish to thank Kelly Austin for her fine editorial eye and her trenchant criticisms and suggestions on many aspects of this paper.
3. While this term is sometimes used to refer only to the English-speaking Caribbean, James here uses it in reference to Haiti as well as Cuba and it may be inferred that he means West Indies and Caribbean synonymously.
4. Rafael Trujillo came to power in the Dominican Republic in 1930, after the country's tumultuous history of dictators who had used their political positions to further their own economic gains at the expense of the people. His reign of terror over the country lasted for over thirty years, ending with his assassination on May 30, 1961. Throughout this paper, my references to historical information, unless otherwise noted, come from Michael J. Kryzanek and Howard J. Wiarda's, *The Dominican Republic: A Caribbean Crucible*.
5. In the text, Alvarez defines the *campesinos* as a "pretty people; golden-skinned, light-eyed" (160). While she also appears to use the term at times in the novel interchangeably with "folk," her definition of it here and subtle uses of the term throughout the text imply that the *campesinos* are not representative of all the "folk," but only of the light-skinned "folk." In my paper, I will not employ the term "folk" as a substitution but will consistently use the term *campesino*—as I see Alvarez employing it—to refer to economically disenfranchised Dominicans who are not of African descent. In speaking of Afro-Dominicans in the text, I will refer to them by that specific nominative.
6. There is much debate as to whether or not there really exists a "post-colonial" situation for many former colonial nations in the Caribbean and elsewhere. Further, the tendency to label and treat an entire area such as the Caribbean as "post-colonial," even though there are still colonies extant in this region of the world, is a significant part of the problem with the way this term is often employed in discourses surrounding Caribbean literature. I am aware of this conflict and use the term in a chronological regard to indicate the exit of the initial colonizer—Spain—from the Dominican Republic.
7. One of my criticisms of Alvarez's novel, one to which I will return in more detail later in my paper, is the lack of the Afro-Dominican experience and voice in the text. Still, as I emphasize here, even through that silence we are able to infer a great deal about how race operates in the Dominican Republic.

8. That the *gringa dominicana* offers a narrative double of Alvarez herself has been suggested not only by myself but also by other critics of the novel, including Ruth Behar and Roberto Echevarria, based on the information Alvarez gives us in the postscript and the similarities between herself and the character of the *gringa dominicana*—personal history as well as physical descriptions. In the Dominican Republic, and elsewhere in the Hispanophone Caribbean, *gringo* has a slightly negative connotation and is used to imply foreigner. Alvarez's juxtaposition of these two words, *gringa* and *dominicana*, highlights her insider–outsider status, something Alvarez has addressed directly time and time again in essays and interviews on the question of her "authentic" Dominican identity.
9. *Machismo* is defined as: "the outward concern to appear strong and domineering, the prideful prance when others are looking, the sexual comments to passing females, the camaraderie among males, and the double standard that applies in the relations of husbands, wives, and mistresses . . . a few of the manifestations of an underlying need to appear superior and in control, sexually and otherwise" (Wiarda and Kryzanek 19).
10. In the late 1950's and up until 1961 before his assassination, Trujillo came under serious attack from the rest of the world for his human rights violations: the OAS became involved, inspecting prison conditions on the island to assess the treatment of prisoners, and even the US was forced to discontinue its stance of ignorance of Trujillo's terroristic rule.
11. Perhaps the most stringent example of Trujillo's incorporation of colonial notions of racial superiority is the Haitian massacre, in which Trujillo ordered the killings of thousands of Haitian's living in the Dominican Republic.

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