

## **POLITICAL AUTHORITY FIGURES AS DISTANT MEMORIES OF A FORGOTTEN PAST: JULIA ALVAREZ'S *IN THE TIME OF THE BUTTERFLIES* AND *IN THE NAME OF SALOMÉ* AND CRISTINA GARCÍA'S *THE AGÜERO SISTERS***

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At the end of one century and the beginning of another, Caribbean women are writing about their experiences—about the distant and ever-present past—while using the mainstream language of the often-hostile host country where they now reside. They address primarily an audience with limited or distorted information on the region and, marginally, the close communities in exile who speak both Caribbean Creole languages and English. They express their concern for a homeland which they reconstruct from the recollected “shards” (using Ruth Praver Jhabvala’s term) of a cultural past that informs their everyday life. In these post-postmodern times, the term “history” has been first deconstructed to examine the many parts that compose it and then reconstructed so that it remains an open process. Testimony, recollections, memoirs, diaries, autobiography, biography, orality, fictional and non-fictional narratives, and documented materials are all considered a part of both history and literature. Linda Hutcheon reminds us that this intertextuality exhibits a desire “to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context” (118). Writers and readers now seem to think historically, which means thinking critically and contextually (88). In this way, history is no longer factual documentation; instead, it is composed of events that are nurtured by everyone and everything. In Spanish, the word *historia* makes no distinction between history and story, between real and imagined, between facts and events. For women who have moved away from the known and familiar to live elsewhere, history and story are individualized, thus blurring the differences between past and present, the stories told by elders and those recalled by the younger. This geographical distance allows the writer to rewrite the (hi)story left behind.

After residing in the metropolitan centers to which they migrated as children, adolescents, or young adults, the female characters these Caribbean women writers create look into their own recollections and the stories told by their parents, relatives, and family friends in order to rescue and preserve a past that seems destined to fade away in this home away from home. Rosemary Marangoly George suggests that “the basic organizing principle around which the notion of the ‘home’ is built is a pattern of select inclusions and exclusions. Home is a way of establishing difference. Homes and home-countries are exclusive. Home . . . along with gender/sexuality, race, and class, acts as an ideological determinant of the subject” (2). Both Julia Alvarez—in *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) and in her fictional biography *In the Name of Salomé* (2000)—and Cristina García in *The Agüero Sisters* (1997) place their female characters in the island space in various time se-



quences: the lived present and the recollected past. Distance is achieved by using the focus of outsider/insider characters who presently live in the United States and are looking back by means of a physical visit or memory. The writers/narrators supply voices to women characters who have been silenced by the traditional roles enforced by the family; these voices then respond to the country's political and ideological structure. Debra Castillo summarizes these women's behavior:

[C]haracters speak little, keep secrets, reveal as little of themselves as possible. Domineering husbands and fathers demand silence, respect and compliance from wives and daughters. Daughters, wives, mothers and grandmothers find these prohibitions so hard to break that the smallest rebellion is accompanied by a disproportionately crushing weight of guilt, and any breaking of silence tends to take extreme forms—murder, for example. (77)

The writer/reporter woman in Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* who writes the story of the Mirabal sisters after returning to gather information from the one surviving sister, Dedé, is a Dominican-American; everyone notices her ethnicity because of the way she speaks Spanish, dresses, drives, and behaves. She intends to write down Dedé's memories and through them bring back to life the dead sisters: Patria, Minerva, and María Teresa. In the work *In the Name of Salomé*, Camila, a retired college professor who wants to begin a new life elsewhere, is in the process of sorting the papers, books, and objects that have been gathered through many years of living in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and the United States. Camila will now reread her mother's (that is, Salomé Ureña's), poems, diary, and unsent letters in order to piece together her flitting memories. On the other hand, García's novel fragments time and space to tell the stories of Ignacio Agüero; his two daughters, Reina and Constanica; and the granddaughter he never met, Dulce. But there is no mediator; each person tells her or his own story while moving through various places in Cuba, New Jersey, Miami, and Madrid.

Though space for the Mirabal sisters and the Henríquez women is synonymous with tradition, family, security, and comfort, the members of the Agüero family feel no desire to remain in one place for a long time. The Mirabal sisters find danger and death in the homeland where they felt rooted; Salomé and Camila have to live in exile to preserve life and dignity; and the Agüeros find something to which they cleave for stability wherever they emigrate. Even though the figures that represent political authority in these novels are part of the narrated reality, the dictator is a dramatized character only in *Butterflies*. The nineteenth-century Dominican dictator Lilís is usually a voice and a shadowy presence for Salomé, whereas the reason for Camila's militancy is the repression of the Cuban dictatorships of Machado and Batista. Cuba's strongman is the imaginary person constructed by Cubans inside and outside Cuba: for Reina, he is the dominant figure who honors and rewards outstanding workers and who exerts his will on everything; for Constanica, he is the monster who drove her out of her homeland; and for Dulce, he is the one re-



sponsible for her unhappiness. These looming figures complement the “dictators” of women at home: fathers, brothers, husbands, and sometimes even sons.

Alvarez has chosen to write about “living” women, those who have a name and a story attached to them. The Mirabal sisters became legends almost in their own time and martyrs very soon after their deaths, whereas Salomé Ureña de Henríquez is considered the national poet of the Dominican Republic. According to Spivak, the distinction “that history deals with real events and literature with imagined ones may now be seen as a difference in degree rather than in kind” (243). As stated in the postscript for *Mariposas* (“*Butterflies*”), the author tells the everyday story of the Mirabal sisters; she wants to rescue the human beings from the legend and communicate to ordinary people that change is a possibility. In *Salomé*, the co-protagonist is an insecure, overprotected woman whose illness and undying love for a man take precedence over the poetic voice. By writing a novel about national heroines, Alvarez redefines the writing of fiction. She says in a postscript in *Mariposas*, “A novel is not, after all, a historical document, but a way to travel through the human heart” (324). In *Mariposas*, the interviewer encourages Dedé to remember the everyday moments in her life back when she was part of a strong and united family, when what was happening outside the home was either unknown or unimportant. Dedé begins to relive the family’s history from 1938 (when the oldest sister goes to boarding school and is forced to face the outside world constructed by Trujillo) to 1960 (when the three sisters and their driver are ambushed and murdered by the dictator’s security forces).

The heading of each chapter in *Butterflies* identifies the voice to be heard. The reader plunges into the mind of one of the sisters and looks at the world from her perspective. Even if Minerva seems to be the boldest and María Teresa the most timid, neither is a superwoman. Neither is willing to give up home, family, and life for a cause. Minerva and María Teresa continue to be privileged women in a society where a very small percentage of the population obtains education, mobility, or land. Minerva, in a very subtle way, makes this observation: “We’ve traveled almost the full length of the island and can report that every corner of it is wet, every river overflows its banks, every rain barrel is filled to the brim, every wall washed clean of writing no one knows how to read any way” (117). Shara McCallum comments on the author’s limited “eye,” which excludes and erases any trace of the greater population of this country:

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. (97)

Because the father only has four daughters and no son from his legal union, he contributes to making them part of the small group of “new women” who are



educated not to make a good marriage but to be independent within a social structure that positions men as the owners of knowledge. The father is still a traditional man, but he is willing to listen to Minerva when she argues in favor of entering law school. These female adolescents grow up to be very assertive women, structuring their lives around family, friends, and boyfriends and passing through the normal stages of friction among siblings, rebellion against parental rules, and clashes with authority figures. The three women will marry and live with a certain degree of domesticity, establishing a household, bearing and rearing children, and maintaining and extending family ties.

Jean Franco places the turning point of women in this society—which is founded by institutions that repress and curb the growth of women at every stage of their lives—on their transgression of the domestic space (275). As long as women remain outside the public space reserved for men, they will not be disturbed. This of course does not apply to their value as sex objects, which will always keep women in peril. In *Butterflies*, the outside world (Trujillo and his security agents) forces itself into this private space, and the sisters have no choice but to join the underground movement against the dictatorship, knowing that this translates into flight, secrecy, and the imminence of imprisonment, torture, and death. Antonia Castañeda reminds us that “rape and other violence against women are acts of domination—acts of power—the direct expression of sexual politics, and these are violent political acts of sexual and other aggressions against women” (311). At this point in their lives, the Mirabal sisters know that it is impossible to ignore or be indifferent to the existing political oppression. Patria expresses her feelings and initial hesitation:

My family had not been personally hurt by Trujillo, just as before losing my baby, Jesús had not taken anything from me. But others had been suffering great losses. There were the Perozos, not a man left in that family. And Martínez Reyna and his wife murdered in their bed, and thousands of Haitians massacred at the border, making the river, they say, still run red—¡Ay, Dios santo! (53)

The Mirabel sisters have breached the public space: Trujillo attempts to make Minerva part of his harem; all the members of the family entertain an “enemy” of the Jefe; soldiers arrest and keep members of the family incommunicado; and security forces surround the Mirabal estate, immobilizing every child, woman, and man in this formerly private space.

The fictionalized present has two narrators: the interviewer and Dedé. The interviewer attempts to reconstruct a story from the various memories of parents, relatives, and older family friends who continue to be linked to the distant homeland. According to Carole Boyce Davies, “the rewriting of home becomes a critical link in the articulation of identity. It is a play of resistance to domination which identifies where we come from, but also locates home in its many transgressive and disjunctive experiences” (115). The narrator wants to make their story her own; the



only way to do this is by traveling to the place of origin and trying to put together as many recollections as she can. For Dedé, telling the story of her family has become her reason for living and her own way to free herself from the guilt of not having been with them when they died; surviving in this case is a punishment, and she redeems herself by keeping her sisters alive through her recollections. These two strangers bond because they are both pursuing the same goal: to give meaning to their lives by establishing a direct link to the open wounds of either isolation or separation from their homeland. They must heal these wounds by revisiting their homeland's story, appropriating this history so they can reconstruct their own lives, whether in their homeland or their adopted home. Neil Larsen reminds us that no matter how many times the Trujillo story is told, it will always remain "fragmented and disjunct" (56). The following quote from the double-voiced autobiography of Desider and Lillian Furst eloquently expresses the feelings of these two women after having met and come together with a common history:

In the great melting pot that this country is said to be, I have somehow not melted; on the contrary, I have become more myself, and thereby more other. I am not in exile from anywhere, the worlds I knew have gone, and I mourn their disappearance as I do that of the family I would have had. (217)

Elsa Chaney, in her seminal study on women and politics in Latin America, states that women's active political interventions "have always occurred at the crisis points in their nation's histories. Women tend to become active only in times of extreme challenge, then sink into apathy when the emergency is over" (23). In the case of Salomé Ureña, she becomes the national poet when her anonymous poems inspire men to rebel against the dictatorship. She is venerated as a "saintly" woman when her name is revealed but sinks almost into oblivion once she marries and has children. Her poetry still lives on, but Salomé as body and voice in the present has disappeared. Her poems will always surface, but they will do so now in the voices of her male admirers such as her husband Francisco (Pancho) Henríquez, who will not only solicit poems for special occasions but will also teach her to inspire her readers with the right words. In this nineteenth-century memoir, women are confined to the home as wives and mothers. They teach the roles they play to their daughters, who will in turn repeat the pattern. Salomé's mother, Manina, will be the dutiful wife who tolerates her husband's absences, which are occasioned by political pursuits and extramarital affairs. Although Manina takes a stance when she learns that Nicolás has set up another household with a mistress and children, she always regrets the separation (136). Salomé also tolerates her husband's absences: after Pancho spends four years in Paris studying marriage and establishing another family, Salomé takes him back (although not in her bed). Salomé's sacrifice goes even further when she is slowly dying of consumption and quietly accepts her husband's affair with her young caretaker, Tivisita. Neither Manina nor Salomé needs a repressing father figure; they silence themselves.



In the work *In the Name of Salomé*, Camila does not go through this repetitive experience, but she feels the open reproof of a father and older brothers. They decide where she should reside and study, and even when she should marry. While she studies in Minnesota, her brother Pedro follows her around to ensure that her honor remains intact during her stay in this foreign country. In Cuba, her father questions her friends and authorizes or condemns her mingling with them. These men are rendered speechless when Camila seems to prefer a close relationship with another woman. Camila must learn to lose her fear of male authority and search for her own identity: "She says nothing, holding her hands to keep them from shaking. She could say any number of things. That she is twenty-four years old. She has her own life to live. That she now has a job, a way to take care of herself" (248). It will take her a lifetime to accomplish this independence, and she is able to do it by living outside her home country and by eventually becoming involved in the revolutionary process in Cuba.

Of the four stories told in García's novel, the most poignant is the silenced one that is inserted in Ignacio Agüero's diary. No voice is given to Blanca Agüero, the woman killed by Ignacio in the prologue of the novel. She is a haunting memory in the sisters' minds as they search for an absent mother. She is also the presence that Ignacio cannot obliterate until he commits suicide two years after her reportedly accidental death. Reina and Constancia continue to be mesmerized by the admired and prominent authority figure of Ignacio. Blanca's death in a supposedly accidental drowning is never questioned; even after Reina sees her mother's shattered throat, she accepts this tale of her mother's death. The memories only come back when she sees Constancia wearing her mother's face. Elizabeth Ammons discusses this fear of pursuing the forbidden as an issue of power:

[There is a] will to break silence by exposing the connection among institutionalized violence, the sexual exploitation of women, and female muteness . . . [and there is also a] need to find union and reunion with the world of one's mother, particularly as one journeyed farther and farther from the world into territory traditionally marked off as forbidden. (5)

To defy the father's authority and question his reason for lying would bring down the social structure, so the sisters preserve his books, his stuffed birds, and the tools of his trade in an attempt to give life and validity to someone who only exists as a vague memory.

Although Constancia plays the part of the exile—always yearning to go back to the homeland—she refuses to accept that leaving Cuba has meant liberating herself from the traditional role of women in a patriarchal society. She stops waiting for her unrepentant, unfaithful, and violent first husband and remakes her life by becoming a resourceful person who is economically independent and emotionally guarded. Under the old regime in Cuba, this liberation would have been impossible. Because Constancia sees herself as a political exile, it is inconceivable for her



to recognize that her sister Reina can be whatever she desires precisely because she grew up in Revolutionary Cuba. Reina is a single mother, a master electrician, and a mechanic; she is energized by the possibility of change in any given society and is never encased in traditional roles and anachronistic definitions of family. When present-day Cuba becomes too suffocating for her, she packs her bags and leaves for Miami. Her choices hold no political meaning, as Miami is simply where her sister lives. Madrid is another option for her to consider, but she is unable to trace her daughter there. Language is used as a metaphor at one point when Reina is compared to Constanica:

In Miami, the Cuban Spanish is so different, florid with self-pity and longing and obstinate revenge. Reina speaks another language entirely, an explosive lexicon of hardship and bitter jokes at the government's expense. And her sister sounds like the past. A flash-frozen language, replete with outmoded words and fifties expressions. For Constanica, time has stood linguistically still. It's a wonder people can speak to each other! (236)

Reina does not have a political authority figure to fear or hate, as her sister does. Fidel is the leader of her homeland, Cuba, and Reina has decided to become an immigrant in this place which seems both foreign and yet familiar. Although she does not obliterate the past to construct a new homeland, Reina reconstructs her life by bringing with her the memory of the voiceless mother and by demystifying the authority figure of the father.

Reina rediscovers her mother when she sees Constanica wearing Blanca's face. She forces her sister to recognize herself as a part of the woman who rejected her as a child for trying to harm her younger sister. Throughout the novel, the voiceless Blanca acquires a presence, but never a voice, in the recollections of the two daughters and in the father's biased confessional diary. In the search for truth, Blanca only appears as a woman who threatened the existing social order and who was then killed by a man who tries to convince the reader of his true love for her. By denying her a space to speak or write, her story has been lost, and only a fragmented memory remains. Ignacio Agüero, the authority figure, is rescued through the four storytellers, but Blanca Agüero has been put to rest in a Cuban cemetery and condemned to silence by the very people who are committed to granting her a space in their own stories. This denial is a reaffirmation of the official voice of authority, which in the case of the Agüero sisters is represented by the father.

Through the voices (imagined dialogues), diaries, and memories in *In the Time of the Butterflies*, *In the Name of Salomé*, and *The Agüero Sisters*, the lost histories of women silenced by authority figures represented by father/dictator/husband/brother are rescued to build a bridge from homeland to otherland, wherever this may be. These characters realize how they can challenge the position of authority by using their own stories to reveal the hidden, the private, the prohibited, the censored. Dedé, the quiet, reserved, and always fearful one, realizes the power of the



spoken word, saying, "[T]hat's when I opened my doors, and instead of listening, I started talking. We had lost hope, and we needed a story to understand what had happened to us" (313). Reina can accept and understand her sense of dislocation if she is not afraid to speak about her ambivalence, something almost impossible to do in Miami. Faced by her sister's reluctance to accept that Cuba is not hell and that the past is part of her present, Reina tells her, "I guess it's less painful to forget than to remember" (174). Women have to travel back to their place of origin, whether they do it like Constanca to invoke the deities, like the woman interviewer to touch the lost stories through Dedé's memories, or like Camila to recapture the woman her mother could have been and discover in a people's revolution a world of possibilities. These women characters, living inside or outside the familiar space, must overcome their fears, face the past, and tread once again the regretted roads, but they must do so this time with a different point of view. They now know both worlds; their imaginary homelands are constructed with pieces from both spaces. They can now, as Marangoly George argues, "acknowledge the seductive pleasure of belonging in homes and in communities and in nations—while working toward changing the governing principles of exclusions and inclusions" (200). These women have incorporated the voices of those who were either silenced or who spoke through the official discourse; they have discovered new ways of seeing and speaking. They are now ready to challenge the authority of the appointed historians of truth with the oral and written fragments of those daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers who were effaced for such a long time.

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