

Martina Urioste-Buschmann

Literary Representations of Fear and Anger during the *Trujillato*:

An Approach to the Female Performing of Emotions in the Novels *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Leibniz Universität Hannover, Alemania

urioste-buschmann@romanistik.phil.uni-hannover.de

Since the dictatorial era of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina came to an end in 1961, various texts of fictional prose have contributed to the Dominican processing of history in terms of artistic inscriptions into a collective memory. In particular, from the late 1990s, literary representations of the *Trujillato* have been a firm focus of local Dominican writers. This tendency is apparent in the novels published during this period. Diógenes Valdez's *Retrato de dinosaurios en la Era de Trujillo* (1997), Marcio Veloz Maggiolo's *Uña y carne. Memorias de la virilidad* (1999) and Ángela Hernández's *Mudanza de los sentidos* (2001) are just a few examples of this common focus. However, this literary processing regarding one of the darkest chapters of Dominican history has not been promoted solely by local Dominican authors. At the same time, American-Dominican authors have helped give literary expression to this era of political persecution, terror and censorship, which probably claimed more than 30,000 lives.¹ Writing in English, "Dominicanyorks" (Herzog 143) managed to situate their texts within a US-American minority literature that was also received by a mainstream audience (Cocco de Filippis 255). Julia Alvarez

¹ It is estimated that approximately 30,000 deaths were caused during the massacres of Haitian guest workers ordered by Trujillo in 1937 (Hilton 83). Additionally there have to be considered the numerous deaths of political opponents of the regime (Moya Pons 523).

² According to Luis Prieto (see 106, 107) the term "fukú" is of African origin. Its etymological derivation is presumably attributed to the languages of Carabalí and Ibo tribes located in the Southeast of Nigeria. The term

and Junot Díaz can be counted amongst the most popular representatives of Dominican-American literature. Their bestseller novels *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, published in 1994 and 2007, narrate experiences of torture and terror under the Trujillo dictatorship from a female point of view. Based on these two novels, the following explores how those female experiences of violence and oppression among the *Trujillato* are represented, paying particular attention to the interplay of narrative constructions of corporality and emotions. In this context, I focus on the semantization of basic emotions such as fear and anger that, on the one hand can be understood as subversive performative speech acts (Butler 106), but on the other hand, can also be considered in the context of Erika Fischer-Lichte's thoughts on staged performances of corporality (*Performing Emotions* 28-29). I would like to start off with Julia Alvarez' novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*.

In the Time of the Butterflies

The text fictionalizes the life story of the three Dominican sisters and resistance fighters Patria, Minerva and María Teresa Mirabal, who were murdered on the 25th of November in 1960 by the Dominican intelligence service on behalf of Trujillo (see Moya Pons 523; as well as Gobbi, Barreto, Cortinas y Fabbri 98). The life of the courageous sisters becomes textualized in the novel through a discursive polyphony of female voices that serve to illustrate the daily oppression of the Dominican population among Trujillo's tyranny. Fictional diary entries from Minerva and María Teresa are interspersed with first-person narratives of Patria, and give insight into various biographical events in the lives of the sisters. The fourth sister, Dedé Mirabal, who did not join the resistance activities of the *Movimiento 14 de Junio* and survived (Galván 335), is given a voice as well. Dedé, however, speaks only in her capacity as a focalizer and does not assume a position as a narrator.

Before turning to the semantic constructions of anger and fear in the novel, I would like to refer first to the patriarchal dictator figure of Trujillo. In the novel, the myth of Trujillo's hyper-

sexual desire for girls and young women is addressed in close context with his political exertion of power as a seducer and tyrant. Here, the numerous historiographic evidences of Trujillo's sexual assaults against young female Dominicans that support this picture have to be mentioned. Generally, it was accepted as a well known fact that the families of those young women who attracted Trujillo's sexual interest were often pressured by the Dominican intelligence service if they were not willing to accommodate the desires of the dictator (Derby 1114). It is exactly this situation that the Mirabal family finds themselves in 1949 as they are invited to a party in one of Trujillo's residences on the occasion of the anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas, celebrated in many Latin American Countries as a holiday named *Día de la Raza*. Although it quickly becomes clear that the attendance of Minerva is especially requested, her father decides to accept the invitation.

On this festive occasion, Trujillo seeks contact with the 23-year-old emancipated Minerva, who is considered the most critical among the four sisters towards the regime. To his frustration, Trujillo comes to realize that he will not be able to win the desirable young woman, neither personally nor politically, over to his side (Galván 151-157). William Galván writes about this meeting:

En esa histórica noche, las contradicciones políticas de Minerva y Trujillo alcanzaron el climax, no sólo porque Minerva mantuvo una posición de independencia política –lo cual en aquel entonces era interpretado aún en círculos moderados, como una actitud antitrujillista– sino porque entre los fanáticos del trujillismo el hecho de que alguien no se declaraba abiertamente defensor del orden establecido, era interpretado como una posición antitrujillista. (158).

In the novel, this situation is described, in a fictitious way, from the perspective of Minerva, who records the events of 12th of October in her diary. Through her writing, it is revealed that she is asked to dance by Trujillo. Minerva reluctantly agrees to dance with the dictator to a Bolero. While the two move together to the music, a tense conversation develops between them. Initially, only the various compliments by Minerva, prevent the scene from escalating. The retrospective

narration by Minerva, at this point, already illustrates Trujillo's manipulative seizure, to which she must submit her body:

El jefe takes my hand. "May I have the pleasure?" He doesn't wait for an answer, but pulls me to him. The smell of his cologne is overpowering.

His hold is proprietary and masculine, but he is not a good dancer. All firmness, and too many flourishes. A couple of times, he steps on my foot, but he does not excuse himself. "You dance very well," he says gallantly. "But then women from El Cibao make the best dancers and the best lovers," he whispers, tightening his hold. I can feel the moisture of his breath on my ear. (98).

However Minerva is not only physically exposed to the mercy of Trujillo. His manipulative conversation techniques also get her into trouble, as she reveals in the heat of the moment her personal contact to oppositional activists. When Trujillo threatens to close the University of Santo Domingo, knowing that Minerva wishes to take up law studies there, she tries to escape his manipulations by pretending to be submissive:

"Ay, Jefe, no," I plead with him. "Ours is the first university in the New World. It would be such a blow to the country!"

He seems surprised by my vehemence. After a long look, he smiles again. "Maybe I will keep it open if that will draw you to our side." And then literally, he draws me to him, so close I can feel the hardness at his groin pressing against my dress. (100).

Minerva's risk of exposing herself with further statements to the despotic caprice of the dictator initially seems halted. Yet her adulate tone of behavior results in the violation of her corporal sovereignty a second time. This transgression induces a subjective feeling of anger in her, which the young woman expresses and regulates with her body:

I push just a little against him so he'll loosen his hold, but he pulls me tighter towards him. I feel my blood burning, my anger mounting. I push away, a little more decidedly, again he pulls me aggressively to his body. I push hard, and he finally must let me go.

“What is it ?” His voice is indignant.

“Your medals,” I complain, pointing to the sash across his chest. “They are hurting me.” Too late, I recall his attachment to those *chapitas*.

He glares at me, and then slips the sash over his head and holds it out. An attendant quickly and reverently collects it. El Jefe smiles cynically. “Anything else bother you about my dress I could take off ?” He yanks me by the wrist, thrusting his pelvis at me in a vulgar way, and I can see my hand in an endless slow motion rise –a mind all it’s own– and come down on the astonished, made-up face. (100).

Minerva’s subjective corporal sensation and her defensive, eventually sanctioning, body language, textually model an emotional reaction of anger directed from a female perspective against the masculine omnipotence of the Dominican dictator figure. The illustrated physical materialization of anger, which is constituted through the bodily uncoupled movement of Minerva’s hand, symbolizes not only a female bodily act of defense, but rather emblemizes a political act of resistance against a hegemonical sexualization of Minerva’s body by the dictator figure.

Considering the historical context, Minerva’s self-reporting acting within the limits of diary writing is to be understood, although in terms of a typically female form of literary expression (González González 107), as a textualized performative speech-act in the sense of Butler. In this way, the acting renegotiates Minerva’s subaltern subject positioning, resisting the heteronormative matrix of power and its rearticulating recitation practice. Thus, Minerva’s retrospectively described anger avoids the gendered memory of embodied history. Only by this strong emotion does she succeed in transgressing the repressive discourse of the dictator, physically breaking his sexist determination. Minerva transforms, therefore, from an expected political and sexualized prey to a mysterious physical and political threat. Butler notes in this regard:

[...] bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities of rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in

which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law. (2).

Through her own political positioning as an oppositional subject within the cultural matrix of Dominican despotism, Minerva is now attributed as a female political enemy. Within the plot sequence, this new ascribed role represents a crucial moment of fraction. Minerva's slap on Trujillo's face induces the peripeteia, which finally forces three of the Mirabal sisters to fight out of the oppositional underground against the regime. Their support of the armed struggle against the dictatorship leads, as it has become historically well known, to the arrest of Minerva and her youngest sister, María Teresa. In the prisons of La 40 and La Victoria, both women experience repression and torture (Galván 293-294). Within the novel, these experiences become also legible in the context of a traditionally feminine connotated writing culture, by diary entries of María Teresa. Physical pain and psychological fear are reflected retrospectively from this perspective:

By the time we got to La 40, I was shaking so bad I couldn't get out of the wagon. I felt ashamed that they had to carry me in like a sack of beans. [...] They stripped me down to my slip and brassiere and made me lie down on this long metal table, but they didn't buckle the belts I saw dangling down the sides. I have never known such terror. My chest was so tight I could barely breathe. (254).

However, these semantizations cannot be interpreted as a performative representation of fear illustrated within speech acts of physical resistance. Moreover the reported torment in relation to the subjective physical sensations constitute a space of articulation for a passively experienced abuse of masculine power.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

This contrasts with the striking aesthetics of Dirty Realism within Junot Díaz' novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* which concern the female fear, anger and corporality associated

“unapologetically” (Abrams 16) with experiences of physical torture caused by Trujillo’s henchmen.

The novel deals with the life of young Oscar and his sister Lola, who grow up with their mother Belicia Cabral, as American-Dominicans in New Jersey during the 1980s and 1990s. Belicia herself had to escape as a young woman from the Dominican Republic in 1962, after having an affair with the husband of one of Trujillo’s sisters, also named *the Gangster*, and becoming pregnant. As a result of the affair, henchmen of the Dominican intelligence service almost tortured Belicia to death. It was due only to the contacts of her foster mother, La Inca, that Belicia managed to escape to the United States. Despite Belicia’s secrecy over her past, and the positive relationship that Oscar and Lola develop with regard to their country of origin, a cross-generational and transnational curse determines the family history, which, even in exile, cannot be avoided. In the novel, the curse is related to the *Trujillato* and has its cultural equivalent in the Afro-Caribbean concept of *fukú*². The *fukú*-curse is passed down to the Cabral family during the 1940s, when Belicia’s biological father Abelard refuses Trujillo’s request to bring his pretty young daughter Jacquelyn to a party, organized in honor of the dictator. Because of this attitude, Abelard is finally sentenced to 18 years in prison. The curse is then transmitted to Belicia, who, as a 16-year-old, suffers violent attacks because of her love affair with Dionisio, before she succeeds in escaping abroad. Belicia’s son Oscar, who is later born in the U.S., is also followed by the *fukú*. Since graduating from High School he has become an overweight nerd, who is into computer games and comic books, has no friends and is scorned by girls of his age. After college and an unrequited confession of love to a fellow student, he decides to take a break in the Dominican Republic. There he falls in love with the prostitute Ybón Pimentel and starts having an affair with her. But Ybón’s boyfriend, a Dominican police captain, finds out about the relationship and tortures Oscar in a sugar cane field so severely that, at the end of the novel, he

² According to Luis Prieto (see 106, 107) the term “fukú” is of African origin. Its etymological derivation is presumably attributed to the languages of Carabali and Ibo tribes located in the Southeast of Nigeria. The term essentially means “bad luck” and is used by many Dominicans who live in the capital to refer to a person who brings bad luck. With respect to the discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus the word “fukú” is often used by Dominicans to denominate the colonizer without using his name.

dies as a result of the injuries sustained during the torture. Oscar's death signifies the end of *fukú*, which had been following his family for three generations. Symbolically, the curse is concluded in the same place it began, with Oscar being mistreated in a sugar cane field, just as his mother was 25 years earlier.

I will now turn to the emotionalized configurations of fear represented in this first scene, in which Belicia is physically abused in the sugar cane field. The events are revealed retrospectively by an omniscient narrator, who turns out to be Yuniór de Las Casas, a former boyfriend of Lola, and college fellow of Oscar. He tells the story of the incident in which Belicia is dragged into a car in front of her home by several men. Her martyrdom already starts during the car ride to the sugar cane field. In view of the experienced violence, her fear-ridden state of consciousness is subjected to a gradual depersonalization, in which the self steps behind:

The world outside so beautiful, but inside the car ...

They'd been punching her and her right eye had puffed into a malignant slit, her right breast so preposterously swollen that it looked like it would burst, her lip was split and something was wrong with her jaw, she couldn't swallow without causing herself excruciating shocks of pain. (146).

Although Belicia's panic is mounting in correlation with the experienced physical pain during the car ride, her fear also creates a space for the stirring of anger, which is expressed bodily:

She cried out each time they struck her but she did not cry, entiendes? Her fierceness astounds me. She would not give them the pleasure. There was such fear, the sickening blood-draining fear of a drawn pistol, of waking up to find a man standing over your bed, but held, a note sustained indefinitely. Such fear, and yet she refused to show it. How she hated these men. For her whole life she would hate them, never forgive, never forgive, and she would never be able to think of them without succumbing to a vortex of rage. Anyone else would have turned her face from the blows, but Beli offered hers up. And between punches she brought up her knees to comfort her stomach. You'll be OK, she whispered through a broken mouth. You'll live.

Dios mío. (146).

Belicia's fear is described here in the context of three different associative images that seem to be situated in a surreal world and apart from the proper scene. The first image of the drawn weapon seems to refer to a situation of acute threat. However, in this scenario, a person can protect themselves with a gun against a threat. This isn't the case for Belicia. The second image is definitely not connected with the action in the car, but refers instead to a distinctive world between dream and wakefulness. The awakening gaze that crosses the eyes of a stranger sitting at the bedside, evokes a Freudian anxiety of the uncanny mixing the alien and the familiar together (Freud 315). The third image of a note played solo and for a long time, characterizes a sensory overload of acoustic stimuli, referring to the physical stress Belicia suffers in her "blood-draining fear". These metaphors constitute a pictorial language of fear, which illustrates Belicia's terrified state. The illustrated fear, however, becomes also a source of anger. This strong emotion finally prevails over the paralyzing fear, becoming expressed through body language. Thus the anger gives the body its own modeling. In this way Belicia does not hide her face from the blows but holds it up to the beating henchmen, without crying. She also manages, in her defenseless situation, to preserve a small physical space of sovereignty, as she pulls her knees up to protect her pregnant belly. Her gestures express bodily a performative resistant act towards the hegemonically connoted exertion of male violence. Thus Belicia's fear is closely linked to the feeling of anger, whereas the latter becomes physically translatable. It is also this emotionalized corporality, which in the context of impotence opens up a space for the unfolding of a transition from everyday consciousness to the existential philosophical perception of being-in-the-world. In a Heideggerian sense, fear constitutes a source of ontological knowledge:

Thus anxiety takes away from Dasein the possibility of understanding itself, falling prey, in terms of the "world" and the public way of being interpreted. It throws Dasein back upon that for which it is anxious, its authentic potentiality-for-being-in-the-world. Anxiety individuates Dasein to its ownmost being-in-the-world which, as understanding, projects itself essentially upon possibilities. (181-182).

The understanding of being-in-the-world becomes apparent when Belicia is eventually dragged out of the car into the sugar cane field, where her tormentors continue to abuse her. Belicia's self, splitted away from the scene, reflects during the mistreatment on her own illusions regarding her expectations of this dangerous love relationship.

Because of the mounting anger she is able to overcome her blindness within this border-crossing situation:

Just as our girl was set to disappear across that event horizon, just as the cold of obliteration was stealing up her legs, she found in herself one last reservoir of strength: her Cabral magis –and all she had to do was realize that once again she'd been tricked, once again she'd been *played*, by the Gangster, by Santo Domingo, by her own dumb needs, to ignite it. Like Superman in *Dark Knight Returns*, who drained from an entire jungle the photonic energy he needed to survive Coldbringer, so did our Beli resolve out of her anger her own survival. In other words, her coraje saved her life. (148).

The surreal level on which Belicia's perception and knowledge about her own errors take place, is reinforced textually by transcultural references to the comic adventures of US-American superheroes. The allusion to the audacious activities of a Superman who survives by using his mutant powers, semanticizes Belicia's behavior as a heroic act of rebelliousness against militarized masculine domination under the *Trujillato*. However, the representation is not to be interpreted as a subversive bodily act in the sense of Butler, in which the female role as a victim of violence is renegotiated by displaying a sovereign corporality which revolts against the attribution of inferiority. Instead, the performance concept of Erika Fischer-Lichte becomes insofar legible as the body refers here to a spiritual materiality, in which constructions of the self are put into the scene, so that perception, as a creative form of acting, becomes visible. Thus, through the performative:

[...] konstituiert und manifestiert sich hier eine bestimmte Weise des leiblichen In-der-Welt-Seins, das schöpferische Prozesse der Gestaltung und Umgestaltung fokussiert, in denen es die Performanz ist, über die man zur Referenz gelangt. D.h. die Generierung von Bedeutungen erfolgt in Abhängigkeit von den

Veränderungen, die durch wirklichkeitskonstituierende Handlungen – Sich-Bewegen, Sprechen, Wahrnehmen – hervorgebracht werden. (“Grenzgänge“ 289).³

Final consideration

As part of a final consideration regarding the scenes of the two novels presented here, I conclude by emphasizing the common aspects of these textual strategies of embodied emotionalization, which contribute to the readability of fear and anger in the specific context of the *Trujillato*:

On the one hand, the modeling of negative basic emotions, which are directed from a female perspective against the dictator figure of Trujillo and his terrorizing power apparatus, becomes visible in these scenes. Particularly, the emotion of anger is inserted as an affect that can be translated into a corporality which creates performative acts of resistance and epistemological processes. In the case of Minerva, whose historical character (as opposed to the fictional protagonist of Belicia) is of rural white upper class origin (Shemak 110), a female subjective consciousness is represented in a context of political opposition by a wrathful bodily act against the physical materiality of the dictator’s hegemonical masculinity. Belicia’s embodied anger illustrates, on the other hand, a relatively passive protest against the henchmen of Trujillo, resulting from massively experienced physical violence. Her acting does not contribute to a transformation of her gendered subject positioning as an outcast Dominican “prieta” (Díaz 127). The emotional modeling of her body, rather, has an impact on her inner self, as it opens up a knowledge-constitutive consciousness which semanticizes constructions of a feminized subalternity related to the historical period of the *Trujillato*.

Despite the differences of these representations, both novels enable an emotionalized intelligibility regarding the historical experiences of the Dominican civilian population of terror

³ “ [...] a certain mode of physical being-in-the world is constituted and manifested, which focuses on creative processes of formation and reformation in which it is the performance whereby one attains reference. That means that the generation of meaning is realized according to the changes originated through reality-constitutive actions such as to budge, speak and perceive.” (Trans. M.U.B.).

and repression, by embodied references to female expressions of fear and anger. In this sense the textualized body is not a mere symbolic construct but a Caribbean depiction of “flesh-and-blood-quality” that

[...] must be seen in the context of political systems where women’s bodies have been subject to abuse, rape, torture, and dismemberment precisely because this very treatment, through its interpretation as symbolic construct, has been an effective method of political control (Paravisini-Gebert 8).

Because of the novels’ success as bestsellers, these textual illustrations of a traumatic chapter in Dominican history, have been recorded in a globally received collective memory. In this way, the novels contribute from a Dominican diasporic point of view, to the construction of literary geographies of embodied emotions in the context of militarized and gendered violence in the Caribbean region.

Bibliography

Abrams, Max. “Immigrants and Galactus: Junot Diaz’s World in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.” *English and Comparative Literary Studies Comps*. Spring 2009. <http://scholar.oxy.edu/ecls_student/2/> (march 31, 2012)

Alvarez, Julia. *In the Time of the Butterflies*. New York: Plume, 1995 [1994].

Butler, Judith. *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of “sex”*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Cocco de Filippis, Daisy. “Dominican American Literature”. *Encyclopedia of Caribbean Literature*. Ed. D.H. Figueredo. Westport, C.T.: Greenwood Press, 2006. 254-256.

Derby, Lauren Hutchinson. “The Dictator’s Seduction. Gender and State Spectacle during the Trujillo Regime”. *Callaloo* 23.3 (2000): 1112-1146.

Diaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead, 2007.

Fischer-Lichte, Erika. “Grenzgänge und Tauschhandel. Auf dem Wege zu einer performativen Kultur”. *Performanz. Zwischen Sprachphilosophie und Kulturwissenschaften*. Ed. Uwe Wirth. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002. 277-300.

Fischer-Lichte, Erika. "Performing Emotions. How to Conceptualize Emotional Contagion in Performance". *Habitus in Habitat I. Emotion and Motion*. Eds. Sabine Flach, Daniel Margulies and Jan Söffner. Bern: Lang, 2010. 25-54.

Freud, Sigmund. "Das Unheimliche". *Zeitschrift für Anwendung der Psychoanalyse auf die Geisteswissenschaften*. Leipzig, Wien: Internat. Psychoanalyt. Verlag, 1919. 297-324.

Galván, William. *Minerva Mirabal. Historia de una heroína*. 3rd ed. Santo Domingo: Ed. Taller, 1997 [1982].

Gobbi, Carina, Cecilia Barreto, Fernanda Cortinas and Edda Fabbri, eds. *Guía de las mujeres 2000. América Latina y el Caribe*. Montevideo: Inst. del Tercer Mundo ITeM, 2000.

González González, Daniuska. "En el tiempo de la mariposas, de Julia Álvarez: Escribiendo el espacio de lo femenino." *Revista de Filología y Lingüística de la Universidad de Costa Rica* 27.1 (2001): 99-112.

Hernández, Ángela. *Mudanza de los sentidos*. 3rd ed. Santo Domingo: ABC Ed., 2005 [2001].

Herzog, Margarethe. *Lebensentwürfe zwischen zwei Welten*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2010 [1953].

Hilton, Ronald. *La América Latina de ayer y de hoy*. New York, Toronto, London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.

Moya Pons, Frank. *Manual de historia dominicana*. 9th ed. Santo Domingo: Caribbean Publishers, 1992 [1981].

Paravisini-Gebert, Lizabeth. "Decolonizing Feminism. The Home-Grown Roots of Caribbean Women's Movements". *Daughter's of Caliban. Caribbean Women in the Twentieth Century*. Ed. Consuleo López Springfield. Bloomington, Indiana, London: Indiana University Press, Latin American Bureau, 1997. 3-17.

Prieto, Luis. "Afronegrismos en el léxico de la prensa de Santiago de Chile". *Boletín de Filología* 40 (2004-2005): 85-137.

Shemak, April. "Re-Membering Hispaniola. Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*". *Postcolonial Literary Studies: The First Thirty Years*. Ed. Robert P. Marzec Baltimore. Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2011. 109-134.

Valdez, Diógenes. *Retrato de dinosaurios de la era de Trujillo*. Santo Domingo: Edita-Libros, 1997.

Veloz Maggiolo, Marcio. *Uña y carne: Memorias de la virilidad*. Santo Domingo: Cole, 1999.