Across generations, language difference, and historical perspectives, “There Are Two Countries,” a highly evocative poem by prominent Dominican-American fiction writer and poet Julia Álvarez, launches a layered conversation with Hay un país en el mundo (There is a Country in the World), a signature poem by Pedro Mir (1913–2000), the revered bard from her ancestral homeland. Mir lived in Cuba as an exile in 1949, when his famous poem appeared in print. Two years before he had left his native soil to escape the blood-drenched dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, an ally of the United States who would stay in power for three decades (1930–1961) on account of a proclaimed anti-Communist crusade. After fifteen years in exile, Mir returned to his country following the fall of Trujillo and soon the people recognized their yearnings in the voice that spoke in his verse. Not surprisingly, in 1984 the country’s National Congress named him Poet Laureate of the Dominican Republic, a title given to no one else after his death.

Spoken from the perspective of an exile looking at his birthplace from afar, Mir’s poem features a speaker who grieves the plight of a land he regards as “a country in the world / situated right in the sun’s path. / A native of night. Situated / in an improbable archipelago / of sugar and alcohol.” These are the opening lines from the English translation ably rendered by Donald D. Walsh (Mir 1993: 3). The speaker’s remote glance describes a place that abounds in land but keeps the peasants landless, where working people have their lives mortgaged to the sugar industry, and where judges and poets have learned to keep silent to save their skins. The speaker thus bemoans: “This is a country unworthy of being called a country. / Call it rather tomb, hole, or sepulcher” (21).

While the dreadful drama occurs in a specific “country in the world,” the speaker points to the economic system and the geopolitical context that enable it, a scenario, that is, where murderous tyranny can prosper as long as it offers the necessary safeguard to the strategic and monetary interests of the World Power to which the small country relates as a dependent capitalist ally. As the poem draws to a close, the speaker envisions the arrival from the mountains of an “enlightened rumor,” a sort of clarion-call that will one day put an end to the monopoly of silence. It will embolden the people to remember their own resistive antecedents and awake
the spirit of the collective to take hold of the reins of their own destiny. The messianic vision leaves unclear the precise form that the people’s resistance will take, but it leaves no doubt that it will happen. The triumph over injustice will then grant a respite to the voice of the poet, who can rest from his labor until the people need him next. He ends thus: “Afterwards / I want only peace. / A nest / of constructive peace in each palm. / And perhaps with relation to the soul / a swarm of kisses / and forgetfulness.”

“There Are Two Countries” carries a dedication cum epigraph (after the maestro) whereby Álvarez makes explicit her dialogue—at once retort and homage—with Mir’s classic poem. Borrowing the moral urgency with which its predecessor confronted the depravity of the Trujillo regime, Álvarez addresses the disconcerting situation that mars the rapport between Haitians and Dominicans today. “There are two countries in the world / in the same path / of the sun,” the first stanza says. “Simply and tragically / torn asunder by history,” posits the start of the fourth stanza. The verses that follow detail the colonial and neocolonial backgrounds to the tension between the two nations that inhabit the island, including the dispossession of vulnerable people from both sides of Quisqueya as well as the heart-rending violence: “another massacre / for the green parsley / of the dollar.” Here the speaker assumes a manner of utterance that resonates powerfully with the texture of Mir’s political tone in the imminence of the exhortation, the presumption of a listening public, and the discernibly edifying intent: “We are simply / brothers and sisters, / not meant to be divided / or set one against the other.” Like the indomitable optimism of the voice in Mir’s poem that harbors no doubt that justice will triumph over hatred and greed, the last three stanzas of “There are Two Countries” describe a coming together “in the killing fields” and “at the wall of wailing” to “sow the seeds of the future / and await / the flowering of peace.” The closing lines envision the island “like a bird / with two wings” heading to its “nest / in the blue Caribbean, / to hatch a future of peace, / with a song of forgiveness / in its throat, / and a sprig of parsley / in its beak.”

A word that for many simply names a valued herb and garnish, “parsley” shores up a tale of horrors in Hispaniola as Rita Dove’s poem of that title has made widely known and Edwidge Danticat’s novel The Farming of Bones has further recalled. Since phenotype will not generally suffice to tell a Haitian from a Dominican, Trujillo’s murderous kleptocracy needed a shibboleth to assist the assassins assigned to perpetrate the genocidal killings of Haitian immigrant workers in the border regions in October 1937. The story goes that the tyrant’s butchers would ask their victims to say the word “perejil” (Spanish for parsley) before slaughtering them, sparing only those who could roll their r’s in a recognizably Hispanic way. Failing this test of phonetic identity meant people were Creole or French speakers, hence Haitians eligible for murder.

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Similarly, the image of the island as a “bird / with two wings” recalls a phrase used by Haitian President Jean Bertrand Aristide to describe the necessary ties between Haiti and the Dominican Republic when he first came to power in 1991. That recollection brings along the memory of the colossally corrupt Joaquín Balaguer, a Dominican president hostile to Aristide’s progressive views and human rights concerns, especially in relation to the near-slavery endured by Haitian sugarcane workers in Dominican plantations. Balaguer shrewdly engineered a massive deportation of Haitian immigrant workers from the Dominican Republic with the deliberate intent to create social stress in Haitian society, destabilizing the Aristide government at its inception. The felonious Dominican caudillo thus contributed to the conditions that enabled the US-trained Haitian military officer Joseph Raoul Cédras to lead the baneful coup d’état that overthrew the democratically elected president in the first year of his term in office.

The references to parsley and to Aristide’s amiable epithet for the shared island trigger the realization that in the quest for unity across the border, Dominicans have many more miles to go than Haitians. The people of the east have had the misfortune of enduring the vicious Trujillo regime, which instituted antipathy towards Haitians as a factor of Dominican patriotism. They have also undergone the ideological continuation of the dictatorship’s perverted nationalist creed by the malevolent Balaguer during the twenty-two years that he managed, fraudulently and violently, to stay in power. The governments that followed Balaguer, though led by the liberal parties Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD) and Partido de la Liberación Dominicana (PLD), did not launch a national education project meant to de-trujilloize Dominican society by dismantling the cultural logic of the poisonous dictatorship. Political expediency prevented them. As they competed with each other, they both pursued the support of the superannuated caudillo who still headed the Partido Reformista (PRSC) that he had founded. Nor did the scenario change in 2002 when the fraudulent politician died. By then, many allies of Balaguer and unrepentant heirs of the Trujillo dictatorship had actually become members of the PRD and PLD, some holding key ranks. The depraved pragmatism that has taken hold of the Dominican electoral market over the last four decades has created a scenario wherein advocating an ideological delinking from the legacy of trujillismo would entail political risks that the country’s liberals lack the moral courage to run. As a result, they too, by default, have become trujillistas. While in power, as with the PLD at present, the formerly liberal elites find themselves obliged to refrain from indicting anti-Haitian hate-speech uttered in the public sphere by the country’s rabid ultranationalists. The preaching of such ethnic antipathy may come even from the lips of high-ranking officials in the government itself.

In the 1980s political pundits at the service of Balaguer began to promote the idea of a foreign scheme—led by France, Canada, and the United States—to dissolve the
sovereignties of Haiti and the Dominican Republic in order to “fuse” them into one new country. Out of frequent repetition, the idea of the treacherous fusion hatched by powerful foreign nations to solve “the Haitian problem” at the expense of Dominicans has gained traction in the nationalist discourse. The noun fusionista now thrives as a valid term in the lexicon of the Dominican right as a badge of dishonor to label those—foreigners or nationals—who advocate unity among Haitians and Dominicans. In their usage they encounter no discouragement from the former liberals now in power.

The final stanzas of Álvarez’s “There Are Two Countries” would easily make the poet eligible for denunciation by Dominican ultranationalists as conveying a message of potential fusionismo. The renowned Dominican-American poet Rhina P. Espaillat also invites hostile charges of promoting fusionismo in writing the poem “Coplas: Nací en la ciudad primada. . . .,” which she wrote in Spanish for reading when she was an honoree of the Dominican-American National Roundtable banquet on 12 December 2013. Espaillat’s fifth and closing stanzas strike a note that will no doubt offend the ultras who insist on enacting their patriotism by preaching the gospel of strife. The former gives the speaker’s genealogy: “En mi sangre corre España, / la Costa de Oro y Haití; / taino, negro y negrero / los tres se juntan en mí.” And the latter affirms the inexorable oneness of Haitians and Dominicans: “Y aunque lo niegue quien quiera, / somos hermanos de cuna: / nos parió la misma tierra / y toda la tierra es una.

Álvarez’s rewriting of Mir’s Háy un país en el mundo declares that “there are two” and not just one country. Certainly the dialogue her poem exacts with Mir’s text will likely ruffle many ultranationalist feathers in today’s Dominican society. If so, that is as it should be. Doing such things may very well be central to the business of poetry, at least if one goes by the claim of an African proverb that says that the role of the poet is “to expose the king.” In fact, Álvarez could not pay a greater tribute to Mir than by catching a fraction of the hell that he risked catching when he unleashed his poem into the world with lines that denounced the Dominican society under Trujillo as “a country unworthy of being called a country.” Living in Havana in 1949 when the poem appeared in print offered him no guarantee of safety from Trujillo’s violence. That’s where, in 1950, the tyrant’s henchmen went and killed Mauricio Baez, the tenacious labor organizer who had dared to lead a historic sugarcane workers’s strike to demand living wages and an eight-hour work day. Nor should we forget that writing fiction unflattering to the regime caused the death of novelist Andrés Francisco Requena at the hands of Trujillo’s assassin in 1952 in New York.

Like Álvarez, whose affectionate rapport with Haiti shines forth in A Wedding in Haiti (2012), Mir gave much thought to the history that caused the partitioning of the island of Hispaniola and the forces that have kept the two peoples on each side of the border from tapping into their inestimable potential for unity. Mir was also an accomplished historian, and in that capacity he wrote the essay Las dos patrias de Santo Domingo: Tesis acerca de la división política de la isla en dos naciones (1975) to explore the
commonality between Haitians and Dominicans and the possibility of their coming together as one based on their shared territory as well as their common legacy of struggle and resistance. The author there points to various moments in the history of both societies when it seemed feasible to transcend the split bequeathed to them by their respective colonial masters. He points first to the divisive interference of the Spanish and French colonial orders, and, later, to the shortsightedness of leaders from both sides of the island, chiefly Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Louis Ferrand, and Juan Sánchez Ramírez (176). Despite the process that culminated in two distinct sovereignties, Mir pointed to the sense of fraternal solidarity that still remains between them, stemming from their common historical roots and the shared lot that has subsequently befallen them. He speaks about a sense of solidarity that has survived through the centuries, even against the wishes of the upper classes in both countries (178).

Of the many ways of corroborating Mir’s claim about the historical fraternity between Dominicans and Haitians, the life of another poet might serve our purpose best. Port-au-Prince native Jacques Viau Renaud arrived with his family in Santo Domingo at the age of six in 1948, his father Alfred Viau having fallen from grace with the government back home. The story of Alfred is itself significant because he ended up serving the Trujillo regime; he even became an apologist for the tyrant’s crimes, including the genocide of 1937 against Haitian workers. But the story of Jacques matters more. Educated in Dominican schools, he developed a knack for Spanish and soon showed considerable poetic talent writing in his acquired tongue. By his early twenties, the poets and fiction writers who would subsequently become known in Dominican literary history as the Generation of 1965 recognized him as one of their own and one of their best. His posthumous collection Permanencia del llanto (1965) stands as one of the most moving, convincing, truly memorable manifestations of the poetry of that period. The collection appeared in September 1965, a few months after the poet had died a martyr of the April Revolution fought by progressive soldiers and civilians who took up arms to demand a return to the constitutional order. They wanted to restore the system of democracy and the rule of law that the general will of the people had chosen when they elected Juan Bosch to the presidency in November 1962. After only seven months in power, Bosch was overthrown by the right wing of the military with backing from big business, the Catholic Church, and the CIA.

Haitian-born Jacques was stationed on a Santo Domingo street corner fighting for democracy against tyranny alongside his Dominican compatriots when a mortar grenade shot from the side of the US Marines shattered his slim body. The United States military came to support the coup leaders and the old guard of the dictatorship to help them crush the people’s democratic aspirations that had brought patriots like twenty-three-year-old Jacques to the barracks. Jacques made the ultimate sacrifice in the effort
to bring to fruition some of the noblest ideals that Dominicans have long harbored and long been denied. That he had been born in the neighboring country did not seem to deter his fateful commitment to cast his dice in the side of Dominicans of good will, for he did not uphold a rigid view of patria (homeland). The body of his writings not included in Nada permanence tanto como el llanto contains a poem entitled “Estoy tratando de hablaros de mi patria” (I Am Trying to Tell You about My Homeland) which articulates the amplitude of his idea of homeland, belonging, and social justice. Jacques speaks of his homeland as “two complementary grounds / cardinal points of my sadness / fallen as from the mariner’s compass / like two lovers torn from their embrace” (Viau 1985: 91). Like Mir and like Álvarez, Jacques understood the past of colonial legacy that lurks behind the bifurcated history of Haitians and Dominicans: “I’ve been trying to tell you about my homeland / my two fatherlands / my one island / which long ago some men split apart / over there, where they parked to dig up a river” (95).

In her poem “Two Countries in the World” Álvarez converses with the maestro—and necessarily with Jacques Viau Renaud—about homeland, belonging, and social justice. The poem is particularly poignant in light of the ruling TC 0168-13 whereby a constitutional court in the Dominican Republic has rescinded the country’s adherence to the principle of jus soli and proceeded to denationalize some 250,000 Dominicans of Haitian ancestry going back to 1929. Ultimately, Álvarez’s poem, like those of Jacques and Don Pedro before her, enacts a conversation about an imminent subject: the role of the poet in society at times when entrenched ruling elites perpetuate blatant injustice against the less empowered.

Works Cited

